

THE NEWS

... from all points of the compass



The Specialist
Travel Consultancy

Issue 4: 2007-08: Autumn Term

Greetings! We hope you had a great summer despite the terrible weather, and for all those who travelled abroad on trips or expeditions, we hope you came back with many a tall story!

We are delighted that during the first half of this year we have been able to assist numerous schools and scout groups with real and imaginative solutions to their travel requests. A selection of these include geography field trips to the US and Japan (see below), tours of India, expeditions in Nepal, a prep-school canoeing expedition in the Ardèche and a British history tour of Egypt to name but a few.

The importance of choosing a destination to fit the time of year that you plan to travel (or indeed vice versa!) is fundamental to the success of any trip abroad. Trekking in the Himalaya, exploring temples in India or visiting Voodoo tribes in west Africa, for example, are often life changing experiences for young people. However, travel out of season and the trip may be remembered for all the wrong reasons: leach infested trails, sapping heat and humidity, and roads that are nothing more than muddy quagmires. While some might say this adds to the experience, travelling in the wrong season mainly shapes the overriding memories for the worse, and if it can be avoided, then it probably should. Find out more about the travel seasons on page three.

We have recently made a variety of improvements to our website. Our country dossiers are now on-line and are a great resource for those of you in the early stages of planning trips. The library of dossiers, found under the Destinations page, contains background information, itinerary suggestions and guideline prices for 21 countries worldwide. They represent the countries we are most commonly asked to assist with. However, if your preferred destination isn't available, don't worry, we can put together trips in over 140 countries around the world. Take a trip at www.thestc.co.uk. We take time to fully understand your requirements and establish a programme to fit your needs. We will also recommend a respected tour operator to deliver the programme for you.

We are also now able to quote on "flight only" travel arrangements using one of the UK's most respected independent flight consolidators, so if you already have contacts in-country and just need the flights, we will be pleased to offer you a quote.

All the best for the term ahead and we look forward to assisting you with your travel plans wherever and whatever they may be.

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Asakusa Sensoji Temple, Tokyo



Japan: Earthquakes, Sushi & Karaoke!

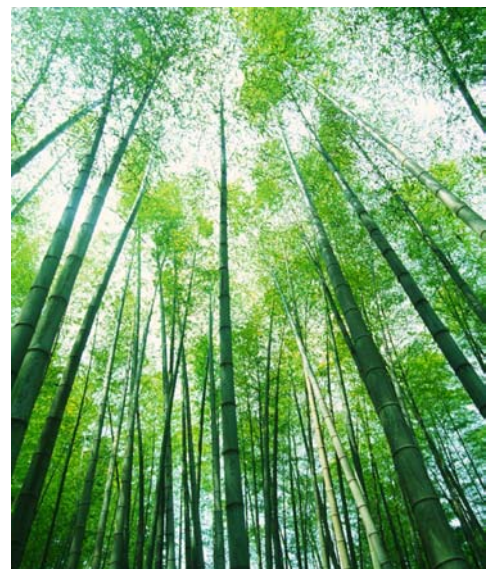
Earlier this year, the geography department at Uppingham School contacted us to see if we could come up with an itinerary for a proposed 10 - 12 day trip to Japan. The brief included a number of specific requests such as a tour of the previous earthquake affected city of Kobe and a visit to various volcanic features. In addition to this there were requests for other activities that would give the pupils an insight into the extraordinary culture and beauty of this unique country. These included some walking and trekking, sumo (watching it, we hasten to add!), a visit to a high-tech industrial plant and... a spot of Karaoke!

The itinerary we devised ticked all these boxes apart from the Sumo, unfortunately, as tournaments do not take place during

the planned trip dates. However, with an itinerary that also includes lessons in calligraphy and origami, talks with survivors from the Kobe earthquake and also the Hiroshima A-bomb, a visit to the earthquake simulation centre, the opportunity to sample sushi for breakfast at the biggest fish market in the world and the chance to dress as a Samurai warrior, we think they will be kept more than busy during their trip!

It's a good example of how our experience and knowledge of who to contact within the industry can help turn a potentially general sightseeing visit to a country into an in-depth look at everything from history and the arts, to religion, geography, culture and food.

Itineraries to Japan start at around £1,500.



Voluntourism: Is your expedition project work doing any good?

In the previous issue of The News, we talked about meaningful project work and how tour operators' in-country contacts affect their ability to source responsible projects. This topic hit the headlines this summer with VSO calling for students to avoid travel companies offering project aid-work as part of gap-year placements. This may seem a drastic step by VSO, but the reality is that many projects are chosen to suit volunteers and not the needs of the locals. Sadly, the same is often very true of projects that form part of school expeditions.

Far too often these expeditions involve activities such as painting murals on school buildings, rather than projects planned in consultation with communities or established local charities. As such they do little to benefit the people or places visited.

With the bigger expedition companies often sending multiple groups of 12 or more teenagers to the same area or village in the space of a few weeks, there are real difficulties in ensuring that the project work they offer is genuine, worthwhile and of real benefit to the area and its people.

We are not suggesting that schools should stop including project work in their expeditions; the rewards can be immeasurable for both the participants *and* the communities involved, as long as the projects are selected carefully and sustainably.

As independent advisers to schools planning foreign travel, we would ask all schools to take a more active role in sourcing operators dedicated to travelling responsibly and that work with local NGOs and communities to establish sustainable project work.

Many of the tour operators we deal with here at the STC are renowned for responsible tourism policies that set the benchmark for others to strive for. The project opportunities they offer derive from community or environmental need, rather than the operator looking to fill a demand from its clients.

If you would like us to plan an expedition that contains a really worthwhile project phase, or have any queries regarding this issue, please get in touch and we will be delighted to help.



14 - 16 year olds: Adventure travel introductions

Numerous schools have recently asked us to come up with ideas and adventure travel destinations that are suitable for the 14 - 16 year old age group. Suitable destinations obviously vary depending on the time of year that the trip is planned for, but below are a variety of itineraries that are perfect for this age group, offering excellent value for money, eye-opening experiences and great trekking, cycling or canoeing opportunities. The guide prices given below are based on a trip of between 8 - 16 days (depending on destination), a group size of 15 pupils with 2 accompanying staff travelling free of charge, and assumes that one of the staff members is suitably qualified (typically an ML qualification) to lead the trip in conjunction with qualified local guides. We can, of course, provide experienced external leaders if required, although this will add to the cost slightly.

Europe:

Slovenia: Remote mountain trekking amongst spectacular peaks and alpine valleys. There are also opportunities for canyoning, white-water rafting and hydrospeeding, making it a great multi-activity adventure destination. *From £950.*

Turkey: Explore the traditions and bizarre landscapes of Cappadocia before heading south for some more serious trekking in the Taurus mountains. There is also the option to round off the trip with a few days coastal exploration aboard a traditional Turkish Gulet. *From £1,000.*

Romania: Trek amongst wild mountains (home to bear, wolf and lynx) and the painted monasteries of eastern Romania. Spectacular canyons, Dracula's castle, the Danube delta and mediaeval villages await. *From £1,050.*

Finland: True wilderness travel. Walking, rafting and canoeing through the remote forests, hills and lakes of the far east of Finland, home to bear, wolf, elk and lynx. Experience the midnight sun and sauna - Finnish style. *From £1,200.*

North Africa & the Middle East:

Egypt: The Sinai offers remote desert and mountain exploration, opportunities to live and work with traditional Bedouin tribes, as well as biblical history and extensions to Cairo and the Pyramids, Petra in Jordan or Felucca sailing on the Nile. *From £800.*

Jordan: Spectacular Wadi Rum offers excellent desert trekking and nearby Petra is sure to drop the jaw of all who enter the siq. Off-road cycling is also plentiful, as are history lessons with visits to Mt. Nebo and the roman ruins of Jerash. *From £1,050.*

Morocco: A country full of year-round possibilities. Depending on the season, trekking could be in the little visited Rif Mountains, the High or Anti Atlas or in the desert Jebel Sahro. Bustling markets, camel treks, Berber hospitality and nights under the stars in the Sahara. Magical! *From £800.*



Long Haul:

Thailand: Often overlooked, Thailand provides handsomely for those looking for adventure, history, extraordinary cultures, warm welcomes and great cuisine - all the hallmarks of a great introduction to adventure travel. *From £1,100.*

China: Trekking along the semi-ruin of a stretch of the Great Wall represents a journey back in time and an opportunity to see a snap shot of life in this fascinating and beautiful country. *From £1,400.*

Vietnam: Vietnam offers a great opportunity to visit some of south east Asia's unique hill tribes combined with some excellent trekking, beautiful Halong Bay and colonial Hanoi. Cycling is a great option for Vietnam too and will enable groups to fully appreciate the beauty of the country and its people. *From £1,500.*

India (Ladakh): Despite potential altitude issues, a two week trip to Ladakh is feasible given a carefully planned itinerary and well managed acclimatisation. The region offers spectacular trekking and a traditional Buddhist culture. *From £1,600.*

Weather: It's a fickle thing...

The world's weather systems can be an intricate puzzle to piece together. With variations within regions and indeed often within particular countries, it can sometimes seem impossible to work out when is the best time of year to travel to certain destinations. Below is a quick resume of what are generally considered to be the best destinations for each season - it is by no means a definitive list! If you would prefer to search by country, please refer to our brochure (available on-line) or call us for a detailed look at monthly temperature, humidity, sunshine and rainfall averages for any particular country or destination.

Spring

Our spring is an especially magical time to travel in the northern hemisphere with bright floral carpets backed by snow capped peaks and blue skies.

Many of the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries are at their best so consider a visit to Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Oman or Turkey.

Suitable long haul destinations include northern India (but not Ladakh) and the Himalayan countries of Nepal and Bhutan. Japan, southern China and also south east Asia are similarly good, as are central America, Cuba and also Ethiopia.

Late spring is also the time to head for Greenland for ski touring and mountaineering.



Summer

Summer obviously presents the best opportunity for a long trip or expedition. Consider the following destinations in Asia: China, Tibet, Mongolia, the "Stans", Borneo, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and the Himalayan regions of Ladakh and the Karakorum in Pakistan.

In Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Botswana and Namibia are all great, weather wise, as are the south American countries of Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. Northern Argentina and Chile are also possibilities.

Back in the northern hemisphere Alaska and Canada are in their prime, as are Greenland for summer trekking, Iceland and Svalbaard.

All of Europe is, obviously, accessible and even carefully selected areas of Egypt, Turkey or Morocco are possible, despite the potential issues with heat.



Autumn

All the destinations mentioned for spring are generally also excellent in our Autumn. Nepal and Bhutan are often considered to be even better, however, as the monsoon rains have cleared the air of dust resulting in incredibly clear mountain views.

In India, Kerala & Goa in the south as well as the remote tribal regions in the north east of Arunachal Pradesh & Nagaland are all excellent.

In Africa, Ethiopia and Mali are excellent in October and November and offer superb trekking and fascinating and unique cultures - all possible within a two week time frame.

Late autumn sees the start of the dry season in central America, but much of south America, apart from Patagonia, is turning wet, so probably best avoided.



Winter

The Christmas holidays maybe short but they nevertheless represent a great opportunity for cultural tours and adventure.

Morocco, Egypt, Oman, India, South Africa and Thailand are all feasible destinations for an 8 to 10 day trip, and offer challenging cultures and endless adventures.

Europe's winter offers many alternatives to the standard ski trip: Scandinavia, the Alps and eastern Europe all offer excellent possibilities for snow shoeing or cross-country skiing. Meanwhile mid winter cultural visits to Eastern European capitals may be cold, but are often quiet and very picturesque.

If you have a longer Christmas break and can fit in a two week trip, then central America and south east Asia are at their best. Antarctica, with its unique history and fabulous wildlife, as well as nearby Patagonia are also on the menu although, admittedly, they are not cheap options.



Charity Challenges: Schools wanted

Our friends at the **Meningitis Trust** are looking for school groups to take part in charity challenge events to raise money for their vital work.

Schools are a natural partner for the Trust with teenagers and young adults being the second most likely group to contract the disease after the under fives.

The Trust is interested to hear from schools, at whatever level, that are interested in supporting its work. For secondary schools looking to combine raising funds for charity with an expedition or challenging trek, cycle or canoe trip overseas, we at the STC have an almost unlimited selection of possibilities for you to choose from. Whether your school has an established overseas programme or is venturing abroad for the first time in an adventurous capacity, we will work in partnership with you to create a suitable programme.

To discuss possible overseas challenge destinations, itineraries, tour operators and costs, contact the STC on 0845 838 7667. For information on the work of the Meningitis Trust, how to get involved and fund-raising ideas, visit www.meningitis-trust.org or contact Lisa Robinson, Challenge Events Manager at the Meningitis Trust, on 01453 769023.



Seven Wonders: One World

After years of preparation, the results of the "New 7 Wonders of the World" competition were unveiled in Lisbon in July this year. Over 100 million votes were cast worldwide to select seven monuments and buildings from a list of 21 finalists - each recognised as having truly global significance.

The final seven were confirmed as:

- **The Great Wall of China.**
- **Petra**, Jordan.
- **Chichén Itzá**, Mexico.
- **The Statue of Christ Redeemer**, Rio.
- **The Colosseum**, Rome.
- **Machu Picchu**, Peru.
- **The Taj Mahal**, India.

Here at the STC, we are very pleased to say that we can arrange tailor-made school trips to see and experience all but one of the of the 21 finalists. Ironically, the only one that escapes us is right on our doorstep - Stonehenge! Still, we're fairly sure our clients are a resourceful lot and won't have a problem getting themselves to Wiltshire if required!

The other 13 finalists were **The Acropolis** in Athens, **The Alhambra Palace**, Spain; **Angkor Wat**, Cambodia; **The Moa Statues**, Easter Island; **The Eiffel Tower**, **Hagia Sophia**, Istanbul; **Kiyomizu Temple**, Japan, **The Kremlin**, Moscow; **Neuschwanstein Castle**, Germany; **The Pyramids of Giza**, Egypt, **The Statue of Liberty**; **Sydney Opera House** and **Timbuktu**, Mali.



School ski trips: Steep learning curves

For those schools looking to develop and enhance their annual ski trip in the Alps, we have some exciting news.

New to the growing list of niche travel companies that we deal with is the specialist mountain adventure provider Mountain Tracks. The company has recently launched a "Backcountry skiing and winter skills" programme dedicated to the schools market.

The 5-day course, which can be tailored to requirements, is aimed at more advanced skiers and boarders who are looking for a new challenge and are ready to explore beyond the boundaries of the piste. The course is run under the instruction and careful supervision of IFMGA qualified guides and combines essential mountain and avalanche awareness skills with off-piste instruction and guiding. There is also the chance for a 2-day ski tour enabling participants to get well away from the resort areas and fully appreciate the delights of touring and off-piste skiing and boarding.

The standard 5-day course fee is £425 per person and includes all guide fees and expenses as well as avalanche safety equipment, but not personal equipment, lunches and mountain hut accommodation on the overnight 2-day tour (usually approximately £30pp).

The course is designed as an add-on to your usual school ski trip and can be run in almost any location throughout the Alps using the flights and accommodation from your usual tour operator. Minimum group size is usually four people. If you would like more information and an e-brochure, please contact us at The Specialist Travel Consultancy.



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Stop Press: New series of "Tribe" on BBC 2

As we go to press, a third series of the excellent travel documentary "Tribe" has just started on Tuesday nights at 9pm. If previous series' and presenter Bruce Parry's eagerness to throw himself into all and sundry are anything to go by, we are surely in for another eye-opening treat of anthropology and fascinating armchair travel. Destinations include Bhutan, Siberia and Brazil.



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