

THE NEWS

... from all points of the compass



The Specialist
Travel Consultancy

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Happy New Year! We hope you have all enjoyed the festive season. Our winter is an especially good time to visit the Indian sub-continent, south east Asia, Patagonia and Antarctica, so for those of you who have missed out on the mince pies and figgy pudding this year, we hope your various travels and adventures have made up for it.

Here at the STC, we appreciate time is in short supply for teachers, so... **if you only have time to read one article in this issue of THE NEWS, make sure it is the one on page 3 regarding financial protection.** This is highly relevant to all teachers taking pupils abroad, whatever the reason for the trip. However, it is especially important to those who plan and arrange their own trips. Assessing financial risk is an essential part of the pre-trip risk assessment and this article highlights some of the potential pitfalls that are not always considered or fully appreciated. Financial protection is a complex issue, so if you would like to discuss anything mentioned here, please feel free to call us.

Since the last issue of THE NEWS, we have been kept busy assisting a wide variety of schools, planning everything from a month long expedition in China, to a short trek in Morocco and a whole range of trips in between. If you would like further information on anything mentioned in this edition, or would like us to provide a quote and comprehensive proposal for a trip you have planned, all at no obligation, then please get in touch and we will be delighted to be of assistance.

We look forward to hearing from you and wish you all the best for the term ahead.

The Salar de Uyuni



Bolivia: The Remote South West

The scenery of the far south west of Bolivia is overwhelming to the senses and a "must-see" for any school planning a visit to this demanding yet intriguing South American country.

Being a wilderness area with few villages and no public transport, the only way to visit this region is by means of an organised tour with expert guides. Most tours start from the small Altiplano town of Uyuni, where day trips can be made into the nearby Salar de Uyuni. At 12,000 sq km it is the biggest expanse of salt anywhere on the planet.

Longer 4-day trips can also be made, allowing a border crossing into Chile and ending at San Pedro de Atacama, a small frontier town on the edge of the world's driest desert. Along the way, the route ascends to over 5000m with snow-capped volcanoes towering over ochre-red deserts and salt lakes inhabited by rare James' flamingos. Some lakes are also home to algae which cause the water to turn either fiery red or bluey-green in the sunlight. Before the descent to Chile the trip is completed with a visit to the 4,800m geyser basin on the border. With its boiling mud pots, sulphur fumaroles and hot springs, it is a fitting end to an extraordinary travel experience!

Bolivia is a great destination for schools wanting an adventurous expedition. It has everything from jungles and snow-capped mountains to colonial architecture and vibrant cultures. The trekking and travel can be tough, even by South American standards, but don't let that put you off - it is well worth the effort! Prices start from around £2,200 per person for a three week itinerary including flights, with a specialist operator. Contact us for information or a quote.

In this Issue

- **Bolivia:** The remote south west
- **Geography Field Trips:** Contrasting Hotspots
- **Pedal Power:** Travel on two wheels
- **BS8848:** A British Standard for overseas activities
- **Destination Focus:** Nepal
- **Financial Protection:** What you need to know
- **Magic Moments:** Right place, right time
- **Planning a personal holiday?** We can help!
- **Latin America:** Language schools
- **Free Wine!**

Geography Field Trips: Contrasting Hotspots

Here we explore two contrasting destinations that are ideal for bringing volcanic activity and physical geography to life. Please get in touch for more information or a full quotation on either of these options, or to discuss any other ideas you may have.

The Azores: Volcanic Island Hopping

The isolated, unspoiled archipelago of the Azores in the mid Atlantic represents a unique destination for a geographical field trip. It is blessed with a rich diversity of geographical marvels and many of the nine islands have a treasure trove of geothermic features including crater lakes, lava tubes, boiling mud and hot springs. There is also the opportunity to make an ascent of Pico Alta (2350m), the islands' highest volcano. Other highlights include learning about the islands' whaling history and the opportunity to take to sea and go in search of the sperm whales and dolphins which visit the islands' temperate waters.

Price guide: An eight day trip is likely to cost in the region of £1,195 per pupil (based on a group of 16 pupils travelling with two teachers). Exact costs will vary depending on the itinerary and the numbers in the group. The best time to visit the Islands is between May and October.

Iceland: Glaciers, Waterfalls and Geothermic Activity

Iceland is justifiably popular as a destination for geography field trips. After only a three hour flight from London, pupils can be immersed, quite literally, into the hot springs of the "Blue Lagoon". With glaciers, boiling mud, geysers, fumaroles, basalt columns and black beaches, any number of topics can be studied in depth or as part of a general overview.

Price guide: A five day, four night trip is likely to cost in the region of £650 per pupil, depending on the date of travel (based on a group size of 35 pupils travelling with four teachers).

Pedal Power: Travel on two wheels

Like walking and trekking, cycling is a great way to see the people and landscape a country has to offer. Itineraries can be chosen to suit the objectives of the trip and the level of challenge required. Options range from leisurely cycles providing a different slant on the classic cultural tour, to extreme off-road adventures in some of the greatest mountain ranges in the world: none more inspiring than the classic route of Lhasa to Kathmandu, crossing the Tibetan plateau. This 20 day trip in a land of rugged beauty, vast landscapes, brilliant skies and glittering peaks, offers one of the world's most spectacular off-road rides. The final descent into Nepal and the lush Kathmandu Valley is crowned by a spectacular 3 day, 160km, 4600m descent from the plateau - ideal for a school mountain biking club looking for perhaps the ultimate challenge!

However, travel on two wheels is not all about extreme off-road mountain biking such as the traverse of the Tibetan plateau. Countries such as Vietnam or China, for instance, are perfect for an active cultural tour by bicycle. The majority of cycling is on well paved roads and there is constant interest en-route with bustling markets and stunning scenery. Closer to home, Turkey offers an excellent location for a more varied trip. After a week or so in the saddle in the stunning region of Cappadocia, head for the coast for some serious Roman history, followed by a few days of relaxation aboard a traditional Turkish Gulet. To discuss any of these destinations in more detail, or other destinations where cycling is a great alternative to trekking, please get in touch and we will be pleased to run you through all the possibilities.

Mountain biking group on the Tibetan Plateau.



Annapurna South & Huinchuli, from Ghandruk



Destination Focus: Nepal

Over the past 10 years, Nepal has been gripped by a Maoist rebellion that has seen more than 12,000 people die. However, with a new peace agreement signed, paving the way for stability, Nepal is finally, it seems, on the road to recovery.

Nepal's tourism, on which it relies so heavily, has suffered dreadfully in recent years, yet what has been the allure for trekkers and tourists for so many years, still remains as strong today as before the troubles: mountains, people and culture.

Whatever the reason for your visit to this enchanting country, you are sure to come away with endearing memories of warm welcomes, smiling children and a sense of wonder at the majesty of the Himalaya. The mountain range dominates life in much of this Kingdom, however, the real beauty of Nepal lies in its sheer diversity.

There is a huge range of environments, ecosystems, terrains, religions and cultures. The disparity between the lofty peaks of the Himalaya and the steaming jungle plains of Chitwan National Park is matched only by the contrast and diversity found within the Hindu and Buddhist religions. Whilst a visit to Nepal would not be complete without experiencing the religious cultures and bustle of Kathmandu or the wildlife of its many National Parks, it is the mountains that draw groups here time and again.

There is no better way to get a feel for this country than to walk through the valleys and villages of the Himalaya. "Life" is all around you: children playing, men and women working the terraces with buffalo and ox, lively markets and

families preparing dinner, all with the magnificent jagged peaks soaring high above.

Trekking in Nepal is not just about scaling high peaks, crossing snow covered passes and traversing remote valleys. There are many options offering easy and short (perhaps four or five day) treks at low altitude. In the Annapurna region, particularly, there are some excellent treks that rise little above 3,000m, so avoiding serious altitude issues, and yet afford stunning views of the 8,000m Annapurna range and the beautiful Machapuchare or "Fishtail" mountain.

Aiming a little higher, classic treks such as Everest Base Camp and the Annapurna Circuit are certainly popular with the masses, but even with a route as well trodden as Everest Base Camp there are some great variations on the standard route that will take you away from the crowds and over some of the most spectacular passes in the Himalaya. More remote opportunities abound too, with access to previously restricted areas opening up with increasing frequency. A circumnavigation of Dhaulagiri, the Rolwaling Valley, or the remote region of Nar and Phu all offer genuinely remote trekking amongst fabulous scenery and isolated communities.

For the more upwardly inclined, there are the trekking peaks: challenging, rewarding, and technically within the reach of any fit and determined group with ice-axe and crampon experience. Mera Peak (6460m), Island Peak (6189m) and Chulu West (6250m) are three non-technical trekking peaks offering the opportunity to experience true mountaineering in the

BS 8848: A British Standard for overseas activities

2006 has seen the Royal Geographical Society (RGS), the British Standards Institute and a wide variety of schools, universities and industry experts drafting a new set of standards for the provision of overseas adventurous activities, expeditions, visits and fieldwork.

It is focused on educational, training or recreational trips outside the United Kingdom and is applicable to trips arranged by commercial companies, educational establishments or voluntary and charitable organisations. Rather than simply more red tape, British Standards are voluntary and this Standard should be seen as a "best practice" guideline in safety management systems that will enable these activities to flourish.

Having recently gone to public consultation, the proposed amendments are currently being considered by the technical panel with a view to launching the finalised Standard within the first quarter of this year. Details should be posted on the RGS Geography Outdoors website (formerly known as the Expedition Advisory Centre) at www.rgs.org/bsi

Himalaya. Our trekking and climbing operators for Nepal and the rest of the Himalaya are supremely qualified to take groups into this arena. Many have been in operation for over 20 years, some have been leading the way for more than 30 years. They are the most experienced in the business and offer a support and safety network that is second to none. Where required, expert pre-departure training can be arranged through the network of AALA registered companies that we deal with right across the UK.

In addition to trekking, Nepal has excellent opportunities for white water rafting and mountain biking. Often it is feasible to include both of these activities in an itinerary if required, in addition to trekking. There are also many possibilities for those schools wanting to include a project phase. Many of the options are community based, helping remote villages construct houses, schools or pathways for example.

Central to any exploration of Nepal is the capital city, Kathmandu. This fascinating, noisy city is home to a remarkable history and a rich cultural heritage. Holy men, artists, business men and tourists jostle for position amongst ancient palaces and temples in one of the world's greatest travel destinations. Any itinerary, whether trekking or more culturally focused, should allow at least some time to explore this absorbing city.

Two week itineraries including an introductory trek start from around £1,200 - £1,400 per person, including flights. Please get in touch to discuss itineraries and options and to obtain a quotation.

Financial Protection: What you need to know and what tour operators won't tell you...

We are, no doubt, all aware that there are many different guises of financial protection within the travel industry. With so many options, it can sometimes be difficult to understand which bonds, schemes or trust accounts offer the best protection, and in which situations, as different forms of financial protection will be applicable depending on whether your travel includes flights, ferries, "land only" arrangements and so on. To muddy the waters still further, if you use more than one supplier to make your travel arrangements (for example by booking your flights and ground arrangements with separate companies) then the various elements of a trip are likely to be covered by different forms of financial protection.

With all the elements covered by at least some form of financial protection, "what's the problem?", I hear you say? Well, here's the crunch: even with each element of a trip being individually protected, you are not completely free from financial risk. There are a small number of quite feasible situations where you could be faced with the choice of either losing money, or being forced to pay further significant amounts of it. This is especially true when a large group is involved. These situations can potentially leave you, as organiser, in a very sticky situation - possibly becoming liable for the extra expense or money lost. The risks are primarily associated with the booking of separate flight and tour arrangements (i.e. not a flight inclusive package). Here we look at a number of scenarios in which arranging your travel in this way can have far reaching consequences...

Change in FCO Advice:

When the Foreign and Commonwealth Office issues a travel warning about a country, a tour operator can no longer take clients to the region due to issues with their liability insurance. Therefore the tour operator has to cancel the arrangements.

As the tour operator has been forced to cancel the arrangements (rather than the client cancelling them) the operator has to provide a full refund of all monies paid.

However, if you have booked your flights separately through a travel agent, airline wholesaler or directly with an airline, there is no such obligation to refund your money. This could potentially leave you in the situation where thousands of pounds worth of flights are left completely unusable.

Verdict: A distinct possibility. Airlines do, in some circumstances, give full or partial refunds in such situations, but they are not obliged to and you should not rely on it.

Operator Insolvency:

If you are using a UK company, non-governmental organisation or charity to arrange the ground element of a trip, it should have some form of financial protection and you should therefore get your money back if they go bankrupt. In this situation, however, you will still be left with your flights which have been booked through a different company and are therefore under a separate contract. If you cancel the trip altogether, you will incur cancellation costs on the flights. If lucky, these might be £100 per person, if unlucky, you will lose everything.

You could of course choose to continue with the trip and get another operator to take the place of the first one. From experience, the replacement services are almost always more expensive, mainly due to reduced availability of good value hotels and other services.

On a similar note, if you make arrangements direct with a company in the country being visited then their insolvency will almost always mean loss of all monies paid to them.

Verdict: Operator insolvency can have disastrous knock on effects for the other elements of a trip and is likely to cause either significant financial loss or extra expense.

Airline Insolvency:

Let us take an example: Your ground arrangements in India have been organised through a reputable UK tour operator and your flights have been booked through a travel agency. Both elements of your trip are fully financially protected. At some point before departure, the airline or travel agency you booked with goes bust. It may take a little while to get your money back, but you will get a full refund of your money for the flights.

However, you have also paid the tour operator the balance for their services. If you chose to cancel the trip, the tour operator will impose cancellation fees and you will lose, at best your deposit, at worst up to 100% of your money. After all, it's not their fault that you are having to cancel.

As with the operator insolvency scenario, you could, of course, choose to continue with the trip and rebook your flights through another airline. Again, this will almost always be more expensive. Many months may have passed since your original booking and flight prices are likely to have risen significantly. Availability of flights is also likely to be a key issue, especially for a larger group.

Verdict: Booking your flight and ground arrangements through different companies, opens you up to significant financial risk and potential extra expense if one element fails.



The Answer: ATOL

Make flight inclusive travel arrangements through one operator with an "Air Travel Organisers Licence" (or ATOL for short). ATOL protection (in the form of a bond lodged with the Civil Aviation Authority) is currently the only 100% effective means of

protecting your money in all situations. Remember, ATOL protection is only applicable if your trip includes international air travel originating in the UK. If you book only ground arrangements with a company that has an ATOL licence, but arrange your flights separately, then the ground arrangements are not covered by their ATOL licence, and all the above scenarios and consequences still apply.

All the tour operators and expedition providers used by the STC are fully ATOL protected, and we will only ever recommend you to travel as part of a flight inclusive package. The only exception to this is travel to short-haul destinations, where it may be more economical and sensible to use coach travel rather than a flight. In such instances, we still recommend the use of just one tour operator for all your travel arrangements, but the financial protection will be provided under a scheme different to ATOL. Because of the need to provide our clients with fully ATOL protected travel arrangements, the STC does not handle any client money. All payments for the travel arrangements we help arrange are made directly to the ATOL holder concerned and you are therefore fully protected by their ATOL licence.

"Surely we would be able to claim on travel insurance if a company or airline went bust?" Sorry, but no. Travel insurance is a red herring in these situations. Very few insurers (if any) will cover any of the above scenarios. Travel insurance tends not cover loss (or consequential loss) where there is (or at least should be) financial protection in place.

Airlines and Low-Cost Flights

No article on financial protection would be complete without mentioning the ever increasing low-cost flights market.

Being able to access vast swathes of Europe so cheaply is becoming increasingly harder to resist. However, before you book the next set of flights, consider the following:

In the past three years more than 30 low-cost European airlines have gone out of business, affecting tens of thousands of passengers. Booking a flight direct with any airline (and that includes those such as BA, not just "low-cost" airlines) means no financial protection to cover you should they go bust. In addition, if your airline goes bust whilst you are abroad, you will have no choice but to buy a new ticket home with another airline, often at great expense.

Ironically, while ATOL protection is designed to cover flight inclusive travel arrangements, airlines themselves are not required to have an ATOL licence unless they are selling a "package" involving flights and one other element such as accommodation or a tour.

Magic Moments: In the right place at the right time...

If any of us ever needed proof that travel and adventure can combine to provide a powerful concoction, then look no further than the following extract from the travel diary of trainee doctor Simon Davey. An experienced traveller, he visited Indonesia in the summer of 2004. Many of us who travel and enjoy the outdoors regularly will know the feeling: to be in just the right place at just the right time...

"We witnessed a moment in time two nights ago that will simply never be seen again. The combination of the timing of the full moon, the sunset and the cloud formations cannot be the same again. It's almost impossible to convey what we saw, but I'll try.

We'd spent all day walking up the side of Gunung Rinjani - a very arduous 7-hour trek - to emerge out of the clouds with dazzlingly clear views of Mt Agung on Bali. A short time later the clouds cleared and the Gili Isles appeared below us: three dots off the North west coast of Lombok.

We battled on up to the crater lake at 2800m and a perfect conical volcanic dome, green lake water and the summit view opened up in front of us - just incredible. Night came in very fast and in a benevolent coincidence of timing, the full moon rose above the summit as the sun went to bed on the other side. Due to our height, the colours became more and more intense - reds to purples,

yellow and everything in between. An ethereal mist appeared below us, above the crater lake, lit by the moon and we all agreed that Mordor did exist and it was down there. Some devilishly nasty beings must have been brewing their potions of evil and hate down in the hidden depths.

As if to confirm our view, the steady but very small lava trickles started to increase most alarmingly. This was followed by an eruption. The whole of one part of the crater rim caught fire and the most stunning display of nature that I have ever witnessed began to take shape. The lava trickles increased from about two runs to 15 or 20, trees and grass spontaneously caught fire and all the while on the other side there was this eerie silence and ghostly mist. The explosions carried on for about 40 minutes and no one said anything - there was this palpable silence between us and exchanged looks that understood we were all witnessing something that we'd never see again. The mountain hadn't erupted since 1991.

In the morning the sunrise was spectacular (how could it be anything but at that altitude with clear skies and views for over 50 miles to Bali and the seas beyond) but somehow it seemed rather unimpressive after the previous night's show. As we came off the rim and walked in a contented silence, I was overcome with a sense that life is just an amazing thing..."



Free wine! It's good to talk...

Do you know of a colleague in your school, or perhaps a teacher in another school or college, that is planning a trip abroad? If so, recommend the services of the STC and you could be a **case of wine** better off for your troubles...

To qualify, simply get your colleague to mention your name when they get in touch to discuss their travel plans. Alternatively, get in touch with us, and we can send them a copy of this newsletter. If the enquiry leads to a booking, then we will send you a case of quality wine, free of charge. Red, white or mixed - the choice is yours. There is no limit to the number of cases you can qualify for under this scheme, but you may like to consider a luxury hamper of the West Country's finest food as an alternative, just in case you prove to be a particularly successful ambassador for the STC! Wine is best enjoyed with a little nibble of something after all...

We can help arrange travel for a whole host of school and college trips including geography field trips, historical and cultural tours, expeditions and adventurous itineraries. We can help find the best destinations for your requirements and advise on the best time of year to travel as well as the most appropriate operators or expedition companies. In short: make the planning of the trip a little easier!

The small print: Our only stipulation is that the booking is for a school or college group (not a personal holiday) and the contact you recommend is not already known to us (i.e. is not on our database and does not already receive a copy of this newsletter).

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Planning a Holiday?

Our expertise and in-depth knowledge of travel and the travel industry is not confined to just the educational sector of the market. We are also able to advise on and arrange a wide variety of holidays, right across the globe.

Admittedly, we do have our limitations. If you ask us to arrange two weeks on the Costa Brava, then we might struggle a little (well, actually a lot, to be honest!), but if you want to visit China, or perhaps go on safari in Botswana's Okavango Delta, trek through the Andes or go whale watching in Iceland, then we will certainly be able to help you.

Tailor-made journeys, escorted group tours, trekking holidays and a wide variety of family adventure holidays with the UK's best tour operators are all in our remit, so why not get in touch and let us help you have a memorable holiday.

As with the schools section of our business, our service is free and we can help you with the choice of destinations, tour operators and suitable itineraries. Again, all our tour operators are ATOL protected, so your financial protection is guaranteed.

Latin America: Language Schools

Spanish schools operate throughout Central and South America and are an excellent way for pupils with no prior knowledge of the language to get to grips with the basics quickly. Even a small smattering of Spanish will enable pupils to interact with the locals, gain a deeper understanding of the country being visited, and generally get more out of their trip to the region.

Courses are typically a week in length, but can be tailored to a group's particular needs, both in terms of duration and ability. There is often the opportunity, if required, to stay with local families for the duration of the course, before heading off for a cultural tour or an adventurous trek or expedition.

Our dedicated South American language tour operators are able to access some of the most respected language schools in Latin America, from Mexico, to as far south as Buenos Aires. At the same time, these tour operators have years of experience in putting together first class cultural tours and adventurous itineraries. This means that all your travel arrangements can be with one tour operator and fully ATOL protected.

Please get in touch for more details on which locations and options would best suit your particular requirements. After some initial discussions, we will then come back to you with our recommendations, a fully prepared itinerary and comprehensive quotation.

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