

THE NEWS

... from all points of the compass



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Greetings and welcome to the latest issue of THE NEWS!

We have decided to dedicate the inside pages of this edition to the subject of expeditions and the various ways schools can arrange such trips. It is a common misconception that school expeditions have to be arranged through dedicated expedition companies. An expedition is defined as "a journey with a purpose" but **does how you go about arranging such an expedition affect the outcome?** Inside we discuss a range of options and issues that are not always taken into account when arranging such trips.

Our role at the STC is to make sure our clients get the best value for money and most appropriate services for their travel requirements. When was the last time you assessed the market and reviewed your current provider? Are you sure that they offer the best solution to your needs? Are you planning a trip to a country you haven't visited before? Are you keen to look at alternative companies, but simply don't have the time? Well, this is where we are able to help. To use an analogy, our service should be thought of as similar to that of an independent financial adviser offering a wide range of products from different companies. Some people buy all their financial services from one source without realising that they are actually being offered a very limited range of products. To discuss a whole range of options and receive some **free independent advice**, speak to us. We think your travel experience will be better for it.

As always, please get in touch if you would like us to quote on a trip you have planned and we will be delighted to offer our expertise. For those of you who are jetting off on trips or expeditions this summer we hope you find true adventure and have fun in the process. All the best for the term ahead and we look forward to helping you arrange some truly memorable travel.

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Mountain Gorilla, Uganda

Geography: A smaller world

Geography departments wanting to take pupils into the field to experience the wonders of the physical and human world we live in are now, more than ever, spoilt for choice when it comes to possible destinations. The continual growth of worldwide travel has brought new and exciting destinations within the reach of many schools, in terms of both cost and time.

There is a huge range of options that can easily be fitted in to a week or 10 days. Explore the deltas of the Nile or Danube, the Biebrza wetlands of Poland, the ice-caps of Norway, the deserts and mountains of Morocco, Jordan or the Sinai or the bizarre "fairy chimneys" in Cappadocia, Turkey.

Further afield, the rainforests of Guyana, Costa Rica or Borneo, the immense dunes and gorges of Namibia and China, the "lost world" of Venezuela's tepuis, or perhaps Peru with its 83 separate ecological zones might fit the bill.

Wherever and whatever it is that you would like your pupils to experience you can be assured that the STC will have a tour operator able to offer excellent value for money and an itinerary that is tailor-made to your requirements. Contact us to discuss your plans and we'll be pleased to put together a quotation for you.

Uganda: Gorillas & the remote Rwenzori

Uganda is commonly referred to as the Pearl of Africa and with the diversity of experiences and the sheer beauty of the scenery on offer it is not hard to see why. Yet, compared with its neighbours of Kenya and Tanzania, it remains little visited.

For schools and colleges planning an adventurous expedition, Uganda ticks many boxes on the wanted list: jungles, savannah, mountains, raging rivers and glaciers, not to mention vibrant cultures and extraordinary wildlife.

To come face to face with a mountain gorilla is a life changing moment. In terms of great wildlife experiences it rates in the top three along with seeing polar bears and tigers in the wild. Many would say it eclipses even these. However, Uganda's wildlife is not just confined to gorillas. In Queen Elizabeth National Park you have a world class safari reserve, and there are also opportunities for chimp tracking amongst Uganda's verdant rainforests.

For a serious trekking phase to an expedition, the Rwenzori Mountains will certainly appeal. Often referred to as the "Mountains of the Moon", they are the only true mountain range in east Africa and at their highest point reach 5,109m. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1994, their summits are encased in ice, their lower flanks filled with dense forests, giant lobelias and other astonishing flora.

The range is notoriously wet, even in the dry season (December/January or July/August) and the trekking is far from easy. However, the Rwenzori provide a genuine wilderness mountain experience and are a challenging choice for a fit and highly motivated group.

Choosing a third party provider: The *most* fundamental decision

Fundamental decisions have to be made very early on when a school is considering an expedition or adventurous trip abroad.

Many schools opt to arrange such trips through a dedicated school "expedition provider" that offers a complete package of pre-trip training and the expedition itself. Specialist adventure "tour operators" who primarily meet the needs of the holiday market are often overlooked, but are equally at home arranging adventurous expeditions, and in certain situations may actually be a better option for a school.

Such tour operators are amongst the most experienced in adventure travel. A sample of 13 of the specialist operators we deal with have, between them, clocked up over 310 years of taking clients to many of the most adventurous destinations on the planet.

Choosing which of these options, "expedition provider" or "tour operator" and then which *company* is most appropriate for your school's requirements, is *the most fundamental* decision you will make.

This one decision has a bearing on everything else that follows: cost, the itinerary, safety, experience, the type of project work on offer (if required), the quality of "in-country" services and, often overlooked, the quality of the information and support given prior to departure.

Naturally, there are pros and cons associated with either option so which direction you take should be matched to your requirements as a school. The decision should be made taking into account a variety of factors: the outdoor expertise within the school, the style of trip required, what you hope the pupils will gain from such a trip, the destination being visited and a range of other factors as well.

Here at the STC we deal with a wide variety of both expedition providers and specialist tour operators and we specialise in helping schools with these kinds of decisions.



The expedition build up period:

Big expeditions to adventurous destinations need not take two years to plan. It is nearly always possible to plan such trips within a year or 18 months.

The "free place" myth:

"There is no such thing as a free lunch", so said Milton Friedman in 1975. The reason for mentioning this here is that you shouldn't be put off if a travel company doesn't specifically advertise "free" or "fully funded" places for teachers or group leaders. All travel companies can cost in as many free places as are needed if asked to do so. The cost is simply distributed elsewhere.

Expedition leaders:

Perhaps contrary to popular belief, many tour operators, like expedition providers, can supply highly experienced, professionally qualified UK leaders to accompany groups. Depending on the destination and itinerary, these qualifications may range from a Mountain Leader qualification (ML), right up to fully qualified IFMGA guides (International Federation of Mountain Guides Association).

However, if a teacher has the necessary qualifications to lead a trip, then tour operators can simply provide experienced local guides. This can reduce the cost of an expedition dramatically, as the pupils are not paying extra for a leader employed by a third party provider.

Destination specialisation:

There is a common trend to use the same travel company for many different destinations. If you use the same provider year on year, yet travel to new countries, it is likely that you are *not* using the best operator for each country and, as a result, possibly not receiving the best value for money either.

It is naturally something no travel company, whether they provide expeditions or holidays, will ever divulge, but they each have their own areas of specialism. One company may operate in 40 or more countries, however, they will always have a specific region or set of countries in which they really excel. Key to their ability to deliver a package in a country is their in-country agent.

Each travel company (apart from a very select few) will use an in-country agent (or ground operator) to make the necessary arrangements in the country being visited. Just as there are many different travel providers in the UK, there are many different ground agents for these companies to choose from.

This local company is *fundamental* to the smooth running of a trip and, as with anything, some are better than others. Travel company "A" may deal with an award winning ground operator in India, but it is company "B" that has the longest links and the best reputation when it comes to Thailand.

With its detailed knowledge of the industry, the STC can help you choose the most appropriate company for the destination you wish to visit.

Meaningful project work:

Project work, where included, is often the most memorable phase of an expedition. However, it is *vitaly* important that the work undertaken is both meaningful and sustainable. The project needs to be carefully selected so that it does not impinge on the local labour market, but nevertheless creates the best use of people power and raw materials available.

Ultimately, the ability of a tour operator or expedition provider to provide meaningful project opportunities comes down to the level of involvement and co-operation their in-country agent has with local communities. Deep routed relationships are the pre-cursors for good project work and the best way to achieve responsible tourism (RT). Poorly selected project work can not only be disengaging for the participants, but also create hostility and resentment amongst the local people.

RT is a topic close to our hearts here at the STC. Most of the travel companies we deal with are able to offer project work and they are passionate about proposing projects that are responsible, meaningful and hopefully (!) highly enjoyable.



Tailor-made journeys and "off the shelf" packages:

Another common misconception is that tour operators only provide "off the shelf" packages. The majority of their "visible" business may come from brochure itineraries, but nearly every tour operator we work with has a dedicated bespoke groups department used to creating individual itineraries for schools, charities and private groups. This means that you can take the tour operator approach, and yet be assured that the itinerary will be developed in line with your requirements as a school.

Outsourcing of pre-expedition training:

Many expedition companies only like to offer the "complete package" of pre-departure training right through to the expedition itself. For those schools with the expertise to run programmes such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award and other outdoor adventurous activities, outsourcing pre-trip training as part of the bigger package may not be the most cost effective solution to enable your pupils to experience challenge, adventure and the delights of foreign travel.

Whilst outsourcing everything to an expedition provider is undoubtedly an expensive option, it should in no way be assumed that this means poor value for money. Such outsourcing can be an *excellent* option for schools with little or no in-house expertise in adventure activities, and we deal with a number of outstanding expedition providers when it is appropriate to do so.

"Student led" or "pre-organised" expeditions:

The "student led" approach delivered by expedition providers offers an excellent personal development programme. However, there are also unique and great benefits in arranging travel in a more "conventional" way.

Many of the best adventure tour operators do not, usually, offer the student led approach. However, it is often these very companies that have been experts in a region or activity the longest. Using their services means accessing a wealth of specialist knowledge and expertise that can add an extra dimension to a trip and enable pupils to gain more from the country being visited. Take China as an example:

China is a relatively new offering within the student led expedition world, with most expedition providers offering a maximum of 3 or 4 seasons experience. In contrast, one of our tour operators for China is a real specialist. They have been taking thousands of clients to remote corners of China for nearly 25 years; providing unique trekking opportunities, meaningful project work, expert local guides and a thorough immersion into Chinese culture - all planned with the benefit of decades of experience.

Even when taking the tour operator approach, pupils can get involved in much

of the planning and execution of the trip: daily budgets, visas, inoculations and fundraising need to be arranged, individual roles and expedition rules need to be established, as well as fitness programmes, communication networks and kit all thoroughly planned. Where required, pre-trip training (adventurous and/or team-building) can also be provided through our Adventure Activities Licensing Authority (AALA) regulated partners.

The question "**Why go on an expedition?**" should also be asked: If it is to experience foreign cultures and taste adventure, to meet the locals, challenge your pre-conceptions, test you physically, emotionally and mentally, to see extraordinary landscapes and to push your comfort zones, as well as to develop teamwork, friendships and maturity, then this is all possible with a specialist operator.

So, is the extra expense associated with a student led/expedition provider approach matched by an increase in the benefits gained? Some argue yes, others no. The benefits are not always directly comparable.

To compare just what you get for your money, we've put together the table below. If you would like to discuss the pros and cons of either option, then please call us.

Service and cost comparison between an expedition provider and a specialist tour operator for a 28 day expedition to China in July 2008. Based on a group size of 14 pupils.

Expedition Provider	Type of service or activity	Tour Operator
✓	Presentation to students and parents	✓
✓	Full pre-departure assistance	✓
✓	Fundraising assistance	usually
✓	AALA and/or team-building training	extra
✓	International flights	✓
✓	Tailor-made itinerary	✓
✓	Trekking phase	✓
✓	Community project	✓
✓	Main cultural sights	✓
✓	Rest & relaxation phase	✓
✓	Student led approach	no
✓	UK leader	no
✓	Expert local guides	✓
1	No. of "free" teacher places	2
✓	Uses local transport	✓
✓	Food budget included	✓
no	Visas & inoculations	no
✓	ATOL protected travel arrangements	✓
✓	Comprehensive travel Insurance	✓
✓	Risk Assessment provided	✓
✓	Comprehensive pre-departure information pack including contact numbers, emergency procedures etc	✓
✓	Communications e.g. mobile, radio, satellite phone (as necessary)	✓
✓	24 hour emergency assistance	✓
4	Number of years operating in China	24
£3,200	Price per pupil	£2,400*

* Sample cost. Exact cost is dependent on itinerary and could be more or less.

Great treks of the world: The Santa Cruz Trail, Peru

Peru's popularity has soared over the past five years and rightly so. The country has such a wealth and diversity of landscapes, habitats, cultures and wildlife that there is literally something to satisfy every taste and interest.

The vast majority of visitors to Peru confine themselves to the southern part of the country seeing such spectacular sites as Machu Picchu, Lake Titicaca, the Nazca Lines and the Colca Canyon. However, for serious trekkers the central and northern regions offer the greatest prize: the highest equatorial mountain range in the world, not to mention the largest concentration of snow capped peaks to be found anywhere in South America.

The main Cordillera Blanca range and its smaller neighbour the Cordillera Huayhuash are amongst the most spectacular. The Huayhuash was home to Joe Simpson's extraordinary escape in "Touching the Void", however, it is the Cordillera Blanca that is home to Huascaran (the highest mountain in Peru at 6798m), Alpamayo (voted the most beautiful mountain in the world) and The Santa Cruz Trail: one of the world's greatest short treks.

The Santa Cruz Trail may "only" consist of 2 valleys separated by one high pass (Punta Union, 4,700m) but the view from the top is amongst the most spectacular in all of South America. The Santa Cruz valley lies at your feet, nestling amongst a handful of majestic snow-capped peaks rising to over 6,000m. Condors patrol the skies while local shepherds tend their flocks in the high altitude pastures below.

The trail can usually be completed by well acclimatised groups in just four days, however with the proliferation of stunning scenery, you may well feel that four days is simply not long enough to fully appreciate this area. If that is the case, then there are a multitude of longer treks that offer equally superb scenery.

Our summer months of June, July and August are the best time to visit Peru, with clear blue skies and warm sunshine the order of the day. However, due to the altitude, night time temperatures can drop significantly. Itineraries can be tailored to group requirements and include trekking, sight-seeing, jungle exploration, wildlife watching and project work. Guide price for a 3 week itinerary including flights: £2,300 per person.

Innovative Geography: Teaching grants

The Royal Geographical Society has five grants of up to £800 each to fund innovative geography teaching. Applications are open to all geography teachers working in secondary education. The grants will enable teachers to develop imaginative, innovative or creative teaching materials and teaching methods.

The aim is to serve both geography pupils and the wider teaching community. Do you have a good idea for promoting geography in schools? Do you have a project that would enhance pupils' education in a stimulating way? Are you short of funds to do this? Would a small grant help you develop new ideas? If so, contact the RGS Geography Outdoors team (Tel: 0207 591 3030). The next application deadline is in October 2007.

The road to the trail head



Alpamayo



Travel safety: An "Objective" point of view

Thorough planning, risk assessment, destination knowledge and experienced leaders are vital in ensuring the safe running of any trip abroad. However, an often overlooked aspect of the matrix that goes to make up a safe travel environment is that of "personal safety". Experienced travellers use a whole array of techniques and precautions to avoid danger and stay healthy; skills which, after a while, often become second nature.

For school pupils on expeditions to exotic foreign climes, often for the first time, heat, humidity, noise and smells, indeed "culture shock" in general, can be alarmingly good at distracting attention and lowering one's guard. So what can be done?

The STC has teamed up with Objective Travel Safety Ltd, a company that specializes in training journalists and industry professionals operating in hazardous areas, as well as pupils and students travelling on GAP years and expeditions.

This is personal safety and awareness training at its very best. Modules are delivered by means of interactive scenarios and role play, lectures and practical based learning. Courses can be tailored from an hour long introduction about general travel awareness (priced at £180 plus VAT and travel), to a full day course with two instructors covering preparation, personal safety, basic first aid and crisis management techniques (£850 plus VAT and travel). These courses can be delivered as stand alone packages or as an add-on package to an expedition that we assist with. For more details on the courses available from Objective please get in touch with the STC and we will be pleased to provide more information.

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