

By Wheelchair



to Greece



BY WHEELCHAIR TO GREECE

A report of a journey undertaken by four physically disabled boys and
sixteen college students

By Malcolm Gill

In memory of Nick

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Introduction

This trip will doubtless remain in my memory for many years, although details will naturally become blurred and confused. It is partly from sentimentality then that I am undertaking the writing of this report of the trip. I feel I must inform the reader that this will be an accurate report and as such will recall some of the less pleasant moments as well as the more memorable. As far as recording impressions of the trip is concerned, I can only be sure of my own feelings but as people were not backward in making their views known during the four weeks, I think I can justifiably attempt to assess the feelings of others. This, I feel, is essential if the true worth of the trip, both cultural and strictly educational, is to be appreciated by all.

May I also take this early opportunity to thank my fellow students for their assistance in allowing me use of their photographs. Much to my disappointment, almost 50% of my own photographs were spoiled and without these extra pictures, this report would lack much of its visual appeal.

Malcolm Gill, September 18th, 1966

Chapter One

The First Contact with the School

The seeds of this venture were sown at the end of the summer term of 1965 when a circular was received by the Students Union at Bulmershe College in Reading requesting help at a local school that caters for the rehabilitation of physically disabled boys. In response to this, five of our students went to the school, Hephaistos at Farley Hill, near Reading, and spent a fortnight carrying out general nursing duties involving getting the boys dressed in the morning, feeding them and helping with the cleaning of the dormitories and at the end of the day putting the boys to bed. In return for their labours the students received board and lodging as well as a small wage. The school is named after the Greek god Hephaistos, who himself had a crippled foot but who overcame his handicap by perseverance.

The school caters for boys from the age of nine or ten years to eighteen or nineteen years. Several firm friendships were made between our students and some of the older boys, four in particular – Leon Watts, a post-polio case who is completely paralysed and has to sleep in a respirator every night; Nick Johnstone, a second post-polio case who is paralysed from the waist down (both of these boys are confined to their wheelchairs although Nick can support himself in a standing position); Merwan Cama, also a post-polio case who can walk with the aid of callipers and walking sticks, although the latter are not always necessary; and the fourth and perhaps the most interesting character, Jim MacDonald. Jim has suffered from cerebral palsy from birth and consequently his physical coordination is impaired.

Unlike many friendships that begin in this fashion and fade as soon as direct contact is lost, these flourished to the extent that the boys often paid visits to the college, either to see a concert or merely to pay a social call. Originally, the boys came to see the five students, John Pickin, Frankie Steward, Sue Evans, Caroline Grey and Malcolm Rimmer, but as time went by and the boys became a familiar sight in the college, more and more people came to know them. Students, not unlike other people, tended to treat them as being totally different from normal people but this fallacy soon disappeared when a few evenings had been spent with them in the bar, where we discovered that their liking for a pint, a cigarette and a good hearty laugh was no different from that of anybody else. If anything their ability to thoroughly enjoy themselves seemed to exceed that of self-pitying students whose only claim to hardship is their own selfishness.



Nick Johnstone



Leon Watts



Merwan Cama



Jim MacDonald

Chapter Two

Organisation of the Trip

Leon and another boy, Bill Dunlop, were the first to suggest that a trip of this nature could be attempted. Leon has an interest in archaeology and for some time he had been talking in terms of an archeological expedition to Turkey. He asked Malcolm Rimmer, one of the students who had worked at the school the previous summer, if he would be the Bulmershe representative during the preliminary months. These moves were made as far back as February.

Bill Dunlop soon dropped out of the scheme but his place was taken by Nick. Meanwhile Malcolm Rimmer had been asking for names at the college but we students were initially reluctant to commit ourselves to a seemingly impossible scheme. Despite the lack of enthusiasm at Bulmershe Nick went ahead with the preliminary enquiries regarding fares, food, the route and the hundred and one other jobs that had to be done before anyone would commit themselves.

By Easter, when the route and other details had materialised, enthusiasm grew and at last it seemed that the trip was not such a hare-brained scheme after all. Hephaistos School had agreed to the use of their school bus, a 1947 Leyland Tiger, for the trip. BOAC, thanks to the efforts of the school bursar Mr Bate, were going to send twenty one aircraft seats so that the five thousand miles would be less painful on our behinds. The Army, having been approached by Col. Bull, the vicar of Swallowfield, had agreed to loan enough tents for the whole party. In fact most of the major items had been dealt with. (For a complete list of contributors and their contributions please turn to the last two pages.)

By this time two more boys from the school, Jimmy and Merwan, had decided to join in with Nick and Leon and at the college thirteen students had decided that they would be able to find sufficient money. In addition three girls who had been working at the school agreed to come along, to help with nursing care. The boys, with the invaluable assistance of Mr Bate, had estimated that if twenty people went on the trip, £30 per head would be sufficient to cover the costs that the party would incur as a whole. On top of this of course we had to find our own pocket money.

That whole summer term Nick worked away at all the plans for the trip. He received much help and sympathy but also a great deal of opposition and frustration. The AA, who were very helpful with the routine, the camping carnets and route etc, refused to insure either the bus or the disabled boys – or in fact take any responsibility for the trip at all because we were a party over twelve in number going in a private bus and not a car or a caravan. This exempted us from their five star service.

Leyland Motors gave help and advice but pointed out that the bus was too old and not man enough for the job. At one stage Nick was trying to hire an alternative vehicle to take us all but was unable to, so it had to be the school bus or nothing. After much persuasion, Mr Robert Glossop of the Byfleet Garage, Basingstoke, agreed to overhaul the bus for us.

This proved to be a very big job but they did it, including the fitting of a roof rack, without which we would never have been able to carry everything we needed. Having put in a good deal of overtime they finally managed to get the bus ready the day before the first of us arrived at the school.

By the end of the summer term, the passage had been booked. We were to leave on the morning of Tuesday 16 August and to return in the early hours of Wednesday 14 September. Nick had written scores of letters to food firms asking for donations, had dealt with visas and had at last succeeded in dealing with the insurance problem. The Red Cross and the Press, both local and national, were also doing what they could to help. Various donations from all over the country were beginning to arrive at the school and at the end of the college term everything was more or less ready for the trip. There were still countless loose ends to be tied up and while we students dispersed to our homes to earn money, Nick spent the remaining three weeks working until the small hours to make sure nothing was left unattended to, a remarkable effort for one still so young.

Throughout the whole of this report I have referred to people by their Christian names. In case the reader becomes confused with the abbreviated surnames I have used, here is a complete list of the members of the party.

Boys: Nicolas Johnstone, Leon Watts, Merwan Cama, Jim MacDonald

Students: Jill Roberts, Sue Evans, Maddy Tillbrook, Chris Miller, Lesley Salmon, Wendy Moss, Hilary Rowell, Malcolm Rimmer, Frank Crompton, John Twyford, John Pickin, Andy Stevens and myself.

Girls who had worked at the school: Helen Foottit, Rosemary Cooper, Brenda Stockwell

Chapter Three

Preparation of the Bus, and the Trip to Dover

My own preparation for the journey involved three weeks' work at a bakery in Poole. The idea was not to enrich myself spiritually but financially as I needed to earn as much money as I could in a short spell. Saturday afternoons were spent rushing around trying to remember all the odds and ends that are necessary for a trip of this nature. Medical requirements were the most important, bottles of aspirins, insect repellent, anti-diarrhoea pills, fly spray and water purifying tablets. I eventually managed to accomplish this with the aid of my mother in time for the departure date of Friday 12 August.

My parents drove my fiancée and me to the school and we arrived about 4 p.m. We were the first to arrive and to our consternation there was no bus, no fellow students and the school seemed deserted. I began to wonder if the whole business was a confidence trick. Our worries were almost immediately stilled with the arrival of the bus. The aircraft seats had been fitted, but to our dismay the interior of the bus was in a shocking state. The old seats had been thrown in on top of the new seats; sawdust seemed to be everywhere; three spare wheels blocked the gangway; in other words the bus presented an altogether depressing sight. This did not, however, deter me from taking the bus out for a trial run.

My previous experience of driving a bus was limited to one journey to Victoria Station in London, so I could hardly class myself as experienced. Nevertheless, I wanted to treat my mother to a short ride in the bus to try and dismiss some of her worries. The roads around the school are of the country lane variety and I had not been driving for more than a mile when I encountered a rather large lorry. The sight of a bus must have upset the driver of the lorry because he immediately screeched to a halt and nervously beckoned me to pass. There just wasn't room to get through so I had to take the bus on to the verge, hoping that it would stand the weight. I managed to get through without taking the lorry with me but this occurrence hindered my concentration somewhat and I became quite tuneless on the gearbox. Of course the bus had a crash gearbox, no synchromesh for her. At this point I began to wonder just how wise I had been in taking my mother along. However, she seemed quite unperturbed and we returned to the school without further incident. On our return to the school my father spotted a screw embedded in one of the tyres. When it had been removed we found it to be a sizeable bolt. A small quantity of air was escaping from the resulting hole so our first job had quickly cropped up. Meanwhile another member of the party had arrived, Helen Footitt. Almost immediately Nick and his mother arrived bringing a car load of food and supplies for the weekend. My parents departed and while the two girls prepared supper I had a quick look at the bus to see what we could make a start on after supper.

Having eaten, Chris, Helen, David (the school handyman) and I cleared the bus of the old seats, spare wheels and quantities of newspaper. When we had done this, the bus looked quite respectable, sufficiently respectable in fact to take Nick out for a quick trip round the block. I still managed to make some rather noisy gear changes but not quite so many as before. I decided that the bus should be christened Jessica, so named for her registration.



Jessica the 1947 Leyland Tiger

Nick in his wheelchair on the electric chair lift



When we returned Leon and Merwan arrived having spent the day dashing round London getting visas and collecting equipment for Leon's respirator. Their arrival was the signal for a trip to the pub before bed. We eventually got to sleep around midnight. As this was the first night we did not bother to erect the tents but slept on the floor of the assembly hall amongst the supplies.

Saturday 13 August

We got up at 8 a.m. and boiled some eggs for a quick breakfast as there was still plenty of work to be done. The first job was to check that the bus was insured for the three days prior to the trip as it would have been rather sad to have an accident before departure on the 15th, only to find we were not insured. I was rather glad that we took this precaution as a telephone call to the insurance company revealed that the bus had only been insured from 15 August. It was indeed fortunate that I had missed that lorry the evening before otherwise I should have been faced with the prospect of having to pay the cost of any repairs from my own pocket.

Nick arranged with the insurance company to extend the insurance to cover the bus from this day onward. Without further delay we took the bus into Reading to buy camping equipment for Leon and Merwan. As well as a camp bed and other necessities, Leon bought a khaki jungle hat which seemed to be at least two sizes too big for him but he assured us it was a good fit and that he would wear it religiously. While the bus was parked in London Street, a local bus enthusiast came over to us to talk about the vehicle and the forthcoming trip. He had read about the venture in the local press and was full of praise and admiration for the idea.

From Reading we drove to a scrap yard near the school in an attempt to acquire a ladder in order to provide easy access to the roof rack. Unfortunately there was nothing suitable so we drove back to the school for a chicken salad lunch.

After lunch Nick's mother telephoned with an offer of a rope ladder from the local Boy Scout troop. This I eagerly accepted as there seemed to be no other way around the problem of getting on to the roof. Nick and I spent the next hour erecting a tent that been lent to us by a well-wisher. After all the unnecessary poles had been eliminated it took about half an hour to erect. It appeared to be excellently weather-proof as there was an outer tent surrounding an inner one with a built-in ground sheet. There was space for four to sleep quite comfortably.

John Twyford and Andy then arrived and to celebrate our reunion we had a swim in the school pool. After our swim Andy wanted to try his hand at driving the bus so we went out while the girls prepared the supper. When we returned, the eggs, sausages and chips were almost ready and the whole building was filled with the delightful smell of the cooking. After supper John Pickin and Jill arrived and while they ate a hastily prepared meal the men carried on with the fitting of the shelves in the bus. Once a system had been devised the job was completed with speed and skill. I was none too sure that the shelves were sufficiently robust for the job and I suggested that it might be necessary to fit extra bracing struts from the outer edge of the shelf to the roof struts. After this strenuous hour's work we all felt in need of a dip in the swimming pool again. Following our swim we erected some of the army two-man bivouacs and the large tent. We did this so that we could test the efficiency of the various tents.

Sunday 14 August

We all spent a very good night in our tents and were in no real hurry to get up as it was, after all, Sunday. When we did eventually crawl from our sleeping bags John P. took the bus out for half an hour, and on his return we set to work with vigour, as the seats were filthy from lying in the school garage for such a long time and after the fitting of the shelves there was quite a layer of sawdust besides. We requisitioned one of the school vacuum cleaners for the cleaning of the seats and willing hands grabbed brushes and set about cleaning the floor of the bus. By lunchtime the interior looked totally different; even the windows had been cleaned. Nick's mother, still working like a trojan, arrived with the rope ladder. All work stopped for a lunch of fresh salmon. It was probably just as well that we were eating good meals then because they might be few and far between on the trip. When we had eaten our fill we decided to take the bus out for the afternoon, firstly to see how the drivers would cope with a loaded bus, and secondly to give everyone a break after rather a hectic morning. Just as we set off Frank arrived, so we departed with our full complement of drivers. We intended to go to Goring but we lost Merwan, who was leading the way in his car, and finished up travelling along the narrowest of country lanes. None of the drivers drove particularly well and there were rather fearsome noises issuing from the gearbox. However, the aircraft seats were very comfortable and we felt they would keep travel fatigue to a minimum. During this excursion many of us realised just how far we were intending to go on this trip when the limitations of the bus as regards speed became apparent to all. We arrived back at the school at 5.30 and the girls proceeded to prepare a supper of beans, eggs and tomatoes. Sue and Maddy arrived at 6.30 and we were beginning to look more like a working unit. We spent the evening chatting, and while I had an early night most of the others went to the pub for what was going to be their last drink in an English pub for over four weeks.

Monday 15 August

We were all up a little early this morning as there was still a great deal to be done. We were a little disappointed to hear that the BBC would not be able to cover our departure after all because of the murder of three policemen in London, but clearly that was more important. We spent the morning in Reading buying travellers' cheques and the hundred and one other articles that we still needed, including a 30-yard length of heavy duty cable for Leon's machine. On the way back to the school we bought sufficient timber, brackets and screws to strengthen the shelves as they had, after all, proved to be inadequate in their original form.

After a wonderful turkey salad lunch, supplied once again by Nick's mother, the men set about fixing the bracing struts to the shelves, while the women tried to make some sense of the vast amount of supplies that littered the assembly hall. Hilary, one of the last of our party, had by now arrived. We spent the afternoon preparing boxes for the roof rack while Merwan and Andy, to their eternal credit, wired up the batteries for Leon's machine. The publicity officer from Huntley & Palmers arrived with a photographer so that a small article could be inserted in the company's monthly news sheet. Wendy and Brenda arrived just in time to be included in the photograph. Hard on the heels of H & P came a reporter and a photographer from the *Evening Post*. We eventually managed to dispose of our well-wishers and completed the task of loading the roof rack and fitting the water tank. By now it was 7.00 p.m.

Resting before loading



Organising the supplies ready for loading





Loading under way.....

.....including the roof rack



One of the headlamp discs had unfortunately been broken earlier in the day so Frank set off in Merwan's car to try and replace it. When he hadn't reappeared by 8.30 we began to worry until Merwan remembered that his car had been almost out of petrol. Shortly afterwards Frank phoned to say that he had in fact run out of petrol and would we pick him up. This incident, coupled with a long hard day, tended to make us all rather edgy, so we were more than a little pleased to get away. Surprisingly enough, there was plenty of room in the bus even though most of the luggage was inside as the roof rack was filled with the tents and food, not forgetting of course the all-important Elsan.

We found Frank near the Three Tuns pub and then headed for Maidenhead along the A4. From there we drove along the M4 to London where we dropped Mr Coe, the father of the Head Boy at Hephaistos who had worked very hard all day helping us with all manner of jobs. Unfortunately the navigators forgot the size of the bus when deciding on short cuts and John P., who was driving at this point, hit the bumper of a car parked on the corner of a narrow street. He had an interesting conversation with the lady driver and her drunken escort, who threatened all sorts of dire consequences for this very trivial offence. When we had sorted this out, we pressed on to Dover without further delay as by now it was very late in the evening.

Tuesday 16 August

The first job at Dover was to find Lesley and Malcolm. We had arranged to meet them at the Dover Stage but there was no sign of them there. We eventually found them sleeping in a shipping office, along with countless other students. At long last we were nearly all together, although Lesley brightened our day by telling us that she had left her smallpox certificate at home. Fortunately we discovered that this certificate is not nearly so vital as it had appeared. This much we were told on arrival at the quayside.

It was now 2.30 a.m. and since loading of the ferry did not begin until 3.45 we all made a bee line for the café as we were all rather tired and cold. Time seemed to drag endlessly, but eventually 3.45 came around and Andy drove the bus round the quay to the embarkation point. The first surprise, pleasant or otherwise, was that the bus had to be reversed into the ship as there was insufficient room on board to turn. Andy did this very skilfully, with the absolute minimum of fuss. I was secretly very pleased that he managed this so well because I had had the impression that some members of the party were none too sure of the driving ability of we four, and accomplishing this difficult feat set one or two minds at rest.

Once we were safely on board, the first job was to find the bar as the duty free drinks were too good an opportunity to miss. The boat sailed on time at 4.30 and most of us were on deck to watch the departure from the harbour. Dawn had already begun to spill its first rays of light behind the distant cloud and as we progressed, the sun rose higher and higher. This was my first seaborne sunrise and I must confess that I became quite sentimental. It was, however, quite chilly on deck and as the Calais lighthouse beckoned the *Free Enterprise* to its harbour mouth, we decided to content ourselves with the mundane but pleasurable procedure of breakfast. We thoroughly enjoyed the good solid meal of egg and bacon, despite the attempt of an obviously very tired waiter to serve an empty glass of fruit juice instead of a full one.

THEY'RE OFF TO EUROPE



FOUR disabled boys—one who sleeps in an iron lung—left the Hephaistos School for Physically Disabled Boys at Arborfield Cross recently with 15 students from the Bulmershe Teachers Training College near Reading, on an expedition which will take them through France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Greece and Hungary.

Included in their luggage is a supply of Huntley & Palmers biscuits to keep them going throughout the journey.

Seeing the party off was Mary Cottrell, our assistant public relations officer, who inspected the converted coach which will carry the party thousands of miles.

The coach has an electric hoist to replace the steps and B.O.A.C. gave the boys a set of specially fitted airline seats.

Organised by 17-year-old Nicholas Johnstone, the party expect to return in early September.

● All set for the off. The party prepares to board the coach that will take them through Europe. In the luggage—enough biscuits to last the long Continental journey.

When we were still two miles or so from the harbour mouth, a call came over the ship's intercom for the driver of the school bus to contact the Bridge. As it was my turn to drive I went along to see what was required of me. The captain was seated on a little stool in one corner of the Bridge hiding behind his beard and duffle coat. He introduced himself and we shook hands. He had called me to say that we could take as long as we wished in getting the boys back into the bus and that his crew were at our disposal should we need them. I thanked him for this display of courtesy and answered his questions about our trip. He then told me to bring anyone on to the bridge who wanted to have a look round. Just about everyone came except the boys. It was impracticable for them, sadly, as the steps leading up to the bridge were steep and narrow. The captain proved to be quite a humorous character. I was not sure to what extent this was genuine and how much was show for our sakes, but anyway we enjoyed our little excursion on to the bridge.

As soon as we had docked, we scrambled madly down to the bus in order to waste as little time as possible. Everyone was on board in five minutes flat and ready to go. The first part of the trip had been accomplished: we had reached France.

FRANCE



Chapter Four

France

I drove the bus up the ramp on to the quayside and followed the line of cars in front to the Customs shed where a pompous little man in blue overalls and beret was furiously waving his arms in the air and pointing. I eventually interpreted these gesticulations as a request to leave the line of cars and park the bus until all the cars had been through the Customs shed. We had to wait for about five minutes while the Sureté Nationale cleared all the cars. A rather obese man, not in uniform, beckoned me to pull the bus forward into the Customs shed. All the passports were taken and we were asked the usual questions regarding the number of cigarettes etc. One point we had overlooked was the amount of fuel we were carrying in our fuel tank, as only 100 litres of diesel may be taken into France tax free. The same obese man wanted to know how many miles the bus had travelled and how much fuel we were carrying. He seemed none too pleased when I explained that the bus had neither a fuel gauge nor a milometer. However, this did give me an opportunity to explain that the bus originally belonged to London Transport and had been converted and given to a school for '*les infirmes*'. At the mention of the word '*infirmes*' he immediately lost the stern look and virtually apologised for bothering to question us at all. At this juncture everybody climbed back into the bus and off we set into the streets of Calais.

At that time of day, 6 a.m., the streets were deserted but for the odd postman on his way to collect his morning's letters. While I busied myself with following the signposts for Boulogne, the rest of the party at last succumbed to the call of sleep. Jessica decided she did not like the northern French roads. The hills were not particularly steep but for most of them I had to go into second gear until I decided to make use of the age old dodge of coasting downhill to get up more speed. As the bus had air brakes I had to watch the indicator light very carefully to ensure that sufficient braking power was maintained! We passed Boulogne without any mishap and stopped just outside to refuel.

We drove on to Abbeville for breakfast as not everyone had eaten on the boat and even those who had were hungry again. The majority of the party went into a café. Nick decided to hang his rather large bunch of keys from a lampshade to give his neck a rest from the rather itchy string. Not until we were nearing Paris did Nick suddenly remember he'd forgotten the keys, but by then it was too late to do anything about it! Inconvenient as this was, we could hardly call it a disaster although it did act as a reminder to us all just how easy it is to mislay objects.

Paris was invaded by our party at 2.30 p.m. and the first job was to pick up the twentieth and last member of the party, the mad American playwright, Jim MacDonald. Chris and John T. got out of the bus on the Quai d'Orsay to look for Jim and as there was nowhere to park, I drove the bus back over the river via the Pont de la Concorde and from there up the right bank to Pont Neuf, back across the river and down the left bank to the American Church where Jimmy was waiting. Chris and John had found him without any trouble and after a hold up for the girls and their seemingly never ending pennyworths, we set off to find the Bois de Boulogne.



Breakfast at Abbeville

(Perhaps the keys are still there!)

We had to approach several people before we were given precise instructions as to how and where we would find the camp site. To find the Bois de Boulogne is a simple task but it is rather large and the camp site is not quite so easy to find. The time was now 6.00 p.m. so the first job was to get the tents up as quickly as possible and to start cooking. We must have presented quite a comical sight to the sophisticated campers of the 1960s with our old bus and our genuine British army two-man 'bivvies'. We certainly felt out of place amongst smart new cars and the latest in-frame tents and shiny caravans. The manageress of the camp site graced us with her presence and told us that she would allow us to stay at a reduced rate, a reduction as well as that to which we were entitled with our camping carnets. As I had had no sleep since the day before and had put in three hours driving I felt rather unwell so I had a rest in the bus while supper was prepared. For our first meal we used some of our packets of Vesta curries and this went down very well after such a long hard day. Before going to bed Andy played his guitar and we sang some good old English songs just to convince our fellow campers that the group of young people travelling in the old bus were the mad English once again.

Wednesday 17 August

We awoke to sunshine and to celebrate we tucked into an appetising breakfast of bread and butter. During the night Leon's machine had ceased to function because the batteries had run down. Fortunately the camp interpreter, a young Englishman, had been able to fix the machine to one of the lights outside the toilets. He also took the batteries to a local garage to be recharged and while we were waiting for them to be returned we struck camp and settled the bill.

As the camp is virtually the only camp site within Paris, it was rather crowded, but in general we were satisfied. The normal charge per person is NF 1.40. the washing and toilet facilities are good although barely adequate for the number of people who were there. There are very good shopping facilities although as with the rest of Paris the food is expensive. There is virtually no grass; the surface of the camping areas is beaten earth so not only did we have trouble knocking in the pegs we also had a rather uncomfortable night's sleep. We were packed and ready to go at 11.00 but there was as yet no sign of the batteries.

They did eventually arrive, but not until 11.30. Off we went on the second leg of our trip, to Dijon. Some of the party wanted to see Versailles so we made a detour so as to pass by the chateau. Unfortunately we took a wrong turn at Versailles and instead of heading for Fontainebleau we ended up heading for Chartres, and a quick look at the map of France will show just how wrong we were. This, coupled with the delay at the camp site, added another hour to our journey. These delays, and the prospect of a 200 mile journey with a bus whose top speed was only 40 mph, presented a somewhat depressing outlook to everybody, and we had visions of being on the road for the best part of the night. To add to the feeling of gloom the sky began clouding over and we saw the sun no more that day.

To compensate for the rather frustrating state of affairs the countryside was becoming more attractive, especially along the Yonne valley where the road followed the river for quite some miles. We crossed the river at Avallon and then struck across country through Vezelay and on to Dijon. We saw little of Dijon as it was quite dark by the time we got there. Although we had been given directions on how to reach the camp site we still managed to take a wrong turn and finished

Jessica at the Arc de Triomphe



Campsite at the Bois de Boulogne



up in the wrong part of town. We did eventually find the site and much to our annoyance it was about two miles outside Dijon on the road by which we had entered.

Signs of tiredness were already beginning to show amongst a few of the party. These were manifested in the somewhat agitated speech being used and the general irritation of most people. I began to wonder just how bad we were going to become as regards to keeping our tempers as I had experienced a similar course of events as a member of party that the previous year had canoed and camped along the River Wye. Living in such a large group of people for a long period of time with nobody in overall command led to niggling exchanges and occasionally a complete loss of temper.

Still, camp was pitched much more quickly than in Paris and this tended to calm the situation a little. All but three of the party went out for a meal as there was insufficient time to cook for everybody. We were all eventually in bed by 10.30.

Thursday 18 August

When we awoke we found that there had been rain in the night but nobody complained of being wet so the tents at least seemed to be waterproof. There was unfortunately no shop on the camp site so the girls set off to find one whilst the men looked after the boys' toilet requirements. As far as I could see, this was going to be the pattern for the remainder of the trip, the girls looking after the domestic side and the men striking the tents and seeing to the boys.

It has just struck me at this point that the distinction I am making between men and boys must seem a trifle patronising. Let me make it clear that in calling one group of males boys and the others men I am not making a distinction between age or maturity. It is merely an easier way of distinguishing between the male members of the party. To make the distinction in any other fashion would require the use of individual names, which seems a tiresome and needless nicety.

After a breakfast of fried eggs and bread, Chris and I went to see the boss of the camp site to settle the bill while the rest of the party cleared up the site and loaded the roof rack. The little man in charge of the site proved to be very helpful and pleasant, from my experience a rare quality amongst French people who are in a position of authority. The charge for the site was NF 1 per person which was quite reasonable. The washing facilities were good and the site itself had an abundance of grass and was very clean.

From the time we woke up to the time we left we took two hours, a vast improvement on the shambles in Paris. We stopped in town to change some travellers' cheques, and eventually set off for Switzerland at 10.15. The scenery at this stage was becoming more and more interesting, as we were now driving into the foothills of the Jura Mountains. We stopped in a village named Levier to explore the rather quaint souvenir shops and of course to find the ever familiar pennyworth.

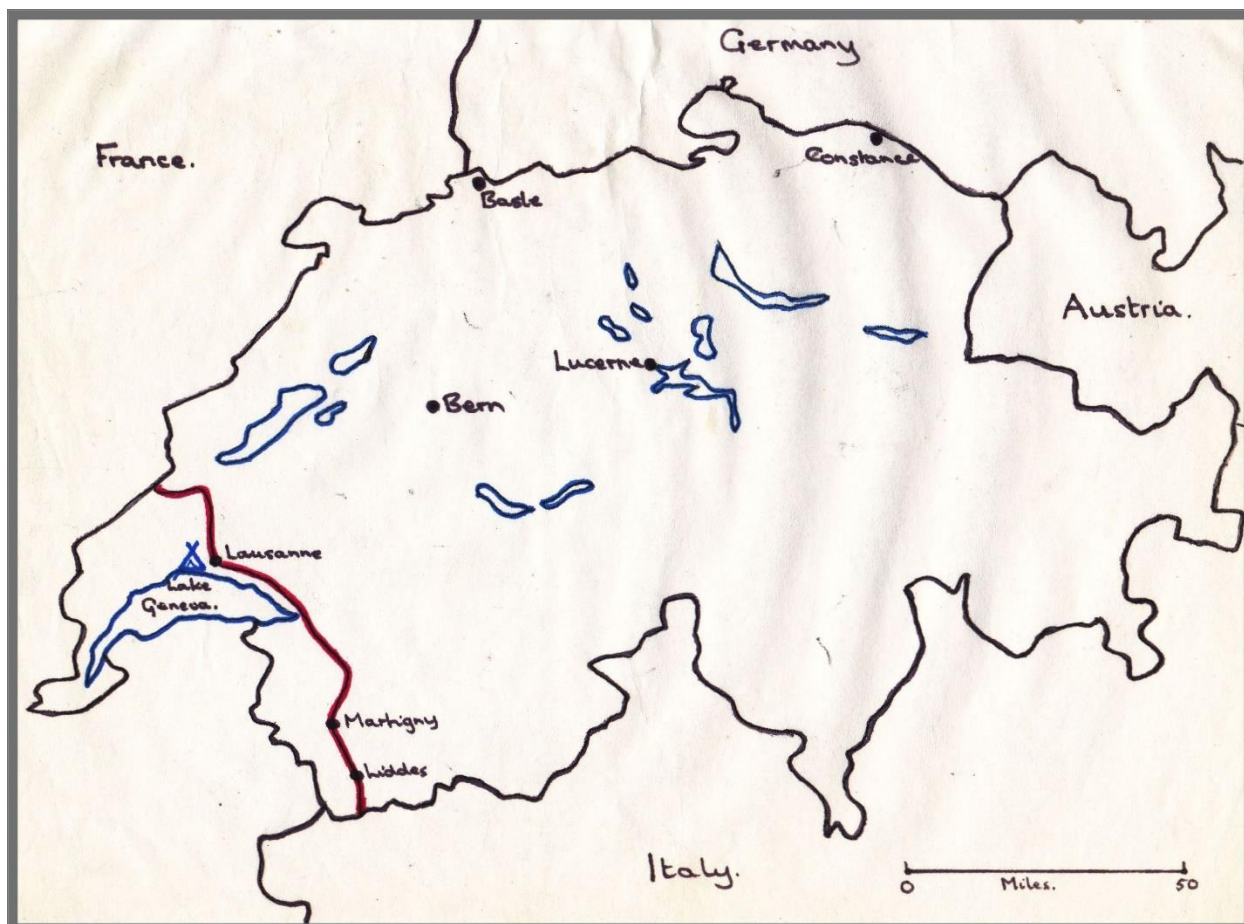
The road to Levier had been climbing quite steadily for some time, but from there on we seemed to be on a plateau, which became really flat as we approached Pontarlier. One tends to think of this part of the world as being completely mountainous but here, right in the middle of the Juras, was a grassy plain of good enough quality to use as football pitches: should anyone want to play



Sue fighting her tent at Dijon.

football that is. We stopped in Pontarlier to buy bread, cheese and fruit so that we could eat while we drove on. From this point onwards, the scenery really became wonderful, although I couldn't help feeling that I had seen it before on postcards, films and television. This did not spoil the overall enjoyment of actually seeing and experiencing it for real! Everything seemed to be so fresh here, the fields, the houses, the air and even the inhabitants seemed to be happier, healthier and cleaner, especially the young ladies. If this was still France what would Switzerland be like? We were soon to find out as we reached the French-Swiss border at 3.20 p.m. Once again the French Customs people were their usual pompous selves, but we were saying goodbye to France for nearly a month and we would not come across them again until the last day of the holiday.

SWITZERLAND



Chapter Five

Switzerland

As soon as we reached the Swiss border post we were aware of the different countries. Instead of being pompous, the border guards were efficient but at the same time courteous. The change of country and scenery coupled with a good night's sleep seemed to have worked wonders on everybody. When we weren't admiring the scenery we were either singing, laughing or telling jokes. Quite a change from the day before. Wendy, sitting next to Chris and me, seemed to be thoroughly enjoying herself with a bottle of vino, the name we gave to all and every wine we came across. Once again the country was relatively flat for the remainder of the journey to Lausanne although several rather quaint churches kept interest alive.

We reached the outskirts of Lausanne at 5 p.m. but a wrong turn sent us off in completely the wrong direction. What made it worse was that we were on a motorway and turnings were few and far between. On the subject of motorways, we were all staggered at the quality of this particular stretch of road. We had spent two days on French roads and not one could compare with this excellent stretch of dual carriageway. Eventually we managed to turn round, and after one or two enquiries we found the camp site without any further difficulties.

To gain access to the site, there was a rather flimsy wooden bridge. Not only was it flimsy, it was not nearly wide enough. Our hearts sank as we had no desire to go chasing around the Swiss countryside looking for another camp site. Luckily it turned out that there was a back entrance, and the bus was soon safely inside the site, with tents being hurriedly erected before it became too dark to see. The girls soon had another of the Vesta curries on the two stoves, and by 8.00 we had all eaten and had the rest of the evening to ourselves.

To ourselves, did I say? This is not quite true. Our arrival at the site proved too much for the average camper and curiosity compelled everyone to have a closer look at the odd bus and its occupants. Children being children were the most curious and we very soon had seven or eight talking to us and clambering over the bus. To our surprise most of the children actually lived in Lausanne yet were spending the vacation on the camp site.

The site itself is right on the shore of Lake Geneva and several of the party including myself went for walks along the beach. Although a mist over the lake reduced visibility we were still able to see many of the coloured lights, made still more attractive by their reflections in the water. This romantic scene was somewhat marred by notices in the water advising against swimming as the water is polluted! Before going to bed most of us had a drink in the camp café where we spent an hour talking to a German student who had been attracted to us in the first place by our singing.



Frank with local children at the campsite in Lausanne

Campsite on the shore of Lake Geneva



Friday 19 August

We were all up by 7.30 and while breakfast was being prepared and camp being struck John T. settled the bill. The charge was SF1 per person, a reasonable charge for a well organised camp with amusements for children, a swimming pool and good shopping facilities including a restaurant and bar. Everything was tidied up and we were on our way by 9.30, an improvement but still not as good as it could have been.

We set off in light cloud, a shame since the road followed the north shore of the lake for many miles. Eventually the sun did break through as we headed into the foothills of the Alps. The scenery now became really breath-taking, with cascades tumbling down sheer rock faces to be scooped into a raging stream that passed beneath the road to continue on its way down the valley. The bus soldiered on to Martigny where we picked up our first hitchhikers. We had decided not to pick up hitchers but a prominent Union Jack on one of the rucksacks made us change our minds. To our astonishment we discovered that the two boys were from Reading; I am still not sure who were the more surprised, the hitchers or our own party.

From this point on the road climbed very steeply as it zigzagged up the valleys with sheer drops on one side and rock faces on the other. We had our hearts in our mouths for it was on this type of road that the bus would fail us if it was to let us down at all. The engine became progressively more and more smelly and at Liddes poor Jessica literally blew her top. Andy pulled the bus into the forecourt of a hotel, the engine steaming rather ominously. John P. risked his neck in unscrewing radiator cap. He gave it a quick turn and then ran! This proved to be a wise move as a geyser of filthy boiling water shot six feet into the air. We were forced to stay at that hotel until Jessica calmed down.

Fortunately a garage was next door to the hotel so we were able to top up the radiator before we went any further. It was by now 1.30. We pressed on up the road to the St Bernard tunnel, passing snow-capped mountains and lakes formed by the damming of streams in some of the valleys. We knew we were almost at the entrance to the tunnel when we reached the new stretch of approach road. At this point the road had been cut into the side of the mountain with a roof so that even in winter the road could be kept free of snow. John P. was keeping us in fits at this time with his efforts to remove a bee that had somehow become trapped between the portion of the window that winds down and the other portion.

We reached the entrance to the tunnel at 2.30. Our arrival was a source of much amusement to both the Swiss and Italian border guards, who at this point on the border occupy the same offices. We were chatting away gaily to an Italian although the only word we could really communicate was 'football'. It eventually dawned on us that he was making several references to the girls on the bus, so without further ado we pressed on through the tunnel.



The relentless climb to the Grand-Saint-Bernard tunnel





And still climbing



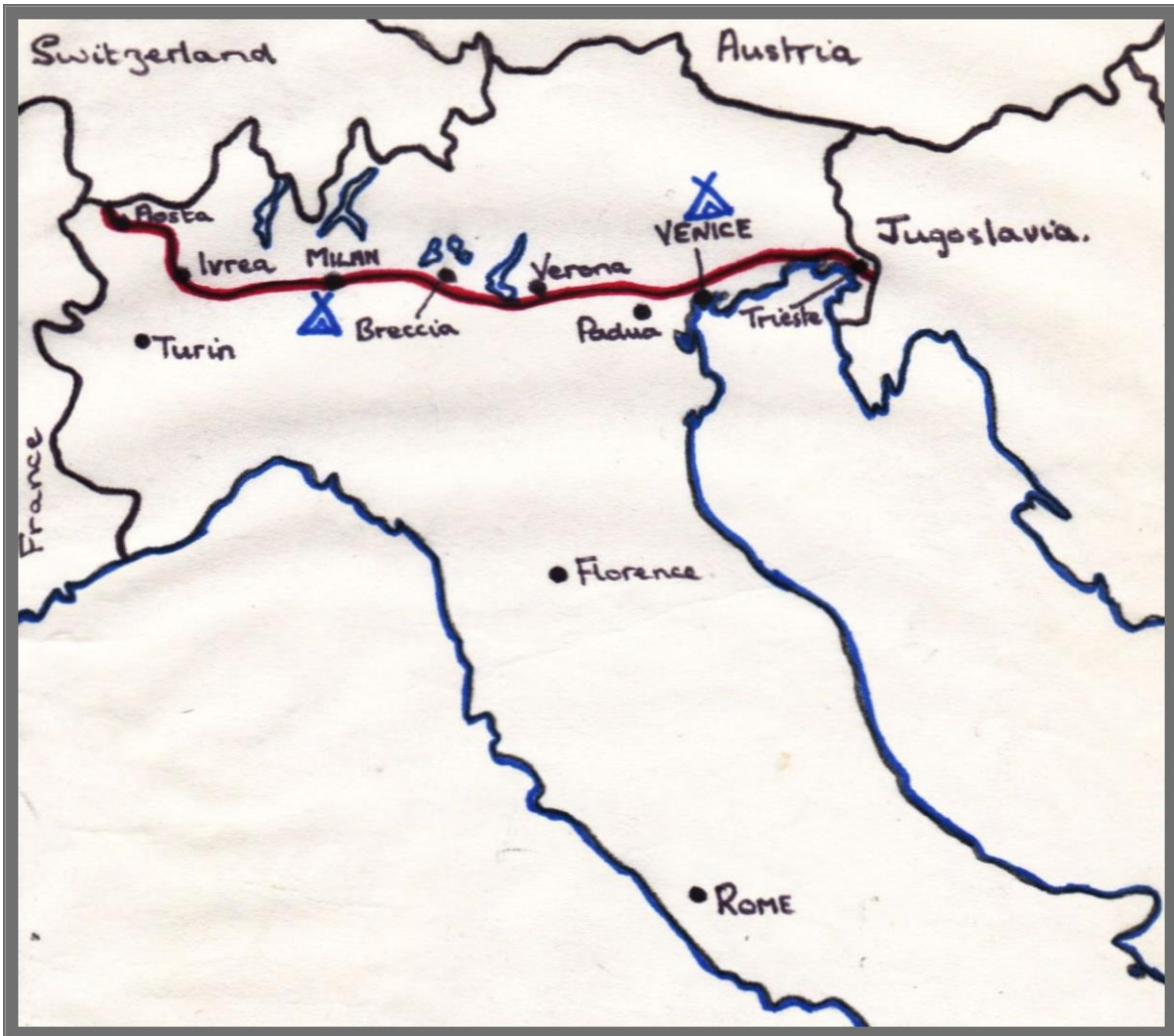


Jessica cooling after radiator boiled at Liddes

The gang taking the opportunity for a bit of cooling as well.



ITALY



Chapter Six

Italy

Ten minutes later we were on the Italian side of the tunnel, only to be greeted by rain. Luckily it died out as we descended from the top to the bottom of the valley. As far as I was concerned this was the most dangerous part of the whole procedure of driving in the mountains. Driving up the mountain is hard work for the bus but forward speed is so slow that a serious accident should not happen as long as the driver is alert. But on the other hand going down is a very different proposition. You must keep your speed down, and use the brakes the whole time. I was worried in case the prolonged braking would be too much for the old bus, plus the psychological factor of having to drive slowly when the slope for once would permit the bus to drift down in neutral.

However, I needn't have worried as we reached the bottom of the valley without incident and pressed on to Ivrea. When we reached the town we couldn't understand at first why all the clocks showed the time 5.30 when our watches showed 4.30, until someone remembered that we had lost an hour by crossing into Italy.

It was here in Ivrea that we realised what a comical sight we must have presented to onlookers. We were forced to stop the bus outside a factory for about five minutes because the traffic was so heavy. During those five minutes several hundred workers on their way home from the factory stopped and stared at this relic of Britain's early post-war technology. Some smiled, some shook their heads in disbelief, others roared their heads off. We in our turn played up to the mad appearance of our vehicle by fooling around and sounding out the England football chant on the bell and horn.

By the time we reached the outskirts of Milan it was dark. John T. once again proved to be priceless by communicating with the locals in an attempt to find a camp site. John couldn't speak any languages but he was always game to have a try and he always seemed to succeed. By the time we found the camp site it was 9.15 and completely dark. Nevertheless we managed to pitch the tents without disturbing too many of the other campers. For a change the men prepared supper, a mixture of tinned chicken curries and chicken supremes, a messy but very tasty meal. It had been a hectic day's travel and we all went to bed early.

Saturday 20 August

Up again at 7.30 to a breakfast of baked beans and bread. The site that had seemed so neat and tidy the night before presented a much less pleasing sight in full daylight, with a gravel pit to one side and tall grim buildings on the others. The washing facilities were none too good either and the toilets smelled very badly. This was our first experience of bad facilities and we hoped that this would not happen too often. Perhaps we expected too much for 100 lira per person.

We were on our way by 9.30 and heading along the autostrada to Verona. We saw very little of northern Italy apart from the fields and occasional farms as the autostrada avoided all the big cities. We decided to be extravagant on this day and instead of our usual bread and cheese

sandwiches at midday we stopped at a motel for a meal. Although this proved to be rather expensive, the food was good and plentiful. While we were there we met an HMI of Schools from Birmingham who seemed genuinely impressed at our pluck in undertaking this venture.

On we drove across the flat northern Italian countryside to Venice, arriving at the camp site at 5.30. Camping Rialto was quite an improvement on the site in Milan, for an increase of only 10 lira per person. The toilets were reasonably clean and the shop and restaurant were cheap and well stocked.

We didn't bother to cook as all of us were going into Venice to wine and dine. Some of us decided to dress up and look respectable for the first time on the trip, so while most went into Venice in the bus, five of us remained and made ourselves look as good as possible. While waiting for the girls to get ready, I got into conversation with a Canadian whose tent was next to the area which we had completely swamped. He gave me all manner of useful hints about Venice, including advice to steer well clear of gondolas, a very pricy item. He eventually offered to run us into the city, thus saving us the difficulty of looking for the right bus.

Despite the delay while we dressed up, we still arrived in Venice at the same time as the bus. We set about finding a water bus to take us to St Mark's Square, the accepted tourist heart of Venice. We had great difficulty in finding a water bus as the one our Canadian friend had told us about had stopped running for the night. By this time six of us had become separated from the rest. We had Nick with us so to walk to the Square would have been difficult. We persevered in our search and with the aid of a foreign student we found the right bus stop. Instead of the £2 or more the gondola would have cost we paid 200 lira each for the return trip (about 2/4d). Our hearts sank when we saw how crowded the boat was but several people got off and we were able to get Nick on board with no trouble at all.

The first part of the canal was very narrow and in the dark it seemed amazing the boats all missed each other. This smaller canal led into the Grand Canal after passing the unique sight of traffic lights at a junction of five canals. The Grand Canal was a mass of lights with several boats buzzing backwards and forwards. One of the attractions seemed to be a floating orchestra with a broken down soprano signing in what we presumed to be genuine Italian. Clustered around this floating opera house were about thirty gondolas with enraptured occupants who must have had more money than sense (or am I being a trifle cynical because I could not afford this water-borne spectacular?).

As we neared St Mark's Square, the canal opened out to reveal the vista that Canaletto so often represented in his paintings of Venice. The boat pulled into the side and we quickly set off to find the square. We stumbled upon it by accident for instead of the wide approaches to a square of such attraction we had expected to find it was at the end of a scruffy little alley, scruffy that is except for the shiny chrome-plated tourist shops. If one could forget these for a moment one could still see Antonio having his arguments with Shylock. It was, however, difficult to forget the tourist attractions since two small orchestras were competing against each other to attract custom to rival bars on either side of the square. Undeterred by this false attempt to create an atmosphere we set off to explore the shops surrounding the square. One side seemed to be the cheaper type of souvenir and dress jewellery shops while the opposite side the expensive jewellery and camera shops. At one end of the square is that wonderful monument of the Church of St Mark, surveying

the square with an almost disapproving stare. Around the corner from the church, book stalls and the famous ice cream sellers replaced the jewellery shops.

By this time we were feeling hungry so we sought out a pizza bar, where we ordered a bottle of Chianti with our meal so that we could dine in true Italian style. While we were eating, a man selling all manner of goods carved in cherrywood came into the restaurant. Chris couldn't resist the cigarette holders so I had to say goodbye to 100 lira, but on second thoughts a small price to pay for peace and quiet. We really enjoyed our pizzas and by the time we had finished the bottle of wine Venice took on a totally different look. It was unfortunately time to head back for the boat, and once again met up with Nick and Lesley, who had earlier gone their own way. I am afraid we were rather selfish and had left Lesley to cope with Nick on her own, and it was probably just as well that we met up with them as Lesley would never have managed with the boat. After an interesting encounter with a Dutchman who insisted on pushing his way to the front of the queue, we were all crowded onto the boat. Chris and I were pushed down into the smoky saloon and she quickly succumbed to the heat and fainted. It was quite a struggle to get her to fresh air but once she had come round we were able to enjoy the return trip after all. On our return, who should we bump into but the same HMI of Schools we had met at the motel in Verona.

We found the bus without difficulty and set off for the camp site at midnight. The trip back was illuminated by a really exciting electrical storm. I had never experienced sheet lightning before and the sight of a whole portion of the sky being lit up for a split second was only rivalled by the beauty of the Swiss mountains. Somewhat exhausted, we crawled into our tents at 1.00 in the morning.

Sunday 21 August

Nobody was in a hurry to get up as we were all suffering from the morning after the night before. It did, however, give us an opportunity to carry out one or two repairs to the bus. The indicator fuse had blown, and batteries were flat from running Leon's machine all night, and the tap on the water tank was not working. We completed all these jobs and eventually set off for Trieste at 11.30.

The drive to Trieste was rather boring and not until the sea appeared once again by the side of the road as we dropped into the town did the travellers, now somewhat refreshed, wake up. I was rather sad at having to drive straight through as the town looked rather attractive, but by then we had decided to press on overnight to Belgrade and there wasn't time to stop. We soon reached the border between Italy and Yugoslavia. Clearance with the Italian Customs was a mere formality, and somewhat apprehensively we approached the Yugoslavian control point.

YUGOSLAVIA



Chapter Seven

Yugoslavia

None of us was sure exactly what to expect from our first encounter with a Communist country. One of the border guards took our passports and visas and those who had no visa went with him to obtain one. Meanwhile a guard in a different coloured uniform came up to me and asked me for something. I couldn't understand what he was trying to say, so he beckoned me to follow him into the large office across the road, where one of the guards could speak English. They required us to pay a circulation tax, in other words we were being asked to pay for the use of their roads. This came to an astronomical total of 24,680 Dinars. This sounded fearsome until we realised that 100 Dinars was equivalent to about 7d! I had quite an amusing exchange with the guards when trying to pronounce the names of the villages that we would pass through on our way Ljubljana, especially Vrhnik. I also learnt the Yugoslavian word for 'thank you'.

We cleared the border by 3.30 and headed for Ljubljana along a fairly good road. It was shown on the map as a motorway but it turned out to be little better than an average A road in this country. By now the day was fading fast so we stopped and cooked by the roadside, much to the curiosity of the local inhabitants.

We also spent an amusing half hour with two lorry drivers who stopped in a lay by across the road. This was our first encounter with any Yugoslavians other than the border guards so we were very interested to meet them. They made the first move by offering John P., who was repacking the roof rack, a drink of water. We immediately countered with offers of Italian wine and English cigarettes. These were eagerly accepted, and although we were quite unable to speak a common language, we still managed to make contact by means of sign language and John T.'s by now well-known gift of being able to break the language barrier. The problem was further eased to some extent when a woman driving a Fiat 600 pulled up. She could speak a bit of English and we could communicate at last.

By the time we had washed up and tidied away all the odds and ends, night had fallen, and we set off for our first overnight drive to Belgrade, a journey of some 250 miles. We passed straight through Zagreb and from there on the majority of the party including me went to sleep.

Monday 22 August

I was woken at about 4.30 by the violent antics of the bus. The road surface was by now nothing like motorway standard. In fact most of our B roads have a better surface. The road was basically concrete slabs that had cracked from lack of attention. The cracks had been filled in with pitch but instead of improving the surface it had made it worse. To drive the bus at more than 25 mph would have been to shake loose every bolt in its body as well as keep the occupants awake the whole time.



Stop for food near Ljubljana before all night drive to Belgrade

As we neared Belgrade dawn began to break, a misty dawn that promised our first really warm day. The camp site was about 5 km out of Belgrade on the Zagreb road so we did not have to face the rigours of going through the city while still half asleep.

By now our first, practised, action on arrival at any site was to check the toilet and washing facilities. We were more than pleasantly surprised to find hot showers, very good clothes-washing facilities and clean, sit-down toilets, a very important point when considering the needs of the boys. We pitched camp in a very leisurely fashion as even those who had managed to sleep on the bus were still rather tired. We couldn't even summon the energy to cook breakfast, so we ordered sandwiches at the camp café. Milk was plentiful and cheap, something for which I for one was grateful. We spent the morning washing clothes and giving Nick a bed bath, and by midday we were ready to invade Belgrade.

In order to get into the city we had to cross the River Danube. Our immediate impression of the city was of a thriving community that differed from a Western city only in the lettering on the shops. There was the usual abundance of taxis associated with the large cities of Europe. We eventually found a place to park and set off to explore the city.

We were immediately struck by the appearance of the people. The majority of passers-by were extremely well dressed, their clothes being colourful and very modern in style. Occasionally there was a poorly dressed person, particularly children. It always depresses me to see such a difference between the comfortably well off and the very poor, especially when the regime of the country claims that everybody is equal. It was not so much the poor were poorly dressed, but the scorn with which the better dressed people treated them.

The city itself is an odd mixture of old and not very impressive buildings, apart from the government building, and modern buildings that seemed to stick out like sore thumbs. There seemed to be plenty of open spaces and parks. In fact we parked the bus opposite one of these parks. The shops were full of merchandise and for the most part everything, except woollens, seemed cheaper than one would have expected. The shops that attracted me were the handicraft shops with really beautiful leather work. I was so attracted in fact that I succumbed and bought a water bottle for 15/-.

Before going back to the bus it was the task of John P., Jill, Chris and myself to buy food for breakfast. We found a supermarket, as self-service seemed to be as good a way as any of overcoming the language barrier. Eggs were plentiful and cheap, and as the cheese looked appetising we bought a good quantity. Melons were cheap so we bought two of those as well. John and I set off to the bus loaded up with these items while the girls carried on with their window shopping.

As we walked down the road to the bus I noticed that the back door was open and I saw someone climbing out with a bag. Our first reaction was that one of our party had already returned. When this figure had disappeared behind the bus it suddenly dawned on us that nobody in our party was that small. We ran as fast as we could to try and catch the man, but being loaded with eggs and everything else we had bought during the day we were somewhat hampered. Our thief had run across the road and jumped into the park opposite and disappeared into the night. John and I followed as quickly as we could but could see no sign of the culprit or the bag he was carrying.



Relaxing in Belgrade



We returned to the bus to see what had been taken. Whoever had forced the back door had obviously been at work for some time as nearly all the bags at the back of the bus had had their contents strewn all over the place.

I set off straight away to find a policeman while John stayed behind to make sure nobody touched anything until the police arrived. Near where we were parked was a large square and this seemed the best bet as to where to find a policeman. The first one I spoke to spoke neither French, German nor English so I was unable to make myself understood. Fortunately someone who spoke English was passing and I eventually communicated my plight. I was advised to cross the square and find a porter in the large Hotel Slavia and he would telephone the police. Luckily I found a porter in the hotel who spoke very good English. I told him what had happened and he immediately telephoned for the police. They arrived after about fifteen minutes, and the porter acted as interpreter for me. I went with the police back to the bus, where they wanted to check for fingerprints. When they had taken a quick look at the bus I was bundled back into the car and driven back to the hotel. Through my porter interpreter I learned that the police could do no more at the present time but that if a list of stolen articles were drawn up, the people concerned should present it at the police headquarters the next morning.

When I got back to the bus I found that my bag had been taken with all my clothes in it. As nobody but Chris and Jill had returned to the bus by then we had to wait before we could find out if any other articles had gone.

As the others got back and we broke the news to them, some thought we were joking and others hastily checked to see if their belongings were still intact. Helen was the only other person to have had her bag stolen, although items such as cheque books and Brenda's camera were found to be missing. It was very fortunate that John P. and I returned to the bus when we did otherwise there is no telling what might have been stolen. We had parked the bus under a tree so the interior was completely shielded from the street light, and the thief was able to work quite undisturbed. This unfortunate incident spoiled an otherwise very enjoyable day, and the return to camp took place in almost complete silence. For once everybody went to bed early in order to try and forget what had happened.

Tuesday 23 August

Despite the events of the day before we were up by 6.30 and tucking into melon and bread and butter. Helen and I busied ourselves writing lists of stolen articles while John T. settled the bill for the night's stay.

The cost per person at that camp site was 625 Dinars, rather expensive but then the site was well equipped. By the time we had done all the necessary jobs it was 9.00, slightly later than usual, but as Helen and I had to go to the police station a short delay at the camp site seemed immaterial. It took us almost half an hour to find the police HQ, and when we did eventually find it we came up against the language barrier again.

In order to get into the building itself, we had to convince the policeman at the gate that we weren't just sightseers. We were getting absolutely nowhere when a Yugoslavian who spoke broken yet understandable English offered to help. After twenty minutes or so we managed to



**Helen and I report our losses at the police station
while local children admire the bus**



gain access to the building. The same man who had helped outside the gate took us to a room right in the depths of the massive building. This man seemed to be representative of the majority of Yugoslavians we met. If ever anyone needed assistance they were always more than willing to help, very useful in a country where even the lettering was different from our own.

When we arrived at the right room, our interpreter bade us farewell and left us standing in the long corridor. The door would open and close intermittently but nobody seemed to be taking much notice of us – though this is not strictly true as Helen was attracting some rather searching stares as all she had left to wear was her very short shorts, and the majority of males that passed by gave her rather disapproving looks. This went on for half an hour or so and nobody seemed particularly interested in us, until I heard a man walking along the corridor talking in English. As he drew level I asked him if he spoke English, and he said yes – he was from the British Embassy and wanted to know if he could help us in any way.

At last somebody was taking an interest in us. I told him what had happened and he immediately walked into the office and found out exactly what was being done. He told us that an inspector would see us in about twenty minutes or so, and that he would act as interpreter. To cut a very long story short, I had to tell the Embassy official the story and he then retold the story to the inspector who then set about typing up the report in quintuplet. Helen and I both had to give a detailed list of everything that had been stolen, and by the time we had been given a certificate for insurance purposes it was well after midday.

I was very relieved that the members of the party who had been forced to wait in the bus all this time were still in reasonably good spirits, even with the prospect of a 271 mile haul to Skopje. We asked a policeman the way to Skopje and to our surprise he jumped on the bus and told us he would guide us out of the city. It made sense when he told us that he was going home for dinner and that his house was out of town on the main road to Skopje. He left us with our thanks and the by now customary gift of English cigarettes.

As we progressed the weather worsened steadily until we ran into the most violent of thunderstorms at Nish, about the halfway point of our journey. After much argument we decided to stop and have a meal in a restaurant as it would be 1.00 in the morning or later by the time we reached Skopje. Rather than leave the bus unoccupied, we decided to eat in two shifts. The first batch, including me, set off in the torrential rain in search of any building that offered food and drink. We all piled into the first café we came to, although if we had had more time we doubtless would have been more selective. Boiled eggs, dry bread rolls and drinks were all the waiter had to offer, but having no desire to go out into the rain again we agreed to this Hobson's choice. The weather seemed to be still as fierce, and wet as we tried to enjoy our sumptuous meal. Nature attempted to assist us in this quest by extinguishing the lights with a brighter than usual flash of lightning. This must have been a commonplace occurrence as the waiter calmly brought out candles from the back room and we finished our meal by candlelight.

After this delicious refreshment we once again set off on the final leg to Skopje, which we eventually reached at 1.30 a.m.

Wednesday 24 August

To our surprise there was still a man on duty at the camp and after a preliminary exchange between him and John T. we drove into the site and set about getting to bed. It was so warm that we decided not to pitch the tents but to lay them on the ground with our sleeping bags on top, and pull the sides of the tent over in case we should have any more rain. We were all settling down for a well-earned sleep when a sudden very bright pin point of light in the sky directly above the site attracted our attention. This pin point grew and became much brighter. To add to the mystery, a jet plane arrived on the scene and appeared to circle the light. At first we thought it was a larger than usual meteorite but decided that it was moving too slowly for this. It eventually extinguished in a shower of sparks which led to a general decision that it was flare of some kind. The excitement over, we once again climbed back into our sleeping bags.

It's difficult to recall the rest of the day as I felt ill for most of the day. The combination of heat, tiredness and bad water had at last caught up with me. In the morning, one group went to the swimming baths across the river while the rest of us stayed in camp. As the morning progressed, the sun became hotter and hotter until at midday we had to wear shoes because the ground was so hot. We didn't even bother to eat because of the heat. The ground at the site was beaten earth with a layer of dust on top so we were grateful there was no wind. There was little else to do but to keep out of the sun all day, so when the sun did finally sink lower in the sky the first thing we wanted to do was to have a meal of soup and eggs.

I felt a little better after this and decided to go into the city with Nick, Chris, Jill and John P. By the time we had left the site the sun had set and we were thankful for the opportunity of a walk by the River Vardar. Not unlike Belgrade, the majority of the townspeople were well dressed except for the very poorly dressed few. For no apparent reason there was a huge crowd of people milling round the main square doing nothing but walking and talking. My first impression was that it was some kind of demonstration or meeting but there was no organisation to this vast mass of people, so in the end we assumed that this was the Yugoslavian idea of a night out. We eventually made our way through the crowd and set about looking for a 'Putnik', the state travel agency, for it is there and there alone that one may change travellers' cheques in Yugoslavia.

We found the Putnik without too much difficulty, and from there we set out to find the main railway station, one of the few buildings left standing after the earthquake that laid the whole city waste in 1963. This building, made of stressed concrete, remains as a stark reminder of that terrible night. The clock outside the station stopped at 5.20. The rest of the station presents a rather sorry sight, with huge chunks of concrete hanging drunkenly from the main structure of the building, suspended by the thin strands of the steel reinforcement. Alas, it was too dark to take a photograph of this memorial to the ferocity of nature, but the sight of this once proud building reduced to an untidy heap of concrete and steel will remain in my memory for years to come.

From thoughts of wonder at nature's fury we turned to thoughts of food and set off in search of a suitable eating house. Not fifty yards from the station we came upon the Hotel Bristol and as John P. comes from Bristol we just had to eat there. For the ridiculously cheap sum of ten shillings each we had kebabs, salad, bread and our drinks including the traditional Turkish coffee. Having satisfied our hunger we headed back to camp for an early night.

When we arrived we found that those of our party who had stayed behind had befriended a group of New Zealanders who were touring the continent in a Dormobile. Two of the party were teachers, and Chris and I began talking to them about teaching in New Zealand as we are considering spending two or three years there. We spent quite an enjoyable half hour chatting before eventually retiring for the night at 10.30.

Thursday 25 August

By now the business of getting up in the morning and striking camp had become a simple task and since we were all up at 6.00 we were on the road by 8.00, after first settling the bill. Although the charge for this site was 500 Dinars per person, 125 Dinars cheaper than Belgrade, by comparison with the other sites we had used to date this was expensive, and for no apparent reason as the facilities were by no means palatial.

The sun was making a brave attempt to break through the early morning haze as John P. drove out of the camp. We found the right road without too much difficulty, although a tank transporter carrying a huge tank dominated the centre of the road for a mile or so. By 9 a.m. the sun had forced its way through the haze and it was now quite obvious that we were in for a very hot day. We very soon reached Tito Veles where we stopped the bus to refuel as diesel pumps were few and far between in this part of the world.

While we were stopped, I noticed two hitchhikers standing at the roadside. I casually wandered over to them and asked if they could speak English. With a grin on his face, one of them answered, 'A leettle,' quickly followed by, 'We're English, you silly bugger!' Charming, but the grin on their faces hastily dispelled any of the ill will one might normally feel at such a greeting. Once again we could not escape from college as one of them, Pete, came from Maidenhead. His friend, alas another John to complicate matters, came from Southend. We seemed to have picked on some interesting and humorous hitchhikers.

From this point onward the Vardar Valley, which we had followed all the way to Skopje, became much more exciting. Instead of the flat flood plain of the Skopje area, the river was now speeding through gorges of immense beauty, now a rushing narrow stream, now a wide sluggish river. The road at this stage rivalled any of the roads we had travelled on so far. Instead of following the shape of the multi-coloured rock face to our left, it took an almost straight line from A to B, here cut into the rock, there over breath-taking viaducts, and even the occasional tunnel. The dwellings that appeared intermittently by the roadside were truly medieval, even perhaps stone age, in appearance, with their very primitive grass roofs and slate walls.

We encountered hardly any other motor vehicles although several donkeys and bullock carts kept the driver alert. Our first reaction on seeing these undoubtedly very poor peasants was, well what do they know or care about communism, or perhaps they had never heard of Tito. It is a shame that we had neither the time nor the language to find out. We eventually ran out of the narrow river valley into more undulating country, and reached the Greek border at 1.30 p.m.

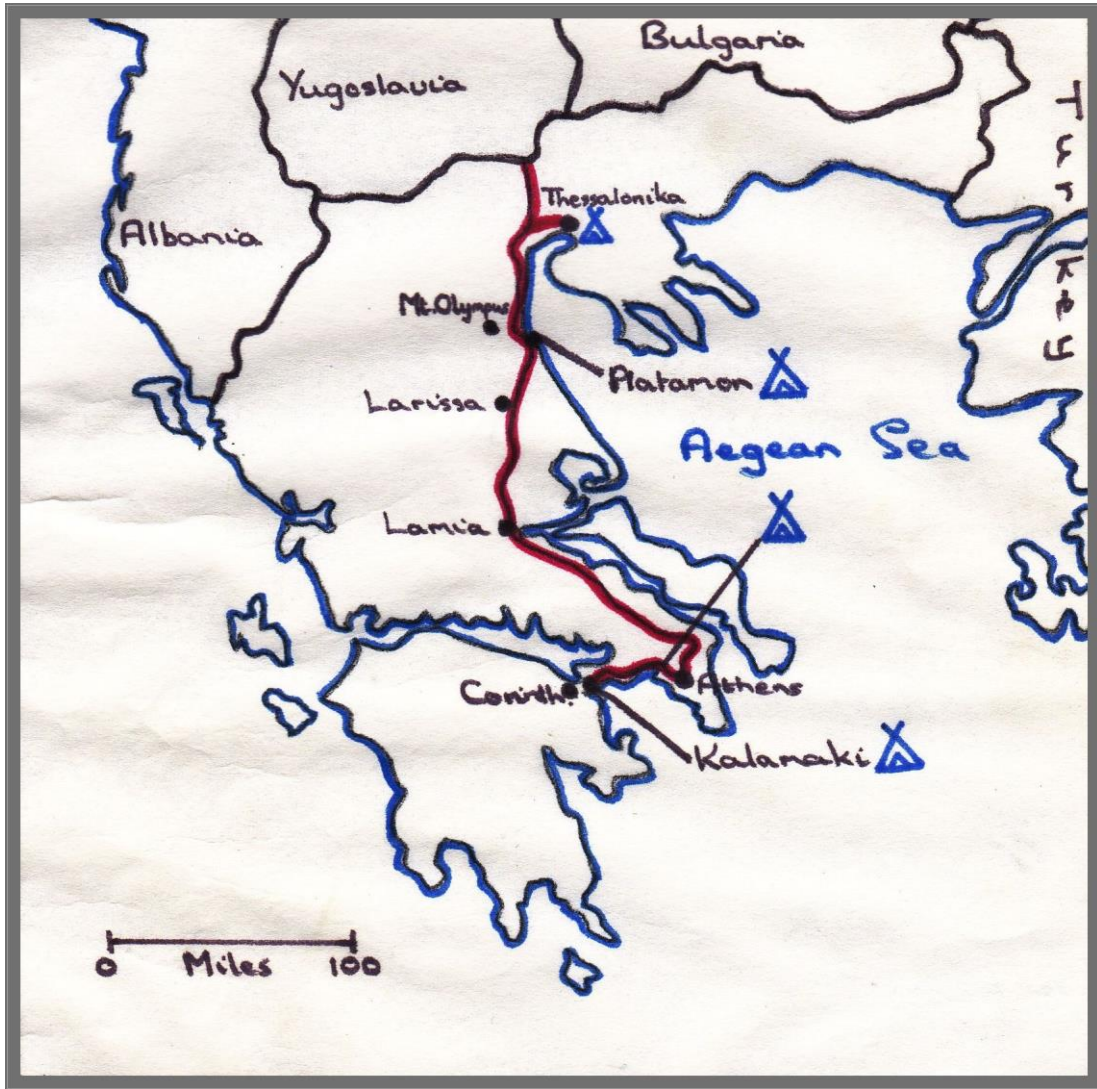


Tito Veles where John and Pete, the hitchhikers, joined us



Greek border

GREECE



Chapter Eight

Greece

After a very quick and efficient exit from the Yugoslavian border post, the somewhat pedantic hour long delay at the Greek Passport and Customs Control was rather frustrating. This delay, coupled with another time change hour by entering Greece, meant that in effect we had lost two hours overall. However, when we set off for the camp site recommended by our New Zealand acquaintances, the rather niggly atmosphere disappeared completely and we settled down for the last leg of the day's journey. We had not travelled very far when the road and the railway, which before had been several hundreds of yards apart, came together and to our delight a goods train was puffing its way along the line about 200 yards or so in front of us and travelling a good deal slower than Jessica, believe it or not.

I was driving at the time and needed little encouragement to try and catch up and overtake the train. The chase was on! We were very quickly alongside the engine and a toot on the horn from me drew a loud blast from the train whistle. By this time everybody was hanging out of the bus windows and waving madly at the driver, the fireman and the guard, and as Jessica opened up a lead of some 150 yards, I was ordered on pain of death to slow down and wait for the train to catch us again. The train driver entered into the spirit of the adventure and increased his speed so that he caught Jessica very quickly.

At this point we came to a village, and to our dismay there was quite a steep hill and we lost all hope of winning the second round of the 'Great Locomotive Chase'. Incredibly Jessica found the energy to storm up the hill without losing too much speed, scattering the frightened villagers in all directions. I am sure that if a policeman had been in the vicinity I should still be in Greece, had up on several motoring offences, including cutting corners and speeding through a village. The train gained a lead of at least a hundred yards and now that the driver of the train was squeezing every last ounce of power from his bellowing locomotive, Jessica was creeping up on her rival very slowly. The train driver kept blasting away on his whistle while I did my best to sound out the England football chant on the horn. Inch by inch we crept up on the engine until eventually Jessica proudly forced her aged nose in front once more. This time I had absolutely no intention of allowing the train to catch me, and Jessica quickly opened up a large gap. As I waved a fond farewell to the engine driver, I detected a sneaky smile on his face, and as we rounded a corner we all discovered why. Barring our way were railway crossing gates. No wonder the driver was smiling. He knew the gates would be shut.

The other people at the crossing must have thought we were an invading force as we all piled out of the bus as quickly as we could to have a really close look at the train and its good humoured occupants. The train had to slow down as it approached the crossing and seemed to be mocking our frenzied attempt to beat it. It trundled over the crossing at a leisurely 5 mph while the driver smiled benevolently at us and waved. We climbed happily back into the bus and set off for Platamon.



The (2nd) Great Locomotive Chase



We've won!



Gypsy cart

Is everybody happy?



Our planned route meant that we would avoid Thessalonika as we all wanted to get to Athens the next day. As the sun began to sink, we came across a rather long narrow bridge where a one way system was in operation and we were held up. Andy and Lesley proved their skill at bartering by obtaining five ice creams from a roadside salesman for the price of one packet of cigarettes. While this high level business was being conducted I became engaged in a conversation with the driver of a lorry. He seemed very concerned with the state of the front suspension of the bus and he nearly fell over himself laughing when I told him the age of the bus. I soon changed his grin to a sour look of disapproval when I challenged him to bring his shiny truck on a tour of England when it was as old as Jessica. Further conversation was impossible as the traffic had begun to move across the bridge. Jessica pushed on and at last we had our first glimpse of the Aegean. It really is as blue as the postcards would have us believe. Our main worry now was whether we would be at the camp site in time for a swim. Shortly we were treated to the truly magnificent sight of Mount Olympus at sunset. It seemed to have completely swallowed the sun, for we could only see faint rays issuing from behind the mountains. It is difficult to conceive how this seemingly harmless mountain was the root of such a sophisticated culture, sophisticated that is except for the very real fear of the summit.

Very soon we were at the camp site. It is situated on the beach at the foot of a hill crowned by a magnificent castle, a relic of the days of dominance of the Venetian traders. To reach the site, Jessica had to negotiate a rather steep and rough track, but this task she completed just as we expected her to. Instead of our usual perusal of the facilities on arrival, we all changed into our swimming gear as quickly as possible and charged into the sea.

Unbelievably the water was WARMER than the air, now that the sun had set. I for one did not want to leave the water, but hunger eventually decreed that we get out and feed ourselves. We were feeling rather lazy so we didn't bother to cook, but decided to eat and drink in the camp bar. The captain of our cross channel ferry had told us about a Greek drink that he for one drank whenever he could get hold of it. This drink was Ouzo, and as the beer seemed rather expensive by our standards, we ordered our first Ouzo. It is drunk either neat or, more usually, diluted with water, when its transparent quality changes to a milky colour (hydrolysis, our scientists informed us). I am not sure how many I drank but I remember that by bedtime I had great difficulty in finding the bus.

Friday 26 August

I woke at about 6 a.m. feeling as if all the gods on Mount Olympus were banging huge hammers on my head. This was a painful price to pay for my over-indulgence the night before. Leon was awake by now, so Helen and I dressed him and sat him in his wheelchair. He, too, had overdone the Ouzo, and he asked if I had a patent cure for a hangover. I have always taken milk for that ailment, so I set off to buy two bottles. I drank mine as soon as I had paid for it and took the other back for Leon. Unfortunately the cure only seemed to work on me, and Leon was sick as soon as he had drunk the milk. Actually, he claimed that this did do him good, so I didn't get the expected harangue.

By this time the others were slowly coming to, and we were more than a little pleased to have the two extra pairs of hands to help with the routine early morning tasks. Already the sun was extremely hot, and this coupled with our hangovers made us feel very sluggish. Even so, we



Camping Castle, Platamon



managed to get Nick and Merwan into their bathing costumes and into the sea in an attempt to keep them cool. Jimmy refused to even go on to the beach, let alone go into the sea. He told us that any mention of water made him feel ill so we didn't press the matter. Leon also refused to be enticed into the water but he did at least come down to the beach with us.

In contrast to our first swim the night before, the sea was a welcome refuge from the scorching heat of the sun. Our lily-white skins looked horribly conspicuous among the bronzed bathers surrounding us, so we decided to spend the rest of the morning basking in the sun, having first plastered ourselves with various sun tan oils. By midday, the sun was absolutely unbearable so we retired to the bar, the coolest place on the whole site. There we stayed until a cooling breeze allowed us to venture from the shade of the bar once more.

Without doubt, this was the best site we had come across. Toilet facilities were excellent and there was hot running water between 6.00 and 10.00 in both the morning and the evening. The whole site was lit at night by little lamp posts about three feet tall and there was an electric point at the base of each of these lamps. There were plenty of water taps, so the furthest anyone had to walk was twenty yards. The camp shop was a miniature supermarket with just about everything on sale. The bar served a wide variety of drinks as well as good, if simple, hot meals. For children there was a soft drinks bar. The camp office was also a souvenir shop so all in all this was a very well 'accommodated site', to quote the international camping guide.

The original plan had been to spend the day at the site and make a move for Athens when the sun began to set, but many of us felt that a complete days' rest would be beneficial to all, and as we had made such good time in getting this far, we could afford the break. Just as at Nish, no hard and fast decision was reached, and we spent the afternoon in bickering and arguing, a sure sign that we all desperately needed a break. We eventually decided we should spend the whole day at Camping Castle and delay the move to Athens until the next day.

After more swimming and our evening meal, we once again gravitated to the bar, but this time I had no intention of touching the Ouzo. We spent the evening monopolising the juke box playing all the English records we could find including the Rolling Stones, much to the delight of Jimmy, a devoted fan of these noisy millionaires. And as if to remind us just how small the world has become, fate decreed that John T. should meet his physiotherapist from the Royal Berks Hospital in Reading. One of the other girls with this party is at Fishponds Training College in Bristol so we spent the remainder of the evening talking to these newly found friends. A second surprise was to meet a group of students from Westminster College, Oxford. Perhaps this was not so very surprising really, as the majority of campers were English.

As much as we wanted to talk the whole night long, we decided to have an early night as travelling in the heat of the next day was going to be rather tiring.

Saturday 27 August

We were all up by 6.30 and after a simple breakfast of bread and butter and melon, we were ready to head to Athens at 9 a.m. We had settled the camp site bill, and were really surprised that it only cost us 10 drachmas each, about 2/6. The manager of the site insisted on having our address so that he could send us Christmas cards. We sadly waved farewell to the site and John started



Stuck on the track

40 horse power + 1 donkey power



to drive Jessica up the steep track to the main road. One part of the track was steeper than the rest and we held our breath and willed Jessica to overcome the incline.

Trouble. She ground to a halt half way. Undeterred, we climbed out of the bus and leant on her while John tried to budge the reluctant motor. Alas, still no go. The only thing to do was to try and take a run at the hill again but this time without the passengers on board. Reversing down the hill proved to be a very difficult task but we eventually managed this and John ran the bus at the hill flat out. We ran behind in an attempt to push in case she still faltered. Although Jessica pushed her aged self further than before, she still couldn't conquer the slope. There she stood, looking quite dejected, almost ashamed that she had let us down.

While the others began to consider various ways of getting her to the top, Chris and I set off for the site office to see if the manager could arrange any assistance. Halfway down we met him on his way up, in his car. We didn't have to tell him what had happened: he guessed as soon as he saw us. He told me that he would try and fetch an army truck that was usually in the village at that time of day. Off he went while we spent our time helping other campers squeeze between the bus and the edge of the rough track.

At last the manager returned and told us that the army lorry was not available but that he had stopped a passing stone lorry and this would come and help us as soon as it had dropped its load in the village. While we were waiting, a villager came down the hill on his donkey. Full of curiosity, he stopped to find out what was happening. Someone jokingly suggested that the donkey be hitched to the bus, and in a flash the poor animal was attached to the bus by our huge towing chain. This caused much amusement and helped to calm down one or two members of the party who were a little annoyed at this unfortunate occurrence.

The lorry arrived quite soon after this, and when the chain had been fixed to it, we were ready to give it another try. With much wheel spinning and smoke, the lorry started to move, and so did Jessica. We all cheered madly and ran behind the old bus to the top of the hill. After much backslapping and thanks, plus gifts of our last English cigarettes, we left the camp entrance at 10.00, an hour after we had originally set out. By now the sun was really hot, even hotter than the day before, and when the road turned away from the sea, it became hotter yet.

All that I can remember is that the road to Athens seemed interminably long and hot, the only relief being a stop at a village pump to fill the drinking can and to cool ourselves under the crystal clear water. On again and we reach Athens at 7 p.m. There seemed to be absolutely no road signs in Athens except those that pointed to the centre of the city. We asked for directions to Corinth but the policemen gave us conflicting directions we so eventually followed the setting sun as our elementary astronomical knowledge told us that the sun sets in the west, and Corinth is west of Athens.

Although we were heading in the right general direction, we were travelling blind, and before long we were completely lost in the back streets of a poor quarter of Athens. We were directed on to the correct road but after another quarter of an hour we were lost again as by now it was quite dark. Directions from the customers at a roadside bar required that we turn round and go back the way we had come. Driving the bus was a sufficiently difficult task, but turning it round on a road not much wider than the bus was long was virtually out of the question. John P. did

remarkably well in this task but inevitably this manoeuvre took time, and a queue of impatient motorists built up in either direction. It was absolute bedlam with frenzied Greeks shouting instructions at John P. and twenty or so irate motorists proving how musical they were on the one button Greek horn. This became too much for one of our hitchhikers, John G., so he grabbed a toilet roll and hurled it at the mooing cars. This must have shocked the driver of the leading car for a moment, as he stopped playing at seals and got out of his car ready for trouble. Fortunately at this very moment John P. completed the turn and we drove off.

We found the right road eventually although by now it was after 8.00 p.m. The road climbed steadily and Jessica was coping quite easily until for no apparent reason the bus stopped rather suddenly. A short circuit in the bus intercom system had suddenly filled the cab with smoke. No wonder John P. stopped the bus in such a hurry. It was then that we first noticed a rather foul smell filling the air. It was coming from a burning rubbish tip across the road. I have never known such a terrible smell. All the way up the rest of the hill, we kept squirting deodorants, fly sprays and any other aerosols we could find to try and make the smell less pungent.

We eventually left the smell behind us and set about looking for a camp site. According to the map several sites lined the waterfront at this point so we decided to stop at the first one we came across. One small but very significant point we had overlooked was that the road was now a dual-carriageway and although we passed several sites we could find no way of crossing the road. We had to drive on for a mile or more before we found an exit and Andy had the time of his life finding the correct approach road for getting back on to the motorway. This we finally did, and picked the site that had the best display of coloured lights. In order to get into the site, the lights had to be raised, but after some of our earlier experiences at other sites, this was a mere formality. We quickly offloaded the essentials for our overnight stay and then headed for the camp café, where we ordered good sized meals in an attempt to overcome the absolute exhaustion brought on by the very hot day's travelling. Our table tucked into plates of omelette, salad and chips washing down with a bottle or two of beer.

We then set about exploring Camping Aspropogyrus. To our disgust the toilets and showers smelled very badly and were in a rather dilapidated condition. The ground was beaten earth and seemed to be crawling with ants and flies. Although the site is right on the shore, the sea was by no means the clear blue water one associates with Greece but rather the sluggish and dirty water that surrounds any area used by ocean-going ships. To offset these disadvantages the food was cheap and plentiful and the proprietors were quite charming to us. It is a shame their charm and energy used in making their customers welcome was not also directed towards making the site more inhabitable.

As there was nothing better to do, most of us went to bed although the hard core of alcoholics drank until midnight. Once again, as had been our policy since we arrived in hotter climes, we did not bother to erect the tents, but merely spread them on the ground as ground sheets.

Sunday 28 August

Nobody was in a particular hurry to get up as we only had a forty mile journey to Corinth. Most of us had breakfast at the café, and by the time we had written our postcards and packed the bus,



Camping Libero, Kalamaki (near Corinth)



it was midday. Fortunately there was a haze so the extreme heat of the past few days didn't impede our leisurely progress.

There are two roads from Athens to Corinth, a toll road and the old coast road. We decided to take the toll road as our previous experiences of toll roads in Greece reminded us that the expenditure was well worth it. Both roads run parallel for most of the way since the sea on the one side and the cliffs on the other make any other route impossible. Jessica made good time along this road and we reached our new site at 1.30 p.m.

Camping Libero is literally right on the sea shore and we decided there and then to make this our base camp for a few days. The facilities were not as good as those we had found at Camping Castle but in comparison with the many other sites we had now used, they were clean and functioned properly. There were showers and good facilities for washing clothes, most important as this part of our hygiene had been sadly neglected. The food was cheap and wholesome, and to cap all this the proprietor was a delightful little old man, Mr Constantin. We immediately christened him Papa Constantin and far from being insulted he adopted us as his own children.

The haze had cleared away by now so we all made a dash for the sea as soon as we had off loaded the boys. Although the beach was pebbly nobody thought to check if the sea bed was suitable for swimming. Sue was the unlucky one who discovered the main drawback – there were sea urchins in the water. Unfortunately she picked up a spine from one of them in her big toe. These spines are needle sharp and roughly one inch long, so we reconnoitred the sea bed until we found a spot that was relatively clear of these vicious little creatures.

After our swim we all headed for the café, where we ordered a good tasty meal. This was becoming too much of a habit, and I began to wonder how long the money in the kitty would last if we continued to eat out rather than take the trouble to prepare our own food.

After this late lunch, John, Jill and I started talking to a woman who was sitting near us. In the course of the conversation we discovered that she was Papa Constantin's daughter, and that she had just flown out from England in the unbelievable time of three hours. She was married to one of the directors of Mecca Dancing in Stoke-on-Trent. She was complaining that she was missing her cup of tea already, so John went back to the bus to fetch a few packets of tea for her. This still didn't make her completely happy as there were no facilities in the chalets for making a good English cuppa. We decided to put this right by inviting her back to the bus for one of our brews. This she happily agreed to, so while she went off to collect her niece, we hurried back to the bus to prepare for our very first visitors.

As usual the bus was in a terrible mess, so we hurriedly attempted to tidy the front seats. The kettle was soon boiling merrily and the tea was mashed just as our guests arrived. We broke open a few packets of biscuits to make the afternoon tea session complete. Looking back on this, it could only be English people who would go to so much trouble to have a little bit of home.

This pleasant little gathering was interrupted by Leon, who had been watching those of our party who were on the beach. He informed us that Malcolm's lilo was fast being blown out to sea and that Pete and John G. had set off after it, using a telegraph pole for extra buoyancy. This was rather a risky thing to do as throughout the afternoon the steady breeze had increased to a gale

force wind, a most unusual phenomenon according to Papa Constantin. Andy set off to see if he could help. While we continued to make polite conversation, Leon still kept on about the predicament of John G., Pete and now Andy as well, so I went down to the beach to see what was happening. In fact the three of them had given up the chase and were swimming back to shore, or at least they were trying their hardest to do so. In fact they were finding great difficulty in making headway against the ever increasing strength of the wind, so I decided to join them and give them a hand in pushing the telegraph pole ashore. We did finally manage to do this, and the great excitement was over.

We had our evening meal, although our preparations were hampered by the very strong wind. It was also becoming a danger to our very inexpertly erected tents, so our first job was to find as many rocks as possible so as to secure the sides of the tents. Ideas of a beach barbecue were scratched for the evening as any open fire was out of the question: so we contented ourselves with a quiet drink in the camp bar.

Monday 29 August

The howling of the wind woke me at six, and I could not get back to sleep, so I decided to have a walk before the others woke up. I grabbed my camera and pulled back the flap of the tent, intending to use up my roll of film. I was very pleased that I did as a rather quaint fishing boat was barely ten yards away from the beach. We had seen it the day before but not so close. This was the only thing of interest in sight, however, since the sky rapidly began to cloud over, while ominous rumblings from the north heralded a very English-like summer's morning. This cloud spoilt an otherwise very beautiful sunrise. In fact I was reminded of a theatre when the lighting technicians dim the lights. At about 8.30 the storm struck – one minute it was not raining, the next it was pouring. This continued with an accompaniment of forked and sheet lightning as well as very loud rolls of thunder.

This storm ceased as suddenly as it had begun and the sun forced its way through the few remaining clouds and began to mop up the rain. Chris and I decided to go into Athens on this morning and we asked Jimmy if he would like to come with us. In the end four of us ended up going into the city. We had to wait until 12.15 for a bus.

This bus ride turned out to be one of the less pleasant experiences of the whole trip. I have already said that there are two roads from Athens to Corinth, a modern toll road and the old coast road. The bus we were on took the old road which was neither straight nor well surfaced. This did not deter the driver from driving like a maniac. I quickly got used to the bucking of the bus but I became rather scared when the road began to hug the top of a 50 ft cliff with the sea grinning back at us. In fact at times we were so close to the edge of the road that all we could see was the blue water below. Even at this point the driver tried to overtake everything in sight. The only consolation was that we got to Athens much more quickly than we had thoughtld.

In my opinion, Athens is perhaps the most difficult city to describe. It is relatively easy to make generalisations about many of the cities we passed through, but not one part of Athens resembles another. To the west, the outskirts consist of camp sites, restaurants and few small factories, while further into the city the streets narrow to present the scene that one would expect but as soon as one becomes used to the smaller streets with their gay shops one comes to the main shopping



Fishing boat just off the beach

Clear blue sea at Camping Libero



area around Omonia Square. Here the shops are large and chromium-plated. Yet overlooking the whole of this hotchpotch of buildings stands the Acropolis, despite the over large neon signs that attempt to obliterate it. As I have already said – a difficult place to describe.

The first thing we had to do on leaving the bus and its mad driver was to find a bank and exchange some travellers' cheques. We found a bank quite easily but alas they were not open for business for another three hours, at 5 p.m., so we decided to pay a visit to the Poste Restante. Jimmy and John, our hitcher, came with Chris and me as none of us could do what we wanted until we had some money. There were not even any letters at the post office to cheer us up so we sat at a street café and drank orange juice.

By 4 p.m. we were quite cold, as by now the sun had disappeared behind more cloud, so we all set off for a walk round the main shopping area as Chris and I were still looking for a suitable ring. While we went on ahead to look at the jewellery shops, Jimmy stayed behind with John. Chris found a ring she liked, and as the time was now 5 p.m. we went back to the bank and changed some travellers' cheques. A quick dash back up the road and the ring belonged to Chris. Now we set about finding John and Jimmy.

Quite by chance we stumbled across Jimmy, completely on his own and heading the wrong way for anywhere. Apparently he had lost John in the crowded Omonia Square and was wandering around totally lost. He wanted to go to the bank so we found one for him, and then had a meal before catching the bus back to the camp site.

After several conversations with bus drivers and a cheeky office girl, we eventually managed to find the bus depot and bought our bus tickets. Hil and Frank were already on the bus. This surprised us somewhat since they had planned to be in Corinth. The bus eventually left at 9.30 p.m. after a rather noisy argument between some Greek and German passengers about who should sit where. Chris and I were just dropping off to sleep when a yell from Jimmy roused us. A wizened old peasant had occupied the seat next to Jimmy and was busily trying to make conversation, although Jimmy could not speak a word of Greek and the man could not speak any English. Jimmy was becoming rather upset by this close attention and tried to stall the man with comments such as, 'Yeah, I dig you baby but cool off a little.' It suddenly dawned on Jimmy why this stranger was being so friendly.

He was in fact the camp night watchman and the evening before, when Jimmy had had a little too much beer in the bar, had helped him back to the tents. Because of this, the night watchman felt he was Jimmy's guardian. The best was yet to come.

When the bus finally reached the camp site, we all piled out, thankful that we had survived our first and last experience of Greek bus drivers. Jimmy started off in front of the rest of us, but his erratic progress, caused by his disability, caught the eye of his guardian angel. In his ignorance, he thought Jimmy was drunk again and without a moment's hesitation he grabbed him by the arm and literally steered him back to camp. We were in fits of laughter at his plight and when he tried to summon help by yelling, 'He's breaking my bloody arm!' we laughed even more. We were being rather unhelpful to Jimmy but I'm sure I would laugh again if the same situation arose.

Jimmy's arm was not broken, and we reached the camp bar to be greeted with raucous singing by those who had stayed behind for the day. Everybody was drunk, and Leon insisted on singing all the rugby songs he knows. I think this was the happiest that we had all been through the whole trip so far and as such I came in for a great deal of ragging when Chris showed her engagement ring to the assembled company. The day spent in Athens had been tiring so I went to bed and left the others to carry on with their carousing.

Tuesday 30 August

Like most of the party now that we had reached Greece, I had become extremely bad at getting up in the morning, and it was 9.30 before I ventured to poke my nose into the morning air. In fact so lazy had we become that we did not even bother to cook breakfast. To make up for my tardy start, I decided to shake some of the dust from my tent. The strong winds of the recent days had blown dust into every conceivable place in the tent, so I tore down the whole structure and started again. When I moved the groundsheet, I had the shock of my life. What I thought was a twig suddenly curved up its barbed tail and began to move. Yes, our first scorpion had paid a call. My shout brought everyone running as few of the group had ever seen a scorpion before. The sight of this creature and the thought that some of his brethren might be around worried some of the girls but a quick consultation with Papa Constantin proved that the yellow scorpion was no more harmful than bee.

About six of us spent the remainder of the morning trying to rearrange the roof rack. After a fortnight of travelling, much of the food had been eaten which meant there was more room on top for personal luggage. With the rearrangement we made enough space for all the larger objects that had hitherto blocked the gangway of the bus. Those of our number who had spent their time sunning on the beach all morning atoned for their idleness by making a rather fine corned beef hash and as soon as the washing up had been done we all, except Jimmy of course, headed for the beach where we intended to soak up some of the Greek sun, which had decided at long last to grace us with its presence.

I enjoyed lazing in the sun for about an hour but then I became restless and decided I would have a swim. Nick was also awake and asked if he could join me. Pete and John, our two hitchhikers, had found some abandoned telegraph poles the day before, so Nick and I set about making a raft. I ran back to the bus and requisitioned several of the canvas straps that we used to secure the wheelchairs and with these I began to strap the poles together. Pete joined in and between us we fashioned a very crude raft. By the time it was ready for its maiden voyage Chris and Hilary had woken up so there was no shortage of volunteers to try out our masterpiece of design. The shovel that we carried in case we ever found a site without toilets was quickly put into use as a paddle. Five of us took part in the maiden voyage. She seemed to be quite seaworthy until Hilary decided to pull rather violently on one of the outriggers. The resulting disturbance of balance made me lose my grip on the paddle. Pete tried to find it, and even though he disappeared from sight in the clear blue water, he still could not see the bottom, an indication of just how deep the water became only a short distance from the beach.

The Mark Two raft was a really sophisticated model although the Ministry of Health would doubtless have been disturbed at the treatment one of the wheelchairs received. Merwan suggested this idea. It consisted of one wheelchair with a pole either side to give the necessary

buoyancy. This proved to be a great success although of course only one person at a time could use it. I hate to think what damage the chair suffered.

By now the sun was setting so Frank volunteered to get the evening meal under way. He decided to cook his speciality, Vesta Chow Mein. In common with the other five men on this trip, Frank cooked from time to time to show the female members of the group that food could be just as tasty although we useless males prepared it, and occasionally we did manage to prove our point, although the beans or peas always seemed to be ready before the main part of the meal.

After supper some of us decided to go into Corinth and then to make our way to an open air night club that Sue and Pete had found the night before in Loutraki, a small village about ten miles away. The arrangement was that some Greek gentlemen who had befriended the group who had gone the night before were to come to the camp with their cars and take us to the night club. When these fellows did not arrive on time, John, Chris and I decided to hitch into Corinth and catch a bus. We did not even have to raise a thumb. As soon as we reached the road, a pick-up truck stopped and the driver offered us a lift. Quite frankly I just could not see where the driver was going to fit us in as there were already two passengers occupying the front bench seat, but behind the seat was a gap about 18" wide with an equally tiny seat. We decided to accept the offer all the same as there seemed to be no other traffic on the road.

With barely room to breathe, we set off, the driver setting a truly hair raising rate. Our bus driver of the day before was a gentleman compared with this maniac. We reckoned that it was about eight miles from the camp to Corinth, yet this Stirling Moss took exactly six minutes to get there.

Partly as a result of this trip and partly because I was still suffering from the effects of a fortnight of bad water, I was caught short as soon as we left the car. I found a patch of wasteland, and I was in such a hurry that I did not check the terrain. I wish I had: I sat on a thistle.

We tried to find the bus depot but we gave up the search when a café proprietor told us that the buses had stopped running. Undaunted, we found a taxi and set off in search of the night club. After a much less hair-raising ride we paid the driver off and finally found the Fujiyama Club, where we wasted no time in buying our drinks. We had been there about ten minutes when Nick, Maddy and Rosemary arrived with the group of Greek men. The evening was spent in trying to talk to each other in very broken English and German. In fact the party did not break up until two in the morning so were more than pleased to get back to the site and curl up in our sleeping bags.

Wednesday 31 August

We were all awoken by the heat of the sun on the tents at about 8.00. As this was likely to be our last day at the camp site, we decided to have a good solid English breakfast. We spent the morning in petty bickering about when we should make the move to Athens. Unfortunately the majority of the group embarked on this argument without bothering to look at the facts. Those that did bother to work out the logistics of the return journey found that we could afford another day's rest. The argument then moved on to whether the day should be spent at the camp or whether we should hold the day in reserve in case we became overtired later in the trip. The eventual

The Corinth Canal



decision was to stay in Corinth for the rest of the day and to move on to Athens the following day.

This unfortunate bickering occurred all too frequently on this trip, and as on other occasions a somewhat heavy atmosphere pervaded the group for the rest of the day. After a lunch of curried prawns, some disappeared into Corinth to escape the unpleasant atmosphere while the rest of us spent the afternoon keeping ourselves to ourselves for the most part.

In the evening, a few drinks at the bar tended to right the atmosphere and we eventually went to bed happy once again.

Thursday 1 September

For once everybody decided to stir themselves relatively early as there was much to be done before heading for Athens. Four days of rest had slowed our reflexes somewhat, and it took much longer than the usual two hours to pack all the gear on the roof and in the bus. We were ready to move by 11.00. When the time came to pay our bill, a few tears were shed at having to leave Papa Constantin, but sad as it was, we had a tight schedule to keep to and had soon to be on our way.

The weather seemed to be reflecting the mood of the occupants as it was overcast and drizzling, and when we pulled into a filling station another downpour hit us. The lady behind the desk shrugged her shoulders and muttered, 'You see, it is not only in England that it rains.' Despite the rain, we had a very pleasant run into Athens. Our first job was to find somewhere to park Jessica as a few of our party wanted to check the Poste Restante. I finished up double parking and hoping the Greek policemen would turn a blind eye to the mad English.

From there we set out in search of the temple of Hephaistos. The day before, Frank and Hilary had found out where it was, so after one or two wrong turns we eventually reached the temple to the god after whom the boys' school is named.

It is difficult to describe the feelings of the party when we had our first glimpse of the temple. Many months of planning and hard work seemed to make sense all of a sudden. Despite the rain, the majority of us stood and stared at this monument. I felt that perhaps the gods had laid on some rain especially for their English visitors.

After much backslapping and laughter, the party set off to have a closer look at this relic of ancient Greece. The structure itself is in very good condition with much of the roof still intact. This building overlooks the ancient 'agora' which in turn is at the foot of the Acropolis. Much scholarly discussion began among us as to why the temple was not part of the Parthenon. Someone suggested that this might have been because Hephaistos had a crippled foot and therefore couldn't have climbed the many steps to the top.

After a quick look round the temple, we boarded the bus again to make the short trip to the foot of the Acropolis. Nick and Leon were none too sure that we would be able to get the wheelchairs to the very top, but they had reckoned without the pig-headedness of the students who were their guides. To get them to the top took us the best part of half an hour as we had to carry the wheelchairs most of the way. We would have given up had it not been for the boys. To come all

Temple of Hephaistos



Bus occupants on the temple steps



The Acropolis as seen from the Temple of Hephaistos

Admiring the view from the Acropolis





Leon surveying Athens from the Parthenon

Nick doing the same





The seven virgins

Four more?



the way to Athens and to miss the view from the top of the Acropolis would have been unthinkable so we pressed on, ignoring the rain and the very slippery surface.

Like so many other places we had seen on our journey, I felt that I had seen it before on television and in books. However, what the books can never convey is the feeling one has of standing where so many legendary figures have stood before. The view from the Parthenon is unlike any other I have seen. Athens stretches as far as the eye can see in all directions. One of our more knowledgeable companions informed us that Athens covers more land than any other city in the world. I can well believe this.

A warship in the outer harbour began to fire a salute and we told ourselves that this was in honour of our visit to Athens. But by now it was about 3.30 and as we had not eaten since breakfast, we decided to bid farewell to the Acropolis and find somewhere to eat. This proved a difficult task at 4.00 in the afternoon as the majority of the restaurants were still closed. We eventually found a roadside café about ten miles outside Athens and before long were all eating heartily, as we had decided to drive through the night to Thessalonika.

We finally set off at about 6.00, having first said goodbye to our hitchhikers.

Friday 2 September

The drive through the night was uneventful, although we drivers had to be alert for gypsy carts. These horse-drawn carts carry no lights and the only hint of their existence is a feeble glow from a totally inadequate reflector. More than once I cursed the drivers of these carts.

As we approached the outskirts of Thessalonika, dawn had begun to lift the curtain of night, but as it was not yet 5.00, we decided to park the bus by the roadside and wait for the morning. John T., who had been keeping me awake over the last sixty miles or so, and I climbed on to the roof of the bus, and we were soon sound asleep.

We were woken up at nine o'clock by the others in the bus, who had decided we should make a move into Thessalonika and find a camp site. Alas, we could not move an inch. Leon's machine had been using the batteries all night with the result that there wasn't enough power left to turn the starter motor. Merwan came to our rescue yet again. By connecting all the batteries together he managed to find enough power to start the engine, and by 9.30 we were in Thessalonika.

Malc R. and John T. had already decided on the camp site and for a change we reached it without getting lost. Camping Neon turned out to be an expensive site for the rather meagre facilities it had to offer. The charge of 12.50 drs p/p seemed rather excessive for toilets that had to be flushed with a bucket, open air washing facilities and a camp shop that seemed to sell nothing more than cigarettes and few postage stamps. The saving grace was its cleanliness.

The first job was to recharge our batteries. The site manager informed us that the owner of a nearby house owned a garage in town, so Chris, John P. and I set off to find this house. We found it without difficulty but from that point on, we had nothing but difficulty. A young woman answered the door and she was immediately joined by an older woman. Chris and I tried French and German but we were unable to make any contact at all. The women could only speak Greek

and since our Greek was limited to 'drachmas' and 'filter cigarettes' we had to leave without achieving our aim.

Back at the site, we told the manager what had happened. He immediately scribbled a note for us and we set off again. The same two women appeared, and John handed over the note. A smile from them told us that if nothing else, we were in the right place. The younger then began to make signs, pointing to her wrist and holding up her fingers. She was telling us to come back at 2.00 to see the man of the house.

Back at the site, the roof rack was being unloaded and the tents were half erected. John P. had started this half-erected tent idea. Instead of pegging down both sides of the tent, only one side was pegged to the ground while the other was strung out on two more tent poles. These were held upright by improvised guys. The result was not unlike a nomad's tent. The advantages of a tent erected in this fashion were that there was much more room as well as a cool draught when sheltering from the boiling midday sun.

Once the tents were up some of the more energetic members of the group decided to spend the day in Thessalonika, so by lunchtime our numbers were down to twelve. As the party was much smaller than usual I decided to cook lunch – and as soon as it was over John and I set off again in the hope that the English-speaking man of the house had returned.

He had: and very quickly we established that he would be able to recharge the batteries, so while we walked back to the site he jumped into his car and followed. He eventually decided that the best thing to do was to drive the bus into town so that he could supervise the operation. Frank volunteered to drive the bus. Some decided to go into Thessalonika on the bus so by the time it left only a few of us were still at the site.

We spent the afternoon lazing in the sun, although Andy and I talked Lesley into cutting our hair. This proved too much for the local residents, and soon a group of women and children had collected outside the fence to watch Lesley, dressed in a very brief bikini, cut the hair of two equally scantily clad males. To add to this somewhat bizarre scene, the barber's chair was the Elsan! What's that about mad dogs and Englishmen?

For once we were not the only bus on the site. A bus load of Germans had camped nearby, although their bus was a shiny new Mercedes. At meal times, their party leader would summon his flock by blowing the multi-tone bus horn. At this signal his party would appear carrying their plates in front of them. When the time came for their evening meal, we decided to answer the call of their horn and see what their reaction would be. As soon as it sounded, we all stood up, held our plates in front of us and grinned pathetically. They grinned back and to our amazement one of the younger men came over and offered us some of their food. For once we were rather embarrassed, but his insistence relieved it somewhat. The food he offered was some kind of salad where everything had been mixed together in one huge bowl, meats, lettuce, onion, oil and spices. The visual effect was rather unusual but it tasted wonderful.

By the time we had eaten our fill and cleared away our cutlery we were all ready for bed. All-night travelling is an extremely tiring pastime and we all felt an early night would be beneficial.

Saturday 3 September

Nobody seemed in a great hurry to make a move as it was only a short trip to Skopje. Before we left, those of us who had stayed in camp the night before were told of Nick's exploits. Apparently, the site's gates were locked at 11 p.m. and when the group returned from town they had to climb over the fence. This task was made doubly difficult as Nick and his wheelchair had to be lifted over the fence. They almost dropped him at one stage of the proceeding!

After a quick breakfast we began to load the roof rack. While we were doing this, somebody yelled out, 'Puncture!' Everybody stopped working and we all had visions of being stuck at the site for the rest of the morning. John T. had indeed discovered a puncture, but the victim was not the bus but Nick's wheelchair!

By 11.00 we were ready to go, and as soon as the bill had been paid we waved goodbye to our German friends and headed for the town. Once again the morning had brought fine weather and most people were in high spirits. The run to the border was uneventful and by 2 o'clock we had cleared the Greek border post. In the no-man's-land between the two checkpoints, a Greek soldier in traditional dress served as a fitting reminder of our stay in Greece. His smile reminded us of the friendships we had made during our short stay; his colourful costume reminded us of the colourful people we had met; and to complete the image the sun was shining brightly to remind us of the wonderful hours of sunbathing we had enjoyed. Most of us photographed this charming fellow and he was doubtless relieved to see the bus-load of English people disappear.



Farewell to Greece

Yugoslavia



Chapter Nine

Yugoslavia Again

Once again we experienced quite a considerable delay at the Yugoslavian border post while the guard decided how much circulation tax we had to pay. Unlike the very friendly fellow at the Italian border, this one was more like the pompous officers who staff the French border posts. While we were changing travellers' cheques he insisted on keeping my passport, papers and sunglasses to make sure I came back. I must confess, I was more than a little relieved to clear that post.

We were treated again to the magnificent Vardar valley with its yellow river. At one stage, the road runs through a rocky promontory. I was driving at this point and suddenly I could not see a thing. I was convinced that the headlights had given up, until John P., who had been caught in the identical situation on the way down, yelled at me to remove my sunglasses. Fortunately there were no other vehicles behind me so my rather panicky braking did not trouble anybody.

All this time, Andy had been riding on the roof of the bus, but when it was his turn to drive, John T. and Lesley took his place. Andy could not have been driving for more than two minutes when a motorcycle overtook the bus and waved at us. The motorcycle slowed down, and Andy overtook him. At this, the driver seemed to throw a fit and immediately overtook us again, but this time he waved more vigorously. It suddenly dawned on Andy that he wanted us to stop, so he dutifully brought the bus to a halt. The irate motorcyclist turned out to be a policeman, and he informed us that riding on the roof was against the law. John T. and Lesley were fined a thousand dinars on the spot (about 6/-). Far from feeling admonished, we treated it as a huge joke and set off again with our law breakers safely inside the bus.

The rest of the journey to Skopje passed without further incident and we reached the camp site at 5.30 p.m. Chris and I went into the town for a meal but we were back at the camp and in bed by nine o'clock.

Sunday 4 September

We were all awake by eight and our breakfast was soon prepared and eaten. While Chris and I had been in town, a student studying history at Oxford had attached himself to our party so once again the bus had an extra passenger. For a change we packed the bus more quickly than usual, and were on the road by 9.45.

This was perhaps the most uneventful day of our whole trip. We stopped once for food at a motel outside Nish and then pressed on towards Belgrade. We reached the camp site at 8.30, and after a meal had an early night.

Time out at Skopje



Monday 5 September

Although we were all up by eight o'clock, we did not hurry as we had only a very short run to the border and we calculated that this could be managed in three or four hours. We decided to go into Belgrade and check the Poste Restante and to spend our remaining dinars, and by 11.30 we were in the city. We parked the bus outside the Parliament building and set off to the post office. The Poste Restante counter had its usual throng of foreigners and the men in our group joined the back of the unruly mob. I say mob as there was absolutely no resemblance to the orderly queue which one would have found in England. The queue does indeed seem to be peculiar to the English way of thinking. But this method of queueing does have its advantages when one is a big lad, and in no time we were at the front of the mob despite the protests of a group of Germans and the murderous glances thrown at us by a group of Persians.

After this scrumming practice, we split up and went in search of souvenirs. When we had passed through Belgrade a fortnight or so before, we had noticed the flags and bunting that had adorned every street corner. Now there seemed to be policemen everywhere. I overheard a German asking one of the policemen about the flags and bunting, and the policeman replied that King Olav of Norway and Tito were to pass through the city at 2.30 p.m. I was astonished. In all my years I had never seen a royal procession of any description, yet I come to Belgrade just in time for one – or rather I hoped to see it, as we had already decided to move on at 1.00. Chris and I hurried back to the bus with our news to see what the reaction of the party would be. Some wanted to stay, but the majority wanted to go, so after much arguing and bad feeling between the two factions, we decided to move. To the delight of the minority, the bus had not moved more than a few yards when a policeman stopped us and told us that no traffic was allowed to move until the procession had passed by.

While all this had been going on, a forklift truck was carrying away any cars that had been left on the route of the procession. Soldiers in scruffy bright blue uniforms lined the route and everybody was waiting for the procession to appear, although there was still another quarter of an hour until the appointed hour of 2.30. Most of us clambered on to the roof of the bus, while Chris and Wendy decided to have a quick pennyworth. While they were away the motorcade swept past with Olav and Tito waving benignly at the groups of school children strategically placed and waving paper Norwegian flags. Immediately in front of the bus were some ornamental fountains. They were supposed to have been switched on for the procession but the man on the switch was caught off guard by the early appearance of the motorcade, and all the fountains could muster was a half-hearted spit when the distinguished guests had already passed by. As we were climbing down from the roof, Wendy and Chris returned and were most annoyed that the procession had not waited for them. Before we moved off, someone noticed that we had been the victim of yet another crime in Belgrade. This time some aspiring criminal had stolen our amber headlamp discs. We came to the conclusion that we did not like Belgrade, however much we liked the rest of Yugoslavia.

Waiting for the procession with President Tito and King Olaf of Norway



Although the traffic was really heavy, we were soon on the road to Subotica. Our first job was to try and do something about the headlights. We were not too worried that we no longer had amber lights but the discs caused the beam to dip to the right, and without them the lights would dip into oncoming traffic instead of away from it. Once again Merwan came to the rescue. We were unable to buy new discs or different bulbs so after experimenting he discovered that by turning the bulbs through 90°, they could be made to dip in the other direction.

The run to Subotica was uneventful and after the usual mistakes we found the camp site about 7.30 p.m. From the description in the guide book we expected a very primitive site with little or no facilities. We were pleasantly surprised to find that there was running water as well as good toilet and reasonable washing facilities, and for 200 dinars per person, we were more than satisfied.

John P. and I climbed on to the roof to throw down the items we needed for one night's stay. While we were up there a really strong wind sprang up. Lightning lit up our wooded site and in a very few minutes a really heavy downpour threatened to flood the whole area. We hastily got our tents up and threw our belongings inside in an attempt to keep them dry. After ten minutes of this monsoon-like storm, the wind died down as suddenly as it had arisen and the rain stopped. However, by that time the damage had been done. We were very wet and didn't feel like eating supper sitting in our damp tents. The camp warden came to our rescue by opening up a building which is normally only open during the day. Inside were electric cookers, sinks, taps with hot and cold running water, as well as ironing facilities. There were also tables and chairs. The sight of this warm, dry building cheered us up no end and the girls set about making a bumper feast of beef curry and Surprise peas and beans followed by prunes and steaming hot coffee. This building also supplied the answer to where we could park Leon for the night. There were several electric points in the building supplying 240 volts AC. This meant we could leave Leon in the building without having to worry about the batteries lasting the night.

Despite our very damp exteriors, our insides were full of good warm food and for once everybody was in a good mood. We did the washing up with the minimum of fuss and at 10 o'clock most of us went to bed.

Tuesday 6 September

The reason for camping just short of the Hungarian border was that our visas only permitted us 48 hours in the country, and we wanted to make the most of our time behind the Iron Curtain. To make sure that we didn't waste a single minute we were all awake by 7.00 a.m. Unfortunately the storm of the night before had blown the fuse of the water pump so we couldn't wash ourselves or our eating irons. The one advantage of this was that we were away by a quarter past eight, and by nine o'clock we were at the border. After a rather confusing exchange with the Yugoslavians, we moved up to the Hungarian border.

HUNGARY



Chapter Ten

Hungary

For once, the bus was quiet as we waited for the guards to raise the barrier. None of us was quite sure what to expect from the border guards so we sat tight until one of them boarded the bus to ask for our passports and visas. Those who had no visa were asked to go to a little office on the other side of the road. The rest of us meanwhile left the bus and went into a small café across the road and to the exchange office.

While we were sitting outside the café, we saw our first road accident of the trip. Two cars chose to collide at the border post and one of the drivers had to face the ignominy of pushing his car from one country into the next. This rather amusing interlude helped to relax a little of the tension that had built up.

After a wait of about twenty minutes all the paperwork had been completed and we climbed back on the bus. One of the guards raised the second barrier and we were off. Advertisements for forthcoming operatic attractions were strung across the road but they were of no interest to us as the dates for the performances did not coincide with the dates of our short stay.

Very soon we were in Szeged, a fairly large town about ten miles from the border. It was there that we noticed almost immediately that the majority of the buildings were a rather dirty yellow colour with a red line round the bottom. We assumed these were state property. Even the flowers decorating the verges were red and yellow.

While I was admiring the scenery I almost ran down a column of very small children who were crossing the road in the charge of a rather harassed young woman. They seemed to be from a nursery school of some description since their average age seemed to be about three. We were all struck by the colourful clothes they were wearing. One child had a shocking pink cardigan, a colour that we were to see many times while we were in Hungary.

From Szeged (pronounced sheged) to Budapest was a mere hundred miles and in no time at all we were in the outskirts of the city. There we encountered a short delay when the sliding door of the bus decided to fly open causing the rollers and springs to disappear. We managed to find the errant items and set off to find a camp site. Our navigators, John T., Malc R. and Leon had already chosen a site on the other side of the city and we were all prepared for a ride round the streets of the twin cities of Buda and Pest, but while we were still a good two miles from the centre of the city a very prominent camping sign required us to turn right. These signs guided us for the next four miles. I began to wonder if they were a Hungarian idea of a practical joke. In fact it was the best example of signposting that we experienced on the whole trip. The signs had diverted us through the outskirts of the city and we finished up at the site we had originally chosen. By 2.30 p.m. we were safely installed.

‘Camping Romei Parti’ is listed as a second class site in the AA Camping booklet but the booklet was obviously at least two years out of date. This site was second only to Camping Castle on the

Aegean. The only amenity that this site did not offer was a restaurant. Everything else was excellent. Apart from the hot showers, bank, shops, very clean toilets and car wash, amenities that most of the first class sites we used had to offer, there were pleasing extras such as the cooking facilities, games room and last (and perhaps least important) a television. As the finishing touch to an exceptionally good site, the grounds had been landscaped, with fish ponds, trees and well-kept lawns, a very rare commodity in Hungary, according to the manager.

The manager of this site deserves a mention. From the moment we arrived he fussed around us to make sure that we had everything we needed. As with any site our main concern was electricity for Leon's machine, and at first we were dismayed to discover that Hungarian law forbids any voltage above 24 in the open air, which meant that all the sockets in the site were for 24 volts only. The manager immediately bent the law in our favour by switching off the whole electricity supply for the camp lighting while Merwan and Andy set about tapping one of the lights, which ran off 240 volts.

Nick and I decided to have a shower as we felt rather dirty having not been able to wash before leaving the site at Subotica. The manager brought us the key and showed us the showers. While I went back for soap and towels he stayed and talked to Nick. When I returned the conversation had worked its way around to food and the manager asked who was the best cook in our party, and I replied that I was. He thought I was being serious so he immediately invited Nick and myself to share his lunch. After three weeks of makeshift meals we both jumped at the opportunity of a home cooked meal.

On our way to his office he told us that the meal we were to have was a Hungarian speciality called *lesco*. From what we could gather this consisted of tomatoes, onions and sausages. I do remember that it tasted very good. His wife kept us supplied with hunks of coarse bread that tasted of aniseed. This bread came in very useful when he informed us that in Hungary it was not considered bad manners to wipe the plate clean, so as not to waste any of the gravy. To complete this simple but delicious meal we had Turkish coffee and a cigarette.

We then sat and talked for half an hour or so. He told us that he had never been to England and that he had learnt his English by reading. I found this very difficult to believe as he had such a good command of the language. Occasionally his grammar was at fault but his knowledge of colloquialisms made up for any lack in the direction. He used metaphors more easily than either Nick or I did. He asked us where we were from, and at the mention of Reading, he said that all he knew about Reading was that Oscar Wilde had written about Reading Gaol, living proof of his wide reading in English. He confessed that he found some difficulty with Shakespeare but I assured him that several English students had the same complaint.

The conversation then turned to Hungary past and present. I started by asking if we would be able to make ourselves understood if we spoke German. He told us that the older generation would understand us but that the younger generation probably would not. With a touch of bitterness in his voice, he said, 'All they learn in schools nowadays is Russian.' Another comment, about the one-time existence of a Hungarian Navy, led us to believe that here was a man not altogether sure that communism had improved Hungary. This above all convinced us both that he was genuine in his attempts to help us. If not he was a very clever actor who went to great lengths to deceive us in order to give a favourable impression of Hungary. I don't think so.

After this very welcome break from the routine tasks Nick and I took our shower. We were both absolutely filthy and when we had finished neither of us had much soap left. When we eventually returned to the tents, the rest of the party were cleaning up after a celebration goulash which looked less than appetising now that the fat was starting to congeal. Most of the party started to get ready to go into the city for the evening. Unfortunately both Chris and I felt unwell so neither of us was able to go. I was rather annoyed about this. We had travelled the best part of four thousand miles to get to Hungary and when the opportunity came to see the capital city, neither of us felt like doing anything except curling up and sleeping, so at 7.00 we said goodnight to the city.

Wednesday 7 September

This morning was another of our very slow mornings. Nobody seemed very keen to go and buy any food, let alone cook it, and not until ten o'clock did anyone make a definite move. One or two people who had arisen very early had gone into the city for the morning, so it was midday before we were ready to move off. The bill worked out at 10 forints per person (about 3/-) and we thought this was very reasonable for the excellent facilities.

There were two possible routes from Budapest to Vienna, one which followed the River Danube and a more direct route. We decided to take the former as the scenery would more than likely compensate for the extra distance, and we were right to do so. The road rarely left the bank of the river for many miles and we were treated to some truly magnificent views. The river appeared to be in flood and in many places several acres of low-lying fields were under water. People were trying to take photographs from the moving bus but since this was very difficult, we stopped for a few minutes. Andy and I decided it would be good fun to have a swim in the river so without further ado we pulled off our shirts, raced down the bank and dived in.

I have never experienced such cold in all my life! I think the river must have come straight off a glacier, as it was ice cold. We were back on the bank in no time, to find that John T. had arrived with the cine camera so that he could film us swimming in the river. Gluttons for punishment (as well as a secret desire to be film stars) we plunged back into the icy water. Film stars or not we were soon back on the bank again.

After this diversion we set off once again and eventually left the Danube Bend and struck across flat plains for the border with Austria. Apart from the occasional villages all we saw were fields of maize. When the bus stopped for the young ladies of the party, Frank, John T., Andy and I decided that the farmers would not really miss four sweetcorns, and we crawled into the field to help ourselves. Even though there was nobody in sight we were glad to get moving again, and by 4.30 we were at the border.

What a difference. Gone were the advertisements for concerts, the smiling guards, the friendly atmosphere. These were replaced by hard-faced guards, barbed wire and watch towers. A lad of about sixteen waved us down a baton similar to those used by German railway guards. About ten minutes later, having first received a signal from a supervisor, the lad waved us through. This time we were really determined to behave ourselves as none of us wanted to spend too much time in the company of the border guards and the stony-faced Russian officers.



The Danube in Hungary

**The tall Hungarian guard at the
Austro-Hungarian border post**



One of the guards signalled us to pull over to the right and this we did. Andy stopped the bus and we sat tight and waited. A guard climbed aboard, accompanied by an officer. They asked for our passports and exit visas, and then informed us that as the clearance of the bus would take a little time, the café across the road was at our disposal. Not wishing to appear ungrateful, we all trooped across the road into the café, where the rather funny little man behind the counter insisted on calling the girls 'sugar'.

After five minutes or so my curiosity overcame me so I sneaked out without the others seeing me and went back to the bus. To my astonishment, the guard started chatting away in an extremely friendly manner. I couldn't understand anything he said and he couldn't understand me, so despite our apparently good communication we weren't getting anywhere. At this point a rather scruffy individual in a boiler suit three sizes too big for him arrived carrying a ladder. The guard then signalled me to go up the ladder and untie the tarpaulin. Not wishing to argue, I did this. The scruffy fellow then came up after me and poked about under the supplies. He was apparently satisfied that nobody was hiding under the canvas and he signalled me to tie it down again.

By now others from the party had returned and also engaged the guard in friendly conversation. He apparently wanted to be shown the cab of the old bus so Chris climbed into the cab and showed him what was what. He helped Chris down from the cab and I called down to him to watch his step and signified that Chris belonged to me. He burst out laughing and immediately brought out his cigarettes and handed them round. By now I had finished retying the tarpaulin and I climbed down. Gone was the tension; in its place a friendly atmosphere. Even so, the battery compartment caught the guard's eye and had to be undone for inspection. When it was time to leave we shook hands with the guard and climbed aboard. As we drove away we waved to the guards and our very tall friend waved back.

AUSTRIA



Chapter Eleven

Austria

The Austrian border post was another mile or so further on. To the right of the road marched the high barbed wire fence while on our left open fields stretched as far as the eye could see. By checking our map we discovered that the barbed wire on our right was not the Hungarian border but that of Czechoslovakia. At this point the three countries met.

We pulled in behind two lorries and a coach at the border post, but as the coach was Russian we decided it would be a long time before the Austrians allowed it through. Andy drove past this line of vehicles and stopped right in front of the office. I am not sure if this angered the guards, but throughout the whole procedure of clearing up the paperwork the guards were extremely rude and arrogant.

We were eventually clear, and in a short while we were in the outskirts of Vienna. The distance from the city to the Hungarian border is negligible but the appearance of the two places indicated two totally different worlds. Instead of the drab red and yellow houses and the general aura of poverty, brightly lit shops and the usual signs of a capitalist society greeted our eyes. Huge department stores displayed every conceivable type of merchandise. Neon signs proclaimed the finest brand of cigarette or the strongest nylons.

Our navigators had chosen a camp site to the west of the city and with the help of a policeman we soon found the right road, and were at the site by 8.30. The narrow road and gate caused a few anxious moments, but we got through all right and began to take over our usual large area of ground.

While the girls set about preparing a meal, Andy and I tapped the camp electricity supply for Leon's machine. Merwan had warned everybody in the bus that since the machine was not earthed in any way we were likely to experience a small electric shock if we touched the bus while we were standing on the ground. Unfortunately Lesley had not heard this warning and she placed one of her bare feet on the lift at the front of the bus, only to collapse in a heap on the ground with a terrifying scream. We hastily switched off the electricity, and while some of the group looked after Lesley, Andy and I lifted Leon's machine out of the bus and onto the concrete path. Meanwhile Lesley recovered from her nasty shock. She wasn't badly hurt but her nervous disposition made it seem much worse.

The electricity was turned on again and I put my hand over the inlet valve of the machine. I wish I had not! It felt as if somebody had hit my arm with a huge sledgehammer. The whole machine was live. The current was switched off again immediately and Andy and I went to find the manager. We told him what had happened, and that the machine had to be earthed in some way. He told us that we could earth it by attaching the earth wire to the inside of the socket. We agreed to do this, and while Andy rewired the plug of the extension lead I set about wiring up the socket. As my job was much easier I finished first, and the manager asked if Andy was ready. I said he wasn't. Alas the man misunderstood me and switched on. At the time Andy had the bare wires

in his hands, and as soon as the current was switched on he described a truly artistic back somersault accompanied by a terrible yell. Believe it or not, we managed to complete the job without further mishap!

The evening meal was ready by now, and we settled down to enjoy our curry. Once the washing up had been done I for one was ready for bed and although the drinkers decided to find a bar I had an early night.

Thursday 8 September

This particular morning showed up one of the main weaknesses of the way we had planned the trip. With nobody in overall command, there was nobody to make sure that people stuck to the decisions which had been made the previous day. When we had arrived at the site, we had decided to get up reasonably early and drive the bus into the city so that we could spend the whole day sightseeing. A few of us were up by 8 o'clock and we began to get breakfast ready. The rest of the group, however, decided to stay in bed, and by 11 o'clock I was fuming. As I saw it we would still be in camp after lunch. Hilary, Frank and Nick were ready to go so together with Chris and I we set off to find a tram to take us to the city.

For the first time I was called upon to use my very rusty German, but despite this we managed to find the 'Strassenbahn' stop and boarded the first tram which came along. The conductor was rather annoyed to see us smoking, but we showed willing and threw our cigarettes out of the window and were friends once more. The tram ride lasted only a quarter of an hour but to get to the city centre we then had to catch a bus. There was a huge queue waiting for the bus and I had visions of the five of us being left stranded on the kerb while everyone swept past us. Instead of this, everybody waited until we had safely installed Nick on the bus before boarding the bus themselves. The rather ancient bus trundled through the busy city streets and eventually set us down outside St Stefan's Cathedral. This is probably one of the most picturesque cathedrals in the whole of Europe, with its yellow and black roof and Baroque styled steeple.

The streets in this part of the city are extremely narrow and are lined with souvenir shops specialising in craftsman-made items rather than the cheap mass-produced items to be found elsewhere. From the small square outside the cathedral, men in coachmen's costumes ply for hire with their open horse-drawn carriages - but the cigarettes dangling from their lips tended to spoil the image.

From there we searched for a café as Frank, Nick and I wanted to sample some Austrian beer. We found a rather pleasant café on the bank of the Danube canal (the Danube itself does not run through the city). Having refreshed ourselves, we set off in search of the river which Strauss immortalised with his waltz. The walk turned out to be much longer than we had envisaged, so Nick, Hilary and Frank turned back while Chris and I soldiered on. We gave up too and caught a tram back to the city centre to buy our remaining presents. By 5 o'clock we were both rather tired so we decided to find the tram back to camp. The camp had given us a map, and with its help we found the right tram and were soon home.

This is a good opportunity to describe the camp site. Camping West I is about three miles from the city centre and about half a mile from the Autobahn-West. It lies in the outer fringe of the

Vienna Woods so it is in a very pleasant situation. Immediately behind the site is a thickly wooded hill which gives a certain amount of protection from the inclement weather while trees on the other side shield it from the road. When we arrived the site was a trifle muddy as a result of a week of heavy rain, but generally speaking there is an abundance of grass at the site. There is no restaurant and the shop is none too well stocked but the toilets and washing facilities are excellent and a hot shower only costs 1 schilling (about 3d).

By 7.30 other people had begun to drift back to the site so Hilary, Frank, Nick, Chris and I set out to find a restaurant. We had been recommended a very good establishment about a five minute walk up the road, and in no time at all we were seated at a table and gulping down some very fine draught beer. Most of us ordered chicken, and when it arrived there was only just room on the table for all the food. After this very fine and remarkably cheap feast we returned to the camp intending to have a singsong.

I had just taken my guitar out of its case when the manager came up me to carrying a huge stick. I thought he was going to complain about noise on the site, but instead he asked me if I would help him for a few minutes. Of course I agreed, and lowering his voice he told me what was happening. Apparently a peeping tom had been annoying the camp for the last three months by peering through the window of the ladies' showers. When he told me this, I remembered that Chris had mentioned a man peering through the window while she was washing earlier in the day. The manager wanted me to help catch the fellow. He sent me round one end of the long building while he went to the other. I peered round the corner of the building, and there in the pool of light spilling from the half open window of the ladies' showers was a young man. He was bending slightly so that he could see right into the room.

He was about 15 yards away from me, and completely absorbed in his peeping, so I dashed out and ran towards him. When I was still about five yards from him he heard me coming and set off running for the woods, but as I had a flying start I caught him and brought him down with a rugby tackle. The manager with his hefty stick caught up, and at the sight of the cudgel the young man stopped struggling. There followed an exchange of words that my limited German did not allow me to understand, but swearing sounds much the same in any language. One snatch I did catch was 'Ich zahle, ich zahle!' ('I'll pay, I'll pay!').

The manager's reply to this was to drag him to his feet and between us we half carried the struggling youth to the office. When we got him there and locked the door we saw that he was a young man about 25 years old. He looked absolutely petrified and I must confess I suddenly felt sorry for him. Granted he had annoyed many women over the last three months but the thought of what would happen to him in the hands of the police upset me a great deal.

The manager telephoned the police, and they arrived within only two or three minutes. He went out to greet them while I stood in the doorway lest our peeping tom should make a dash for it. The green-uniformed policemen then came up to me and started to accuse me of everything under the sun - they thought I was the culprit! A rather embarrassed manager had to explain that I was not the felon. The police swept me aside and started on the young man instead. After taking the young fellow's name and address, one of the policemen abruptly thanked me for what I had done and disappeared.

To celebrate our adventure, the manager broke open a bottle of wine and we settled down to sample the contents. He told me to go and fetch any of my friends who might fancy a nightcap. Only one or two came over, but when the trio, Sue, Maddy and Jill, returned from their day's shopping they joined us and by 2 a.m. we were all happily inebriated, including the local policeman who had dropped in for a quick drink himself. He finished up as drunk as the rest of us and spent the time when he wasn't drinking, dancing with the girls to a never ending stream of Beatles' records.

The party eventually broke up at 2.30 and we stumbled back to the tents. I had already decided to sleep on the roof that night so I had a rather terrifying five minutes climbing up and setting out my sleeping bag. I don't remember much more.

Friday 9 September

I was woken at 6 a.m. by a terrible thunderstorm. The rain was really pouring down, accompanied by lightning and loud thunder. By 7 o'clock the storm had died away and the group began to come to life. All those who had slept in the two man bivvies were soaked to the skin. Was I glad that I had decided to sleep on the roof. Fortunately most of the group saw the funny side of the whole affair and tempers were remarkably good until I accidentally upset Hilary. She had managed to find a few dry clothes and was busily sorting out her bag. She was standing by the open emergency door with the bag just inside the bus. I was still on the roof and was looking for something beneath the tarpaulin. I could not find what I was looking for so I rolled back the tarpaulin still further. What I had not noticed was a huge pool of water that had gathered during the storm, and unfortunately this pool of water splashed all over Hilary, soaking her again, and all the contents of her bag. At first she thought it was funny and we both roared with laughter, but then it dawned on her that she had no more dry clothes, and she became rather annoyed with me. This second storm soon passed, however, and we were friends again.

This soaking meant we could not move off as early as we had planned. We set about hanging up the sleeping bags and tents all over the bus and I simply could not resist the temptation to make a sign proclaiming 'Steptoe and Son'. We really must have been a comical sight.

We spent the morning drying out and by midday we were ready to move. The camp management insisted we sign the distinguished visitors book and it was with a touch of sadness that we bade farewell. As we had made such a late start, we decided we would drive through the night to Frankfurt. We made a brief stop to fill up with oil and diesel and set off for Germany.

After a mid-afternoon meal of bread, butter, cheese and fruit, with entertainment provided by John-call-me-the-sound-of-music-Pickin we headed for the Austro-German border. At 5.30 we reached the border town of Passau. Here the River Inn forms a natural border between the two countries. We arrived at the border post and immediately a small crowd gathered. Somebody sent for the local newspaper reporter and he appeared running down the road. He took many photographs of the bus and of us, and John P. gave him a few details about our trip. He promised to send a few copies to college and with that he disappeared.

We decided against crossing the river into Germany straight away as we wanted to use up our Austrian money. Enquiries revealed that there were several restaurants in the town so we set off



The spire of St Stephen's Cathedral, Vienna

Drying out after the cloud burst at the campsite in the Vienna Woods



to find one. Because there was nobody to say where we were going an argument developed over which of two establishments we should patronise. Half of us finished up in one restaurant while the rest of the group went to a hotel down the road. The food we had in the restaurant was wonderful. For the insignificant sum of five schillings we had wienerschnitzels, chips and a salad and all washed down with excellent beer.

The town of Passau is interesting. To enter or leave the visitor has to find one of the many gates. Our poor old bus just managed to scrape through the gate to the south of the town. The streets are very narrow and in places take it upon themselves to turn through a right angle, making life very difficult for the bus driver. In contrast to the narrow streets the huge square dominates the centre of the town. At one end a fountain plays to a silent audience of neon-lit restaurants. The other three sides of the square are made up of a continuous terrace of houses broken only by the streets that enter at each corner. These houses are painted in a variety of pastel shades ranging from pink to lime green to orange, an unlikely sounding mixture yet the overall appearance is extremely pleasing. One of the houses appears to have window boxes but on closer inspection the window boxes are painted on the brickwork. In fact the whole square gives the impression of being a stage set.

By 8 o'clock everybody had eaten their fill and we made our way back to the bus. The group eating in the hotel arrived a few minutes later and once again we set off for the border post. By 8.30 the necessary paperwork had been completed and we crossed the River Inn for the German border post.

GERMANY



Chapter Twelve

Germany

The German border guards seemed more interested in keeping warm than checking the bus and as soon as the necessary monies had been paid we pressed on for Frankfurt. At Passau the River Inn flows into the Danube so from there to Regensburg the road followed the Danube valley. The very cold night air caused a mist to form in the bottom of the valley and for most of the journey we were restricted to a speed of about twenty miles an hour.

On our arrival in Regensburg we stopped so that the girls could pay their visits and while they were away we made up Leon's bed in the gangway so that he could sleep while we were travelling. The rest of the party wrapped themselves in blankets and settled down for the long journey to Frankfurt.

Saturday 10 September

Most of us managed at least two hours sleep before we arrived safely in the outskirts of Frankfurt at 7.30. we experienced a little difficulty in finding a camp site as they all seemed to be on the western side of the town, but we eventually found one at 8.15. The tents were soon up and breakfast on the way, and the men set off to find the showers so that the boys could have a long overdue wash. We were rather annoyed to find that a hot shower cost 50 pfennigs but the luxury of standing beneath hot running water soon soothed our tempers.

After a really good breakfast of fried eggs, bread, marmalade and marmite we spent the morning recuperating after the long overnight haul. Andy and I unsheathed our guitars and had a good sing song, much to the delight of some little French children. As a special request we sang *Puff the Magic Dragon* for them. A New Zealand sheep farmer dropped in to pay his compliments and quite soon the men were involved in an animated discussion with him about his brand new automatic Mercedes. He told us that ever since he had been old enough to own a car he had wanted a Mercedes and when he had saved enough money to buy one in New Zealand, he decided to come to Germany and buy it tax free, having a holiday on the £1,500 he saved by doing so.

About midday several of us decided to go into town to spend the afternoon window shopping. Seven of us eventually made our way to the tram depot and were soon rattling along the roads into the centre of the town past the bomb damaged opera house to a square near the river. As soon as we left the tram, we realised that the shops were all shut except for one little sweet shop. This of course meant that we had to buy a few sweets to keep us going for the afternoon.

Since we could not look inside the shops we went for a walk along the River Main. We found our way to it with the aid of a map the camp site manager had given us although progress was very slow being impeded somewhat by the girls stopping to peer into the windows of every clothes shop. The river was rather uninteresting, with only the occasional oil barge to relieve the monotony. We were wondering what we could do next when a notice board advertising boat

trips caught my eye. Most of them seemed rather expensive but one of them was only 1.10 DM (about two shillings). We decided that even if the trip was a waste of time it would be as cheap a way as any of spending the afternoon.

Six of us bought tickets, while John T. went off on his own to do some sightseeing. We were wondering what sort of boat would turn up for such a cheap ticket, and we were pleasantly surprised when a fairly large and modern river boat approached the bank. 'Der Wikinge' was hardly a luxury cruiser but she was well accommodated, with a dining saloon and a bar as well as several seats on deck. The six of us raced on board to get the best seats and by the time we were settled and had lit a cigarette we were off.

The boat headed up stream and slowly the river side of Frankfurt revealed itself. Far from being a waste of money or time it was very enjoyable; that is, if we ignored the occasional factory and instead admired the fine churches and houses that line the banks. The trip upstream lasted about twenty minutes and the terminus was about 200 yards below a huge lock.

The landing stage led on to a huge expanse of grass which we discovered was called the 'Gerbermuhle'. A rowing club and restaurant took up one corner of this park and as we had had nothing to eat since breakfast we decided to try the restaurant. We did not go in straight away as the girls spotted a wedding party, and just had to have a gossip about the bride's dress.

Finally we found a seat in the open air and ordered drinks and some rather delicious nut gateaux. We had to wait forty minutes for the boat to return so we took our time, and John P. and I even had time for a second bottle of beer. Heading downstream again we had a race with two oil barges, one of which was carrying the captain's Volkswagen on the hatch covers.

By the time the boat reached its destination it was dark, and lights and the sound of music attracted our attention. A fair was in full swing, and although we had very little money between us we had two rides on the dodgem cars. One of the attractions at the fair was a small market offering all manner of pottery and earthenware. John P. and I bought beer mugs for our respective brothers. By now it was about 8.00 so we made our way back to the square and caught the tram out to the camp site.

After a supper of bread and corned beef and a quick drink in the bar, where much to our amusement Jimmy was monopolising the juke box and playing all the Rolling Stones records he could find, Chris and I turned in for the night.

The name of this camp site was Camping Neddernheim, which is the suburb of Frankfurt where it was situated. Apart from its hot showers and good washing facilities, the toilets were clean if not numerous, and the shop had a reasonable supply of food. The bar, although not part of the site, was right next door and seemed to be the meeting place for the local adolescent population. In general we were satisfied with the site, particularly the relatively low cost per person, a mere 1.50 DM.

Sunday 11 September

We decided not to hurry ourselves this Sunday morning as we only had a journey of eighty miles to Bonn. After eggs for breakfast we tidied up, and were on our way by 11 o'clock. For once we cleared the town without any difficulty and were soon speeding along the Autobahn towards Wiesbaden, where we left the motorway and headed for the Rhein valley.

Our first view of the river was from the top of a hill and spread out below us was the sight of Germany's main artery. It seemed to be suffering from high blood pressure as it had taken over several of the low-lying fields that hug the banks of the river. Very soon we were speeding along the right bank. We were all surprised to see just how quickly the river was flowing. Boats making their way down stream seemed to be shooting by while those going up stream were barely moving.

Just below Rudesheim we decided to stop and have a meal rather than buy food and make sandwiches to eat while travelling. We saw several restaurants but we could find nowhere to park, until we found a huge car park, almost empty. All twenty of us trooped into the restaurant and at first the management would not allow us in as the wheelchairs were taking up so much room. We managed to settle the argument by rearranging the tables, and were soon tucking into delicious wienerschnitzels washing down with a glass of the local wine, a very tasty red served in rather exotic glasses.

We took about an hour over this meal and made our way back to the bus in high spirits. There was a short delay while John P. went back to look for his camera, and this gave us the chance to watch the berthing of a large river steamer, a very tricky task in the fast-flowing river. Once John was back we set off again on the last leg of the journey. We were all very excited to see the continual stream of Schlosse and churches, as well as the Lorelei, and the journey went by very quickly. We parked our bus by the river at our camp site at Bad Godesberg, and supper was soon on the table. This meal consisted of the usual curry and as many peas and beans as we wanted, since we had neglected these vegetables for most of the trip and there were still several cartons left.

An English couple who were attempting much the same trip as us were much intrigued by the old bus. They thought that they were daring in doing the trip in an old mobile electricity board showroom, and the sight of our bus gave them more confidence in their rather ancient vehicle!

When we had done the washing up, out came the guitars and we had the usual after-supper sing song. On the other side of the river was the Drachenfels with its ruined castle at the top. For some reason spotlights had been trained on the ruins and fireworks were exploding in the night sky above. While we sat and watched this spectacle, John T. and Leon decided to go out for a drink. One or two other people went with them but those of us who stayed behind sung a few more songs and then retired to bed.

Camping Bad Godesberg could hardly be classed as a good site as there was no bar, shop or hot water for general use. There was no electricity for Leon's machine so we had to use the batteries to provide power. Although the river was only ten yards from the site, we couldn't get access to

the bank as there was a barbed wire fence in the way. In fact we were not very satisfied with the site as the charge of 1.20 DM seemed a lot for the rather poor amenities it had to offer.

The Rhine near the Lorelei

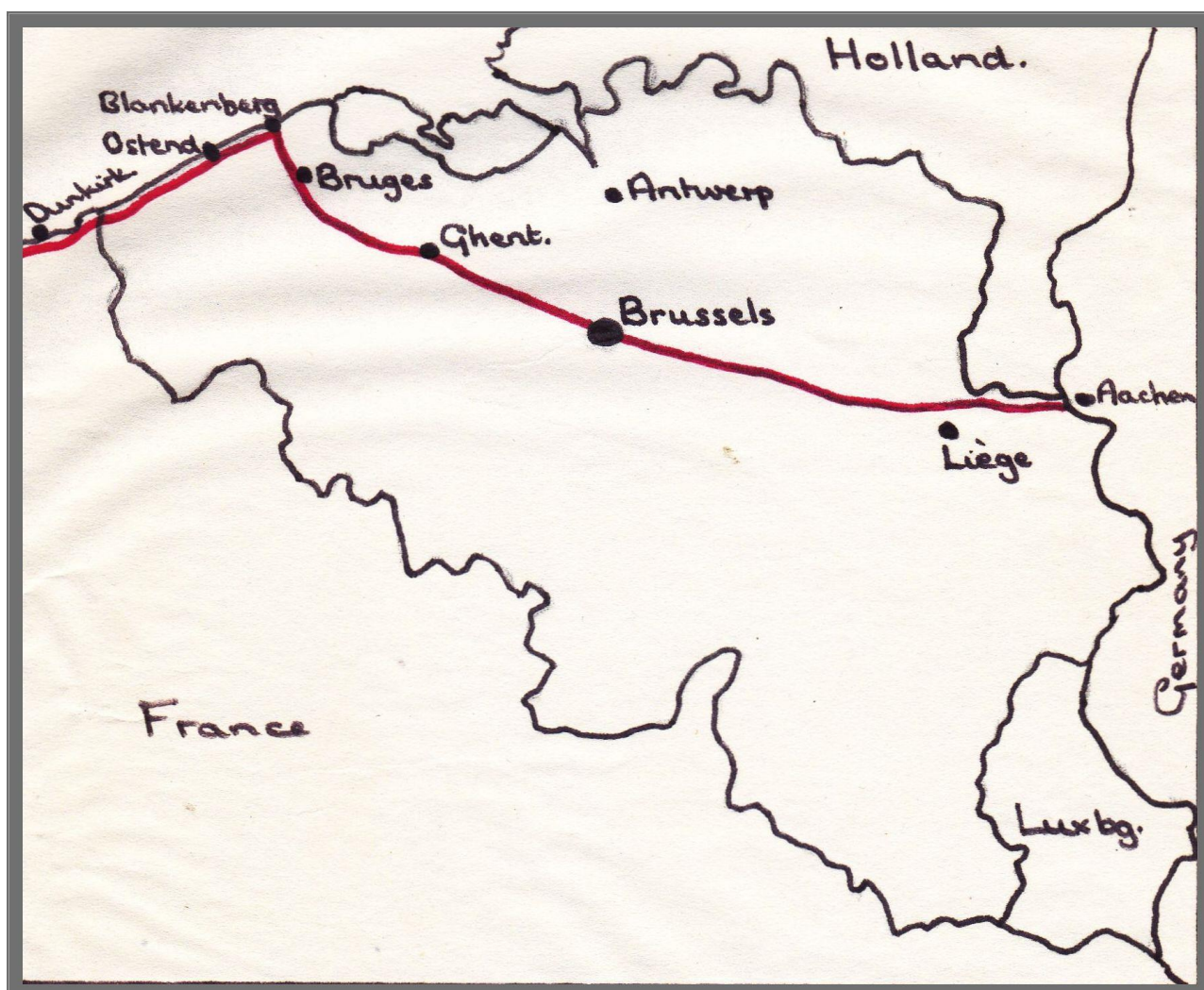


Monday 12 September

Everybody was up bright and early at 6 o'clock as we had a relatively long trip to Bruges. We were packed and ready to go just before 8.00 but to our annoyance we discovered that the batteries were flat again. Merwan enlisted the help of an English motorist and by connecting his battery to one of the bus batteries we managed to get the engine started, and by 8.30 had managed to set off on our way to Bonn.

We did not go into the city but skirted it on the ring road and then struck across country to Aachen. Just beyond Aachen we came to the border post, a strange set up with no apparent frontier. The German and Belgian officials seemed to share the same offices but we eventually found a German guard - who told us to find a Belgian guard to see to our papers.

BELGIUM



Chapter Thirteen

Belgium

The Belgian guard was wearing a wonderful red and blue hat with gold braid. He checked our papers but he seemed uninterested in us and we were not delayed at all. We drove on towards Bruges but our stomachs advised us to stop and have a meal before going much further. We were turned away from one restaurant with the excuse that there were too many of us. We felt this was a poor excuse as there were 30 tables in the restaurant and only three cars in the car park.

However, we soon found a less expensive restaurant, the Nova, in the village of Heers. The manager looked after us extremely well, and we all enjoyed the food, especially the wonderful ice creams which we had for dessert. We took about an hour over our food, and were back on the motorway by about 3.00.

We reached Bruges after a very uninteresting journey, only to find that there were no suitable sites in the town, so we pressed on to Blankenberge where we were told we would find several camp sites. However, we did want to visit Bruges before setting off for Calais the next day – we would have no time to visit Brussels so visiting Bruges would be instead of that.

By the time we reached Blankenberge it was dark, so we set about trying to find a camp site. I managed to frighten the life out of a local motorist by driving the wrong way down a dual carriageway, but we soon forgot about this as we were more concerned to find a site with electricity. It appeared that the only site offering electricity had closed for the season, but with the aid of a charming old man the site was opened specially for us and while Andy and Merwan wired up Leon's machine, the rest of us set about pitching the tents and getting supper ready.

A very strong wind made life a bit difficult for us, and one gust even bent some poles of the large frame tent. We managed to straighten them out, and all the tents were soon ready. The camp manager even opened the bar for us, and we spent the evening drinking and singing songs for the benefit of a few of the local old folk who had come along to keep us company. By eleven o'clock we had drunk our fill, and after noisy farewells to our small but appreciative audience we made our way back to the tents. By now the wind had become really strong and we all had to dress up warmly before going to bed.

Tuesday 13 September

The bill, of 18 Belgian francs per person (about 3/- each), had been settled the night before and although the high wind and frequent squalls delayed our progress we were away by 11.30. Our first stop was Bruges, where we spent the morning sightseeing. Jimmy also left us at this point, as he was going on to Paris that night by train. He insisted he could manage on his own, and after a rather sad farewell we watched him turn the corner.

Chris, Wendy and I stayed behind to read while the others set off to explore the quaint old town of Bruges. In fact we did very little work as we sat and chatted most of the time. I could not have



The campsite by the beach in windy Blankenberge



gone sightseeing even if I had wanted to as the only footwear I had left after the robbery in Belgrade was my moccasins, and these had now acquired rather large holes in the soles and my feet would have been soaked.

By 3 p.m. everyone had returned and we rejoined the motorway bound for Ostend. I quite liked the look of Ostend. The very name seemed to indicate a dirty little sea port, but far from it, this was a clean and attractive town with a fine 'tall ship' dominating one end of the harbour.

From there to the Franco-Belgian border was only a short twenty miles, and for the most part the road hugged the shore. We stopped once for a toilet break. Those of us who needed to go opened the door and walked straight in to set about the task, only to have an old lady come in behind us and start bawling at us. Once we had communicated to her that we couldn't understand her if she spoke so quickly she calmed down and explained that the toilets were closed for lunch! She accepted our hasty apology and refused our money, so we climbed back into the bus rather bemused at the private enterprise toilet.

At the border post two young Englishmen hitched a lift from us as they had no money and they had to get to Dunkirk. They were both very scruffy, and I wasn't too keen on the idea, but we finally agreed that if they went through the border on foot we would pick them up the other side. One of the guards wanted to see the receipt for a road tax which we should have paid, but in the end he decided that we had probably not paid the tax as the bus belonged to a school. Without further ado we moved up to the French barrier.

Chapter Fourteen

France

The French border guards seemed over conscientious and after a slightly heated exchange it was agreed that we were not carrying more than the regulation amount of diesel. After we had cleared the border post we picked up our hitchers, and spent an interesting half hour listening to the tales of their exploits. One of them had set off from England on an old bicycle intending to cycle to Israel and back. For company he carried a rather battered violin. When he reached Israel both his bicycle and violin were stolen and although he recovered his violin he never found his bike, and had to hitch home. The other fellow had hitched to India. He had brought back with him some rather fine souvenirs including a sheepskin coat and a huge hat made of straw. In fact we were rather sorry to leave them when we reached Dunkirk, but they knew of somebody there who had agreed to lend money to the insolvent pair, so we put them down near the harbour and bade them farewell.

From there to Calais is only a very short distance, although a truly wonderful sunset helped relieve the boredom of travelling through the flat and uninteresting countryside. By 7 o'clock we had arrived and having first parked the bus at the Customs shed, we walked into town to look for a café. I was rather amused to see the Café de Liverpool which presumably was given that name for the benefit of English tourists; but it seemed rather a dirty place so we pressed on further into town. There we found a hot dog and a glass of orange, as no one was really hungry. Afterwards we headed back to the bus to try and get a few hours sleep, as there would be no chance to sleep on the short crossing, since the wind was as strong as ever.

We were quite unable to sleep, and talked and sang until midnight instead.

Wednesday 14 September

The boat arrived about half past twelve, and by 1 a.m. we were on board ready for the return trip. There were very few vehicles on board. We had virtually the whole of the centre section of the ship to ourselves. By the time the boys had been unloaded and we had installed ourselves in the bar, the ship was ready to sail.

At 1.30 precisely she pulled away from the quayside and we were on our way home. A few of us braved the cold wind and stood on deck beneath the bridge. The ship headed for the harbour mouth and we were soon in the open sea with Cap Gris Nez sliding by on our left. We were all waiting for the moment the ship would start tossing about but unaccountably the sea was quite flat and there was hardly any roll.

Chris and I went back to the bar to buy cigarettes and to take advantage of the cheap drinks. I had just enough money to buy 200 cigarettes, some cigars and two drinks, if we were to have a meal as well on the crossing. We headed to the restaurant and ordered a large meal as we were unlikely to have another good meal before supper at college. Dinner was still being served so we

made pigs of ourselves with chicken and chips. The waiter was very liberal with the food and served us a second plate of chips and as many rolls and butter as we could manage.

When we had finished we made our way back to the bar, where an Italian lady started to talk to me. She asked about our trip, and I felt like earning some pity so I told her that my clothes had all been stolen in Belgrade. She seemed quite upset to hear this, and disappeared, returning a few moments later carrying something in her hands. She came up to me and offered me two shells, the largest and the smallest she had found during her holiday. She called these her treasures and said that since my treasures had been stolen I could have hers. I was very touched by this gesture and thanked her very much.

This cheered me no end, and to celebrate I decided to spend two shillings on the one-armed bandit. As I stood looking at the machine two youths informed me that the machine was not paying out very often but they would furnish me with as many sixpences as I needed. I offered them my two shilling piece and took four sixpences from them. The first, second and third coins were swallowed by the machine with no sign of a payout, and the youths began to lose interest in what I was doing. My fourth sixpence, however, caused them to spin round very quickly - I had won the jackpot! For only the second time in my life I heard the very satisfying rattle of sixpenny pieces as they overflowed from the machine. There were no fewer than 172 of them, a total sum of £4. 6s. I scooped them up and set off to find the bank, where luckily the cashier was short of sixpences and was glad to change them into pound notes and two shilling pieces.

Even while I was gloating over my good fortune, Chris had chosen with perfume she wanted. To celebrate I bought another box of cigars and handed them round. The rest of the group had just about convinced me that it was my duty to buy everybody a drink when the intercom announced that we were entering Dover Harbour and would we please go below to our vehicles. In no time at all, the bow was being raised to reveal the white cliffs of Dover.

Chapter Fifteen

Home Again

I think it would be unfair to try and assess our feelings at seeing England again. I am sure tiredness meant that the thought of bed was uppermost in our minds. We prepared ourselves for a thorough grilling by the Customs officers as we just could not see how anybody could miss the opportunity of searching a bus for contraband. Perhaps they realised that we had hardly enough money to get home let alone spare money to buy goods worth smuggling as, to our surprise, the Customs officers were not interested in us. After a very quick look at our passports and an even quicker glance at the tired and bedraggled party of students just about standing in front of them, they waved us through without bothering to look in the bus.

We muttered our thanks and stumbled back into the bus for the very last leg of the trip. We hoped and prayed that Jessica would not let us down at this stage. We stopped at a service station for some engine oil and a few gallons of diesel before Andy drove the bus into the sleeping town of Dover. Jessica just managed Folkestone hill and from there on she seemed to develop a homing instinct. When I took over I had to drive along the M2. At one point there was quite a long downhill stretch and I had to fight to keep her on the road. In no time at all were in the outskirts of London, where by now the city had begun to stir.

The first buses were already on the road and we wondered how many of the new London buses would be able to attempt the journey that Jessica had completed when they were almost twenty years old. Frank took over at Victoria when we stopped in order to drop Rosemary. We were soon through London and heading down the M4 towards Maidenhead. John P. took over just before Slough and by 8 o'clock we were in Reading.

Once we were on the Shinfield Road we knew that we were really home, and by 8.15 we were climbing the hill up to the school. John P. was blowing both horns and we were all leaning out of the windows and yelling at the tops of our voices. John drove the bus straight through the gates and we were a little surprised to see that nobody had heard our noisy arrival. Until we got to the end of the drive, where a reception committee was waiting for us!

The local BBC news unit had arrived to film our arrival and Miss Woolley, the school Principal, was there with Nick's mother. We had caught the film unit unawares and they asked us to reverse back down the drive so that they could film our triumphal return. This we did, and they filmed us getting out of the bus and unloading the boys.

Miss Woolley told us that breakfast was ready for us in the dining room so we left Jessica to cool off while we tucked into egg sandwiches and gallons of hot tea. This revived us, and we were happy to answer the many questions which were fired at us. Nick's mother handed round copies of the press write-ups we had received as well as the promised copies of the *Huntley & Palmers Herald*.

Home at last - the end of the road



After breakfast we set about unloading the bus, while the television camera and interviewer focussed on Nick, Leon and Merwan. The three of them were a bit annoyed that we were not to be interviewed ourselves, but as we tried to explain to them, hale and hearty students are not news no matter what part we played in the trip.

By 1.30 we had cleaned and tidied the bus and had placed our own luggage back on board ready for the short trip back to college. We waved goodbye to everyone and climbed aboard Jessica for the last time. We bade farewell to the bus that had been our home for the past month, and I felt very sad at having to say goodbye to the old girl. The four drivers of the bus knew more about her than the rest of the party as we had been directly concerned with her every inch of the five thousand miles. We had nursed her up mountains, held her back when running down mountains, driven her through blinding heat and through torrential rain. She had come through the lot with the London Transport badge still worn proudly on the top of the radiator grille.

A record of her trip is there for everybody to see in the form of flags and stickers bought at various places along the route - Athens, Corinth, Belgium, Venice - in fact virtually a complete record of where she had been. We did not buy these things to show that we had to these places, rather that Jessica had covered these miles and it was she who deserved the credit.

Chapter Sixteen

Evaluation and Reflections

I feel that this report would be incomplete without an attempt to evaluate the set up and the results of the venture. I do not want to single out any one particular person for praise, or to single out anyone who did not pull their weight. Everybody was important to the trip, and since we achieved our aim of reaching the Temple of Hephaistos in Athens I view the trip as a great success. Without the girls the domestic side of the trip would not have been so organised; without the men the driving and navigating and looking after the boys could not have happened; without the boys the trip would never have happened; without the generous help of very many people connected with Hephaistos School the bus would not have been available; without the knowledge, skill and generosity of Mr Robert Glossop, the proprietor of the Byfleet Garage, Jessica would never have come through her tough ordeal. If any generalisation can be made about the trip, it is that cooperation can turn the impossible into the accomplished.

There were very definitely lessons to be learnt from the trip. The most important lesson I myself learnt is that without a defined leader a group of this nature does not work to its capacity. Before we left we agreed that nobody, except the drivers of course, would have a specific job to do. Rather than have a rota of day by day jobs it was understood that people should volunteer to cook, wash up, look after the boys, and pitch camp. This approach I would say was the greatest mistake of the whole trip.

The reader will have noticed that I have frequently referred to arguments and quibbles. I feel sure these could have been eliminated if at the end of each day a duty list had been drawn up for the next day. On the few occasions when it was decided before reaching the site who was to do what job, the organisation worked very smoothly indeed and there was no argument. However, on most occasions the meals were prepared by the people whose hunger had overcome their lethargy. Unfortunately the same people usually finished up doing the work every day as some people were willing to go hungry rather than prepare food.

The second mistake we made was to take the wrong mix of men and women. Altogether there were ten women and six men. What we had not taken into consideration was that although the girls were perfectly willing to look after the boys' toilet requirements they could not go into the male wash and toilet rooms with them. This meant that as well as driving, the four drivers had to take it in turns to look after the boys, otherwise John T. and Malc R. would have been physical wrecks. As it was they were as exhausted as the drivers were at the end of a long day. This meant that not one of the six men could devote all their energy and time to the all important jobs of driving and navigating.

Although there were ten women, the same five did most of the work. This did annoy me, since cooking and washing up for twenty people is hardly an easy job and should have been shared. For this sort of trip, six girls would have been enough.

The third mistake of the trip was to attempt the distance in such a short time. We covered a total of about 5,000 miles in twenty-one days on the road. This works out at an average of 238 miles a day. In a car or a modern coach this would not be considered excessive but in a bus of Jessica's age that distance meant anything between eight to twelve hours travelling. As a result of these tiring days many of us spent the time trying to catch up on sleep. If ever I am given the opportunity to take part in a trip like this again I would insist that for every day spent travelling, there should be a day for resting. I consider this to be the minimum of resting time.

My fourth point is really an extension of the first, though it concerns not what happened in the camp sites, but what happened outside. Time and again, and notably in Vienna and Belgrade, one group of people wanted to do one thing while the rest wanted to do another. No one was more guilty of this than another. In Belgrade I was one of the prime agitators for the minority, and as such must take the blame for that one. Once again the answer lies in a course of action having been agreed upon at the end of each day ready for the next.

These four points cover the weaknesses in the basic organisation of the whole trip but I do wish to place them in perspective. As far as we could gather nobody had attempted a trip of this nature before and because of this the organisers were really guessing all the time. Nobody knew how the boys would stand up to the continuous travelling; nobody could be certain that the money would last; the bus was always an unknown factor. The most important unknown factor was how relationships would stand the strain.

In other words I am astonished that the trip went as smoothly as it did. I said I did not want to single out any one person for praise: but I do want to thank the four boys from Hephaistos for the incredible amount of effort that they put into the organisation of what was a very tricky venture. None of us believed that we would get to Athens and back again without some disaster, yet the twenty of us plus Jessica came home with a collective record of one overheated radiator and a few cases of tummy bugs.

For we students the most satisfying part of the trip is that we have given a holiday to four people for whom movement is extremely difficult. We have taken them through several European countries and we have seen many of the large and important cities. In fact the list of names – Venice, Vienna, Belgrade, Budapest, Athens, Paris, Milan, Frankfurt – reads much like the index of a travel brochure. I wonder how many people have seen so much of Europe in such a short time and on such a restricted budget.

There are other, more tangible, benefits to the trip, which will be extremely useful for those of us intending to be teachers. We now know the difficulties of catering for a large party under canvas. We know how to feed a group inexpensively, and what items of equipment are necessary for the preparation and serving of food. Every one of us can pitch a tent in the strongest of winds or on the hardest of grounds. In fact we can justly claim to be experienced campers.

But perhaps the most important benefit is that thirteen students now appreciate the difficulties that physically handicapped people experience. We are also convinced that the only difference between them and ourselves is their physical disability. Wherever there was space for a wheelchair the boys wanted to go. Leon was terrified that we were going to drop him when we were carrying him up to the top of the Acropolis but he was equally determined that he should

get to the top. Nick insisted on going aboard the water bus in Venice despite the overcrowded conditions. Merwan simply would not take no for an answer when he wanted to get on to the roof of the bus to photograph the procession in Belgrade. Jimmy never flinched when people laughed at his erratic progress. The lesson that we can learn is that as they have accepted their difficulties and that it is up to us to do likewise and to treat them as perfectly normal people with the same drive and determination as ourselves.

To conclude I must add that although we worked very hard during the trip we all enjoyed ourselves and the long days and occasional sleepless nights were well worth the effort.

Appendix

The following is a list of contributors and their contributions. Without these contributions, the cost of the trip would have been very much higher so I feel that their inclusion in the report is essential. To add thanks to the list is unnecessary as the report of the trip itself is sufficient recognition of the generosity shown by so many people.

Thank you!

Companies who contributed:

Unilever Export Department	4 doz packet curries 2 doz packet spaghettis 6 doz packets Surprise beans 6 doz packets Surprise peas
Shippams of Chichester	6 doz assorted spreads
Huntley & Palmers	Sufficient biscuits for the whole trip
Nabisco Frears	6 large tins of assorted biscuits
Dennys Meat Export	8 doz tins of assorted stews and steaks
Kinghams, Wholesalers	Assorted tinned meats and fish; coffee
Schweppes	1 doz cordial concentrates
Nestles	4 x 2lb tins coffee
Cadburys	48 tins of Marvel 12 tins of drinking chocolate 60 bars of plain and milk chocolate
United Dairies	90 lb (240 pkts) of Miracle dried milk 6 tins butter
Knorr	12 doz assorted pkt soups
Libbys	6 tins luncheon meat
Tate & Lyle	10 lb sugar
Twinings	6 lb tea
Dale-Martins	12 lb chunky marmalade
Bovril	6 lb Marmite
Oxo	6 lb corned beef
Heinz	1 doz tins baked beans
Cooper & Robertson	Assorted medicaments
Cupal Ltd	Assorted medicaments
BDH	Chloramine water purifying tablets
Kodak	Cut price films

Individual contributors:

Peter Sellers - £15
 Lord Marks (of Marks & Spencer) - £5
 Hephaistos School - £100
 BBC - £5
 Mr Tom Pepper - £25
 Miss Doward - £5
 Mr Nicholson - £5
 Miss Woods - £6
 Miss Cary - £25
 5 anonymous donations - £20

Total - £211

Mr Robert Glossop's Byfleet Garage overhauled the bus at a cost price of £145, and the labour costs, estimated at some £50, were not charged for. The same garage also supplied 3 new tyres for £24, which would otherwise have been £60 each.

BOAC donated 21 seats and delivered them free of charge. These seats were complete with trays and seat belts.

The Army supplied 10 two-man bivouacs, 20 tent poles, mallets and pegs. Various private individuals contributed items of equipment. I do not have a list of their names, but we are very grateful that they supplied: frame tent; ground sheets; gas rings; bottles of butane gas; food, vegetables; Elsan; tarpaulins; tools; jerry cans; ropes; tent pegs.

The following people and organisations spent many hours working free of charge for the trip: the AA; the Royal Insurance Company; Margaret Mackay, who obtained the Hungarian visas and paid the £11 for them; Mr Bate; Miss Woolley; Miss Wood; Mrs Johnstone and her friends.

I hope I have not overlooked too many others who gave both direct and indirect assistance, but to them I add my thanks.

In Memoriam

A very sad footnote to this story of determination and success was the sudden and totally unexpected death of Nick on 14 December 1966. Anybody who had the privilege of meeting Nick was struck immediately by his sense of humour and unbounded energy. He had accepted his disability and was determined that he should still live his life to the full. The fact that this holiday ever took place at all is a lasting tribute to him and none of those involved will ever forget him.