

CHAPTER 1

WHY, HOW & WHEN?

The first question at the start of writing this narrative was, “where do we start?” To be precise is it with the planning, the holiday, or further back, the reason?

The reason is simply explained. It started when I was about 5 years old, some neighbours lent us a View Master which had a disc with views of the Grand Canyon, at the same time another lent a jigsaw showing the Ghats at Benares. Then came a book, the *Readers Digest Book of World Travel* and me as a 14 year old in search of reading started a yearning to see the wonderful places in the photographs and text. But life and all its complications got in the way. Schooling, something for which I never cared, work, relationships, marriage and children.

After 14 years of marriage we divorced, faults on both sides, so no reason for lasting acrimony, there was far too much at the time! 15 years and two grand children later we saw far more of each other, eventually we sat down and talked sensibly for the first time and well things developed from there!

In the intervening period, freed from the day to day care of the children, I had taken holidays in China, India (the Ghats at Varanasi are still as I saw on the jigsaw!), various other parts of the Far East and the ‘good ole US of A’. I include New Zealand in the Far East – it is when you think about it, how much further east can you go?

The nature of people being what it is I kept getting into conversations with friends and acquaintances about places I have been and sights I have seen. Much to my embarrassment I noted that Judy was on the sidelines politely keeping quiet not able to contribute much to the conversation. I realised that something had to be done to rectify the situation. So in the manner which characterised our earlier relationship, I said that we must take a round the world trip, something I had wanted to do since reading about the wonderful places in the book.

What a fantastic idea. We both have to work for our living, yes, but we both no-longer enjoy our occupations, the modern world with all its stifling form filling has totally transformed our worlds from those we entered 30 plus years ago, but you cannot do this sort of thing with no money. The money came from the sale of a house. I refused to consider the idea of another mortgage at my age so, there is part one of the problem solved. Yes but, shouldn’t we wait until we retire, too many people do and then die! The hell with it, I’m probably starting Alzheimer’s so let’s get moving.

Yes, but where?

Starting with a blank piece of paper.

'Where do you want to go?'

'Wherever you think.'

'Oh fine, where do you really want to go?'

'Well I would like to see the Pyramids, the Great Wall of China and the Grand Canyon.'

The list included many other places, a timescale was applied, we had originally thought of six months for the whole trip. Allowing one day in each location we had a chance, the decision was made to put off China and India to another year. Substantially more discussion and a final spreadsheet was prepared, whatever did we do before computers?

In collecting brochures for ideas, we found a lot of interest from travel agents, and then we noticed that Kuoni were offering a tailor made service. I emailed them for more information, to receive the reply that the service was starting in two months time, would we like to leave contact information etc?

We did and carried on with our lives, a time of major upheaval where Judy's father died suddenly. At times like that the last thing you worry about are vague plans for a holiday, but it galvanised our minds to the realities of life.

Do it now or it will be never!

We informed our respective employers that we would be leaving by the end of the following March, that burnt the boats, we had to do it!

An email arrived in early December from Kuoni, were we still interested, and would we like to send our ideas? A reply in the affirmative was sent, we will send our ideas after Christmas. We were then in the middle of planning what we wanted to be our best ever family Christmas celebration.

Those who are familiar with Kuoni, will know that they do not compete in the 'Ibiza' holiday market, and their Worldwide brochure is not the most inexpensive on the market, but I have used their services before and had value for money. But by way of comparison we also decided to investigate the 'gap year' market.

The company we went to had problems as we wanted to include places not normally within their usual experience and so their proposals included a certain amount of back and forth flights, also their 'side tours' were a little basic, fine if you are 18 and need to do it 'on the cheap and in tents', but when we did some comparisons it was no cheaper than our proposed 4 star hotel existence. There are an awful lot of 'extras' to tented holidays, and the while idea of roughing it may have appealed to our 20 something eldest daughter it did not to us!

To cut to the chase, Kuoni produced a quote while the others worried about getting between Bali and Australia! A few discussions, a couple of changes, a bit of haggling and hey presto, get your name changed on your passport you are booked for March the 28th, the current date? January 27th!

We had also found it necessary to cut out Kenya. Round the world air tickets require you to go in a relatively straight line. That made the vaccinations easier, Judy's previous trips to Europe had not necessitated her needing any protection; I am at various stages, having reached the position with some where I have no need to have any more boosters!
The nurse will advise.

A plaintiff voice from across the room,
'Depart Heathrow for Frankfurt 10:15.'
'Yes, check in by 8:15, mmm, what's Helen doing?'
'We can't ask her, not there at that time.'
'OK, we can sort it!'

A scan through the brochure, executive cars available subject to certain terms, ok, ask, job done, car arranged.

This is not intended as an advertisement for Kuoni but they were extremely helpful.

Where they did have a problem was the insurance, their suggested people would only provide cover for a maximum of 180 days, we were going for 196. I found several on the internet, most didn't want to know because of either our ages, you shouldn't do this over 35 or in the timescale. Of those we did find who would look at it, several offered cover that allowed for a holiday cost of £3,000, finally we found one which would cover us including the full invoiced value of the holiday, the premium, £571.00!

So visas sorted (another Kuoni service), vaccinations injected, including after much discussion Yellow Fever, £350 worth of Malaria tablets purchased, various minor details continually rising and either being listed or dealt with, only two major items remain; Australia and New Zealand, together a period of 10 weeks and nothing arranged after 3 nights in a Perth hotel.

So out came the brochures, 'why does everything in New Zealand go from Auckland to Christchurch and not the other way?' well there must be an awful lot of cars in Christchurch, I'll call Laura.

Laura at Kuoni again came up with the goods, there is no reason why a fly drive cannot be done in reverse, OK quote us, let's get another deal done!

Australia; where do you want to go?

'All round.'

'Yes but it's a very big place.'

'Well a woman at work used the trains when she was there, they are very good apparently.'

Lets get on the web, Austrains is full of information and details. 'Right then Perth to Adelaide; Adelaide to Alice Springs and Darwin, how do we get from Darwin to Cairns? We want to see Ayres Rock etc., that means we have to spend a fair bit of time in Alice Springs waiting for the Ghan. Ok send it to Laura lets see what she says.

The message came back, 'Can do, but why do you want to spend so long in Alice Springs?'

A quick reply 'Do you infer that there isn't much to do there?'

'Well a colleague did spend 6 months there, but I wouldn't!'

'OK, but that tied in with our going to Darwin, the other problem is getting from Darwin to Cairns, can we drive it?'

'I wouldn't, it's outback and would take at least a week.'

'So we miss out Darwin then, can you get us from Ayres Rock to Cairns?'

'Fly direct.'

'We need a hotel in Cairns to go to, there's some in your brochure offering bonus free days.'

A hotel for 5 days and a quote agreed, and paid, with 6 days to go!

Tickets arrived in half inch thick wads, the Itinerary in three sections with vouchers, e-tickets and information packs, and a promise that the Australian and New Zealand parts would be waiting for us in Perth.

Packing was a nightmare, how do you select the right clothing for 6 months? The baggage allowance is 20kg per person. A decision was made, pack only the absolutely essential items for hot weather and go from there. One thing we found, almost by accident, that proved most invaluable, self seal bags from the supermarket, in two sizes, one for shoes and the rest for smaller items which could leak or just needing to be kept together.

Money? Now there is the rub, so many people still recommend travellers cheques, I lost faith with them years ago after signing one four times in Bangkok because signatures on my passport and the cheque didn't quite match (anyone who has seen my signature will know why). Put that with the fees charged to buy and cash them. A straight forward decision, \$1,000 & £500 in cash, the rest will be paid for by credit card and any further cash from ATMs. Yes I know that there's a fee for ATMs outside Britain, but with the exchange rate being the international banking one it works out cheaper!

And then came the realisation, what the hell are we doing? Neither of us has been away for more than 3 weeks before, how will we cope, what about home sickness, will all the connections work out, what if we are robbed or the computer beaks down?

A farewell party was arranged by Helen our eldest. We received a sheet of paper.

'I will arrive at your house at 9:00 on Saturday 25th March, you are both to leave your house no later than 9:30am with your Grandson James, you are required to return home no earlier than 3pm and no later than 3:10pm. (I know what mums time keeping is like!)

We took James to Wimpole Hall in Cambridgeshire, he enjoyed the farm and the children's playground while we wondered what was happening at home.

On our return, as we parked, Judy said 'That's my sisters car!'

On entering the living room there was sister Jane with Jenny her daughter and hidden round a corner, Poppy our Granddaughter, Diana couldn't make it so Jane brought Poppy to see us off.

Later David arrived with Hayley and Robert, and to top it off Pat and John my sister and her husband arrived. We all enjoyed a buffet meal that Helen had prepared and a few drinks to toast the forthcoming journey.

Everyone we spoke to about our plans was supportive, many said that they wished they had the courage to do it. My response is always 'just do it!' Life's too short to worry about the future, in my experience whenever I have planned ahead, something happens to change everything. Amazingly this time everything came together and worked!

What you are about to read is generally distilled from a series of emails which were sent to Helen during the tour, improved by excerpts from a daily journal kept by Judy. The English may not be perfect. The language is colloquial at times and there are some references to 'family' things. We sincerely hope that it adds to the spontaneity of the work.

The views expressed and contained in the following chapters are those of the authors, gained from experience on the ground at the time, they may offend some people, in many cases we apologise, but frankly there are some cases where I hope that they do offend!

I hope that it leads anyone in regular contact with the travelling public to consider how they appear and to lessen the stress they cause to their customers.