

AG
TO

association of
group travel organisers

MAGAZINE

issue 7 | Summer 2020



GTOs reveal their favourite places

In this issue...

- AGTO News..... p3**
- Keeping in Touch During Lockdown p4**
- Another Great Tour Organised p7**
Sue Shapland reports from Kenya
- In Search of p12**
GTO members choose their favourite destinations
- Around the Country with AGTO p23**
Thoughts from Branch Chairs, GTO reports and day trip snippets
- Associate Guest Column..... p39**
Harold Burke from just for groups! on the importance of sausage rolls
- Quirks and Curiosities..... p40**
Our Associate members take a closer look at their products
- Carlie's Theatre Tips p44**
Theatres may be closed, but the show goes on-line
- Test Your Knowledge p46**
How well do you know your destinations and visitor attractions?
- The Benefits of Membership..... p49**
- The Last Word..... p50**

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For administration enquiries, call **01787 221022** or email **agto@agto.co.uk** | **www.agto.co.uk**

We welcome your editorial contributions. Please email them to **editorial@agto.co.uk**

Editor: Stuart Render
Designer: Sarah Edwards

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The tour goes on... line

Welcome to our summer issue of the AGTO Magazine.

At a time when we should all be enjoying the sunshine, taking our groups away on day trips and holidays, we find ourselves in varying degrees of lockdown, wondering when we might start travelling again, and what the 'new normal' is likely to look like.

Travel plans for the foreseeable future are on hold, with a visit to the local supermarket or park the highlight of the week for those of us not needing to isolate completely.

However, many of us are indeed getting out and about, often travelling the world, and all from the comfort of an armchair. A growing number of destinations, visitor attractions and tourism suppliers now give you the opportunity to take a virtual tour online. Many of our Associate members are leading the way with this. It's proving to be not only a really positive experience, but it's also offering you inspiration for trips in 2021 and beyond. You'll see more about this over the page.

Knowing that the lockdown would prevent you from sending in your

usual reports on trips and holidays we asked you for your stories. You didn't disappoint. We also asked you to let us know about your favourite places. Again, you didn't disappoint.

So this issue is a bit different. I hope you find it informative and perhaps even a little entertaining!

On page 20 you'll also find information about our 2021 'AGTO Showcase Weekend and AGM' in January. This time our annual opportunity for GTOs and Associate members to get together to network and socialise is being hosted by Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines on board *Black Watch* as she sails from Liverpool to Southampton on the first leg of her world cruise. It promises to be a rather special event so get in touch with the reservations team to book your place.

For now then, enjoy the summer weather and stay safe.

Wendy

Wendy Hartley-Scarff,
CEO, AGTO

AGTO News

AGTO BOOSTS GTO AND ASSOCIATE MEMBER BENEFITS WITH WEBSITE RELAUNCH

AGTO has unveiled a new website that will improve the level of services offered to GTO and Associate members.

Launched in May, the new site features a complete redesign, improved functionality, and quick access to essential information that will help members keep up to date with what's happening in the world of group travel.

A new Members' Section with increased security provides opportunities for AGTO Associate members, representing destinations, visitor attractions, tour operators, hotels and other suppliers, to provide regular updates on new and refreshed products, special offers for GTOs and details of forthcoming familiarisation trips. There's also a full list of all the benefits available to GTOs and Associates.

Commenting on the relaunch Wendy Hartley-Scarff, AGTO chief executive, says: "After many months of planning I'm delighted that our new website is now up and running. AGTO is the UK's largest independent membership organisation supporting and representing the interests of individuals who organise travel for groups. A key element of this is the important relationship that exists between GTOs and Associates. Giving Associate members the opportunity to post their latest news and to update their details will mean

WEMBLEY'S HAT-TRICK OF NEW GROUP OFFERS

Wembley Stadium in north London is to offer free coach parking as part of a hat-trick of improvements for group visits when the Stadium Tour re-opens later this year.

The improvements also include a new photo opportunity and the chance to visit the newly laid out changing rooms.

The additions form part of a programme of stadium enhancements initially intended for the Euro 2020 Football Tournament, which will now take place in June 2021. Visitors will be able to sit in the seat of their favourite England player



GTOs are just a click away from having the latest information. The next stage of development will allow Associate members to upload product videos including virtual tours."

The new website also contains added security features.

"Being a membership organisation we carry a great deal of confidential information," says Wendy. "The increased levels of security will protect member data and other confidential AGTO information. In light of this we're asking our Associate members to check their website entry to ensure it's accurate and up-to-date."

www.agto.co.uk

or take a look at manager, Gareth Southgate's new office, which he helped to design.

The new photo opportunity allows visitors to remember their visit with 11 digital images taken against different photo backgrounds and themes. Visitors will be able to buy printed copies of the photos as well as a souvenir photobook.

Free coach parking in the recently opened, purpose built coach park, will be available to pre-booked groups. The coach driver receives a complementary ticket for the tour.

For more information or to make a booking, email **wembley.tours@wembleystadium.com** or go to **www.wembleystadium.com/tours**

HOVERTRAVEL OFFERS 20% DISCOUNT

Hovertravel, the passenger hovercraft service that links Southsea with Ryde on the Isle of Wight in 10 minutes, is offering a 20% group discount on 2020 prices for all 2021 bookings pencilled in by 31 July. The company plans to abolish deposits and is reducing the payment period to two weeks before travel. For details, call Patrick Sowerbutts on 01983 717700 or go to **www.hovertravel.com**

Keeping in touch during lockdown

One of the most refreshing and inspiring developments to come out of lockdown has been the way that GTOs and Associates are responding to the current situation. Members across the country are demonstrating remarkable resilience and creativity in keeping communications going with their groups and members.

CITY & VILLAGE TOURS TAKES TOURING TO A NEW LEVEL

It's 8am and you're joining a walking tour. But wait a moment, you're still in bed. Are you dreaming? What's going on? As GTOs Carol Gower and Eileen Booker report, a new initiative introduced by City & Village Tours is giving GTOs the opportunity to explore the world from the comfort of your bed – well, sort of.

Those of you who know Gyll King, managing director of City & Village Tours, will know of her boundless knowledge, immaculate planning, and perfection in delivery. Above all she is a people person and an excellent raconteur.

We guess it was inevitable then that she would want to do something for her GTO friends and their groups during lockdown. But perhaps even we were surprised at what this 'something' might be.

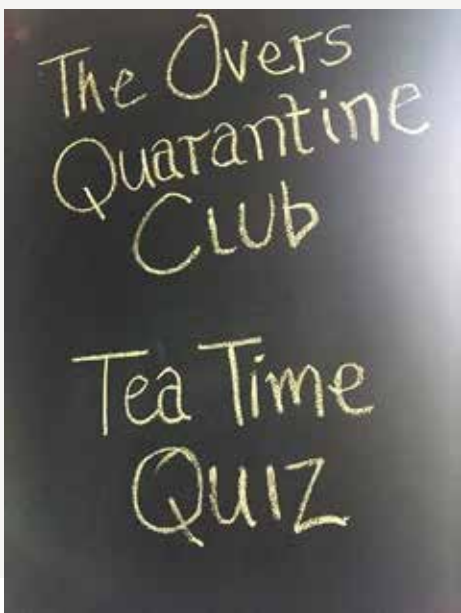
On 21 March, just as lockdown was taking effect, she set up 'The Overs Quarantine Club', a new Facebook Group for us to drop in to. Not so much a coach trip as a couch trip.

Unable to take us out into the world, she brings the world to us, with a daily "Good Morning" greeting at 8am, and an afternoon quiz at 4pm. On top of

that, several times a week there's an evening 'Village Hall Talk' or some other form of entertainment. Reminders of the upcoming programme are posted on the site. Membership of the group is currently approaching 250.

Whilst Gyll often takes the lead at 8am, and today we learnt why our refuse bins are called DUSTbins, we're also enjoying weekly Wednesday morning visits to The Sussex Prairie Garden with owner Pauline, where we're able to keep an eye on the coming-together of the gardens for 2020.

Gyll's Blue Badge guides and entertainers have been extremely supportive of her endeavours. Over these last few weeks we've enjoyed illustrated talks on The Nicholsons at Sissinghurst Castle, then Rye Smugglers with Sue, the 1920s and Tutankhamun with Owen, and been awoken by Captain Mainwaring of Dad's Army. We've walked around hidden London with Martin, through beautiful areas of Cambridge with Jacky, through Abbey Woods with Gyll (a hidden gem!) and Herefordshire delights with Elizabeth. We've watched a watercolour demonstration with artist Paul Apps, visited a vineyard (a pity we couldn't sample at the end of the tour!), and learnt about RAF life with Moya. We've shared pictures of our own gardens and



our localities and had jigsaws created from our own photos and learnt dance steps.

The 8am welcome is just the thing to make you feel uplifted, even buoyant, before getting up. It's like a friend dropping in for a chat. Walking through bluebell woods wearing your PJs is certainly an unusual experience! We urge other GTOs to join us on our virtual trips and share the link with members of your groups.

Heartfelt thanks to Gyll for all the experiences she is sharing with us to fill our emptier-than-usual days. As always, your City and Village Tours are very much appreciated.

To find the group go to Facebook and search for 'The Overs Quarantine Club'.

WHATSAPP? IT'S HELEN CONDUCTING HER GROUP

When your 'group' is a choir, not being able to meet up presents many challenges. But for Helen Sims, musical director of Gloucestershire-based Stuart Singers and a member of Western Branch, an online communications app has brought a solution.

I run a 'special interest' group. It's for people who want to sing together with the primary aim of local friendship, singing a wide range of music and raising money for charity.

“...I say “Ready, Steady, Sing”, and each member clicks on the uploaded track and sings along.



Of course, none of that is possible at the moment. Even with the latest technology of Zoom or Microsoft Teams the time-lag on instantaneous virtual singing together causes problems. However, we've found that WhatsApp (the online text and voice messaging app) is a simple and effective way of singing at the same time, even though no-one else can hear each individual.

In advance of us all getting together I play a rehearsal (piano only) track via my computer and speakers. I conduct the piece as I would in a normal rehearsal, giving some words and bringing in each voice part. In the meantime my husband, Roger, videos me on my phone. I then upload the track to our choir WhatsApp group.

At 7.15pm every Thursday each choir member signs in, computer, phone or tablet at the ready. We message and exchange greetings. Then I say "Ready, Steady, Sing", and each member clicks on the uploaded track and sings along.

There are various comments made after the three minutes of singing: How did you get on? What happens on page 2? I missed the repeat on page 4, etc.

The advantages of the regular timeslot ensures we all keep in touch with each other, we generally raise a glass to each other, maintain the laughter and friendship, and hopefully keep on learning repertoire for when we can get together at a proper rehearsal in the near future.

DISCOVER MORE WITH VIRTUAL VISITING

Since lockdown began many visitor attractions and destinations, both in the UK and across the world, have introduced virtual tours to help you keep in touch from a distance. Here's a look at just a few.



BRITAIN'S 'SISTINE CHAPEL' GOES DIGITAL WITH 360-DEGREE TOUR

The Old Royal Naval College in Greenwich has launched a new 360-degree interactive virtual tour of its famous Painted Hall. Described as 'Britain's Sistine Chapel', and now re-opened following an award-winning architectural and conservation project to clean and protect it, the Painted Hall can be viewed in high resolution images.

Originally a Tudor palace, before being rebuilt as a hospital for seamen, the Old Royal Naval College has a rich history, with buildings designed by Sir

Christopher Wren. Painted in the 18th century by Sir James Thornhill, the Painted Hall features 40,000 square feet of walls and ceilings covered in a decorative scheme that depicts 200 figures, including kings and queens and mythological creatures.

The virtual tour, which offers a customisable version with British Sign Language available, is free to explore and can be accessed via the website at www.ornc.org

HEVER CASTLE

Hever Castle offers a series of six virtual tours that you view online through the Kent attraction's website. Castle supervisor, Dr Owen Emmerson, guides you inside the castle and round some of the rooms, pointing out objects of interest and facts about this fascinating historic house. There are some surprises along the way. In the Drawing Room watch until the end of the video to see what's behind a hidden door. It's not what you'd expect!

www.hevercastle.co.uk/news/inside-hever-castle-virtual-tours

MAKE A TOUR GUIDE JUMP!

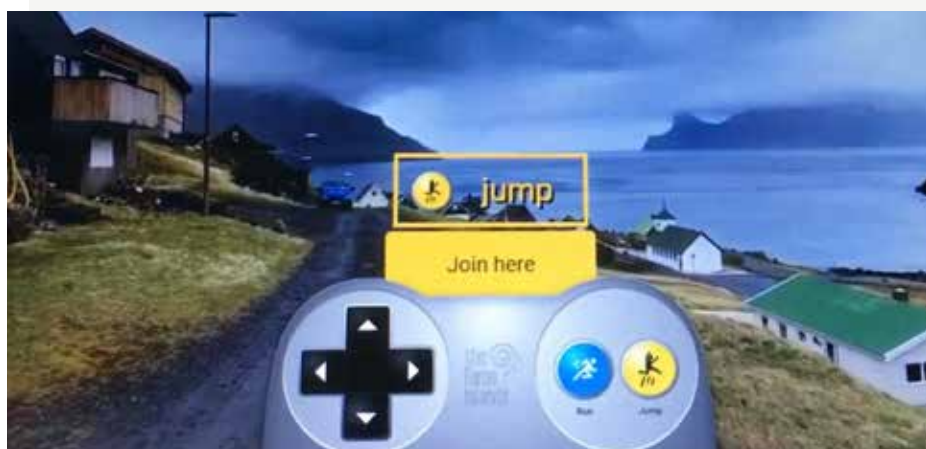
One of the more imaginative online tours comes from the team at Visit Faroe Islands. Wondering how they might recreate a Faroe Islands' experience for those who had to cancel or postpone a visit, or who were thinking of visiting at a later date, the team came up with the idea of allowing people to explore the islands as virtual tourists through the eyes of a local guide? Even better, what if the virtual tourist could control the movements of the guide in real time?

The result is believed to be the first of its kind. Via a mobile, tablet or PC, you can now explore the Faroes' rugged mountains, see close-up its cascading waterfalls and spot the traditional grass-roofed houses by interacting, live, with a local Faroese, who will act as your eyes and body on a virtual tour.

The local is equipped with a live head-mounted video camera, allowing you to not only see views from an on-the-spot perspective, but also to control where and how they explore using an online joystick (see screenshot below) to direct them to turn, walk, run or even jump!

To take part you simply go to the

website and follow the instructions. Demand among those wanting to 'direct' the tour guide is high. But if you aren't lucky enough to be selected you can still watch the tour unfold (and see the guide jump!). It's a wonderful way to really bring the destination to life. To find out more information, go online at www.remote-tourism.com



NATIONAL GARDEN SCHEME ADDS CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW TO VIRTUAL GARDEN VISITS CAMPAIGN

The National Garden Scheme, which raises funds for community nurses through the opening of exceptional gardens across England and Wales, has produced a special series of films that take a virtual look at memorable gardens. The gardens feature the work of five of the most distinguished current designers, each of whom would have had their work on show at this year's cancelled RHS Chelsea Flower Show.

Four of the designers: Tom Stuart-Smith; Bunny Guinness; Julie Toll and Marcus Bennett have amassed 29 Chelsea gold medals between them.

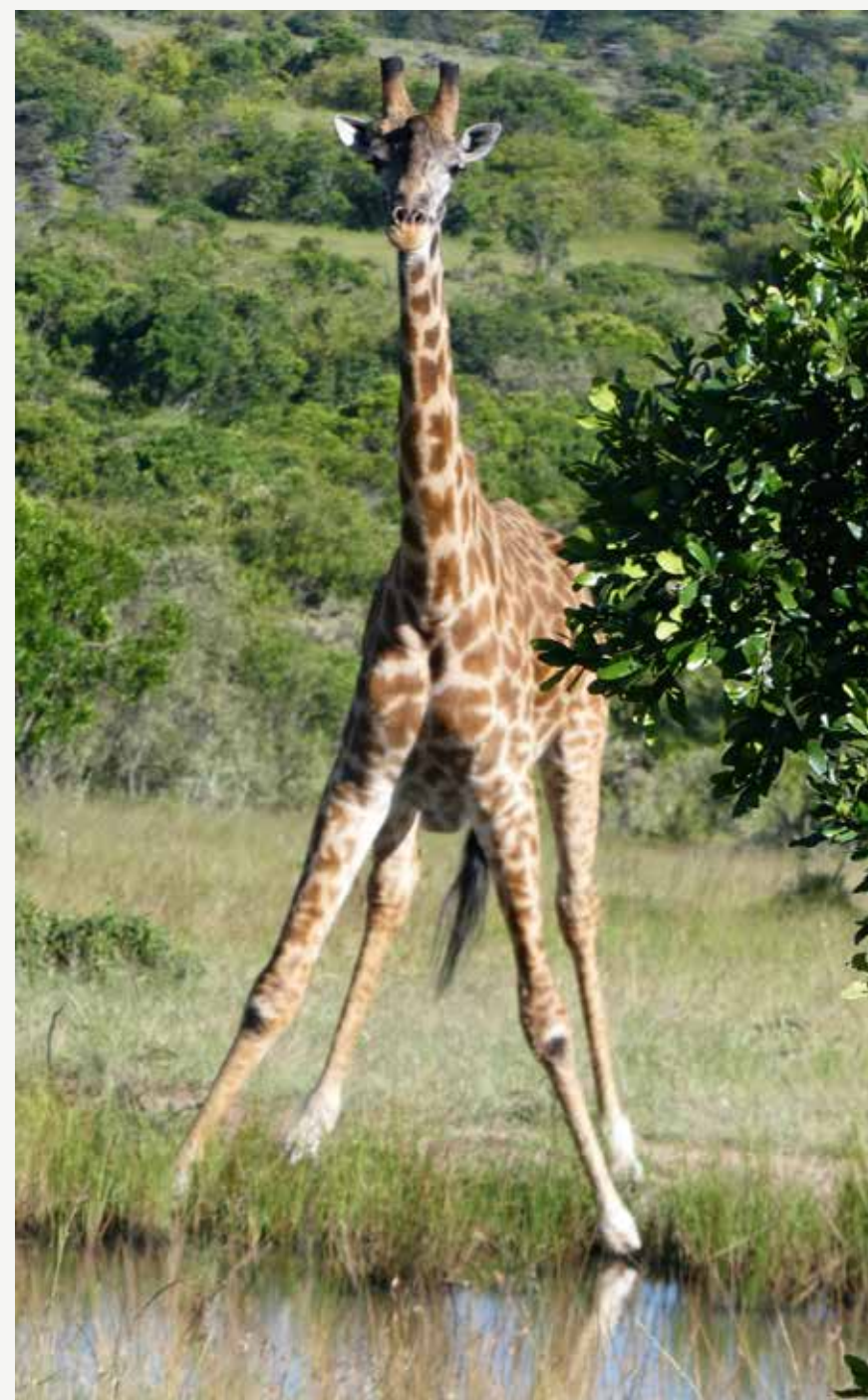
The fifth garden, which would have been one of the stars of this year's show, is the 'Florence Nightingale Garden: a Celebration of Modern Nursing', designed by Robert Myers.

The films are part of the National Garden Scheme's 'Help Support Our Nurses' campaign which has been running while all its gardens are closed. The charity is sharing weekly portfolios of films made in their gardens by owners who would usually be opening as part of the scheme.

To see the films, go to ngs.org.uk/chelsea-flower-show-special. To see the other garden films, go to www.ngs.org.uk

Kenya Game Park Safari

In the first of a new series of features reporting on a successful group tour, Sue Shapland of Exmoor Extroverts recounts a magnificent holiday in Kenya taken in February this year.



Planning for a tour to Kenya began many months ago. I had contacted several travel agents and asked for an itinerary and provisional costs. It is fair to say that it was quite late in the day before I discussed it with group holiday specialist Simply Groups. However I thought they came up with the best offer, and they allowed us to have twice the number of single rooms which I knew would be in demand.

The programme was advertised in my February 2019 newsletter and there was immediately plenty of interest.

We were to have Toyota Land-Cruisers that took six people in each. We quite quickly had passengers for four of them, at which point we decided that would be a sufficiently large group.

There was lots of discussion about the details of the itinerary, some withdrawals and also some new applications. In November 2019 we had a 'get-together' lunch so everyone could meet their fellow travellers. We had the opportunity to discuss what inoculations were required



and what medication we needed to take between us. We also shared tips and looked at the requirement for us to only have one small soft bag each - no suitcases!

I appointed a team leader for each of the Land Cruisers and we decided who would travel in each vehicle. This worked really well throughout the tour and I would do the same again in similar circumstances.

The weather was good for the start of our adventure; our local coach company Ridlers drove us to Heathrow with a stop for lunch on the way. Our overnight flight with Kenya Airways was direct to Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi. We arrived an hour early so we had a short wait for our transport to arrive. Here we met up with our four superb

drivers with their smart nine-seater vehicles, room for the luggage in the back and plenty of room for six passengers in the main body of the vehicles. Later we discovered the roofs lifted to allow us to stand up and see out, so giving everyone an excellent 360-degree view.

Our first destination was at the International Hotel where a fantastic breakfast spread was on offer – just about everything one could think of!

From here we headed north to Samburu Sopa Lodge where we stayed for two nights, deep inside the Samburu Game Reserve. Our first game drive that afternoon was an eye opener. We saw such a wonderful variety of game including the beautiful reticulated giraffes and our first elephants down in a river.

The lodge restaurant overlooks a waterhole where many animals came to drink during the evening, including a huge troop of baboons. In the morning, following a cup of tea, it was an early start whilst it was still dark. Again we were very fortunate, finding a cheetah with three half grown cubs lying in the long grass. Some of us also got a sighting of a solitary leopard. There were many colourful birds including several hornbills. Back to the Lodge for breakfast then time to make the most of the facilities including a beautiful pool. We enjoyed another game drive in the afternoon when we saw a lot more giraffes, elephants and several different types of deer, then supper and bed.

Following an early gourmet breakfast we headed southwards to the Aberdares Country Club, arriving in time for a lavish

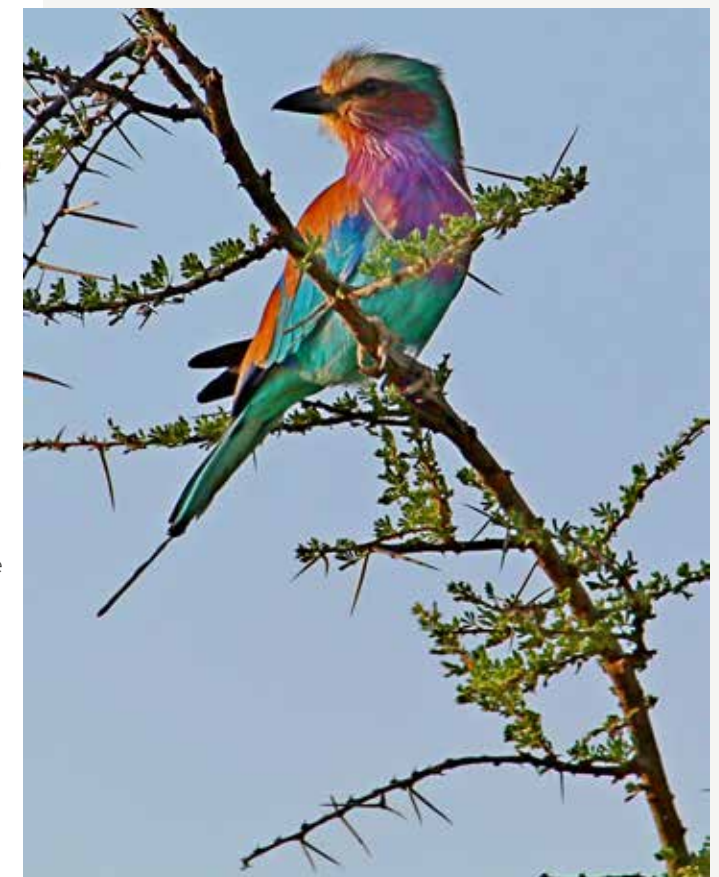
lunch. Here we left our main bags and just took a small rucksack with us. We had an interesting ride in a bus, travelling several miles on an unmade mud track. We travelled deep into the Aberdare Forest to the tree lodge known as 'The Ark', not far from 'Tree Tops', and situated beside a large waterhole with a natural salt-lick in constant use by many animals and a large variety of birds.

Unfortunately a lorry had demolished an electric pole and the generator was reluctant to co-operate so dinner was served by torchlight! Fortunately the generator was later restored as the waterhole is normally floodlit at night so the animals can be viewed. Here we saw a good selection of Cape buffalo, a very rare hairy black pig, waterbuck, a cheetah and a wonderful variety of birds including two crested cranes. After another great breakfast we headed back in the bus to be re-united with our luggage and our Land Cruisers for the next part of the journey.

One of the many highlights of the tour was stopping at the Equator where we had a group photo and watched water rotate left or right depending if it was north or south of the Equator!

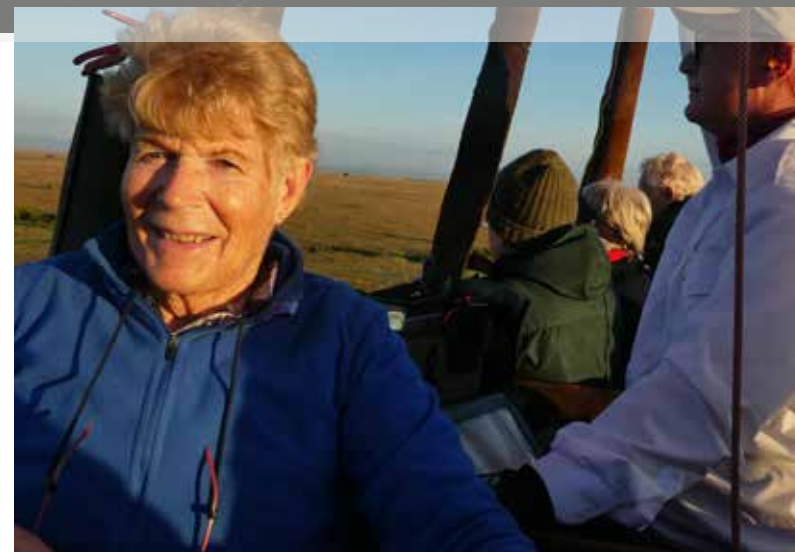
We had a magnificent view of the Great Rift Valley on our way to Lake Nakuru National Park. The Sarova Lion Hill Lodge was the best of the lodges we visited with splendid food and our afternoon drive around the lake exceeded all expectations. Famous for its flamingos, Lake Nakuru had not had them for three years and I had enquired if we could go somewhere else to see them. However, joy of joys they were back there in their thousands!

The bird life around the lake was incredible, lots of white headed eagles, many hundreds of pelicans, various storks and many other wonderful birds. We had excellent views of troops of baboons, herds of zebras and then we saw a family of five white rhinos including two youngsters right up close – how lucky were we?



“

**For over an hour
we flew at heights
up to a thousand
feet over that
incredible
landscape.**



The next morning after another early breakfast we drove through the park again on our way to the Maasai Mara, also known as Masai Mara, and locally simply as The Mara. Together with the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania it forms Africa's most diverse, incredible and most spectacular eco-systems and possibly the world's top safari big game viewing eco-system.

Our drivers elected to take us on the 'scenic route' which gave us a fabulous insight into this beautiful and amazing country, such a rich farming area even if the roads have not yet got tarmac.

There had been an unusual amount of rain before our arrival and this meant two things – firstly the tracks inside the park (they have no metaled roads in the parks) were in a very poor condition and it was a case of slowly making the best way one could in our vehicles – secondly the grass was very much taller than it would normally be at that time of year, as we discovered when we landed after our balloon flight!

More wonderful food when we arrived at the Mara Sopa Lodge, then off on the afternoon game drive. Here we saw Maasai giraffe, lots of elephants, huge herds of wildebeest, hippopotamus and lots of types of deer, to say nothing of a close look at a lioness.

Fifteen of our group had signed up for the Hot Air Balloon Flight. This involved a 4.30am departure and because of the poor tracks about an hour's drive to our destination.

There was a slight glow in the east which got better and better. We had a superb pilot who instructed us all, then we climbed into the basket and were up, up and away! What a thrill. For over an hour we flew at heights up to a thousand feet over that incredible landscape. We were lucky enough to see a lioness with four small cubs amongst numerous other animals.

Our return to earth (and the long grass) was magnificently handled by the crew and then we were treated to another

magnificent spread with a 'Bush Breakfast' in the park. Not to put too fine a point on it but the whole experience was A M A Z I N G!

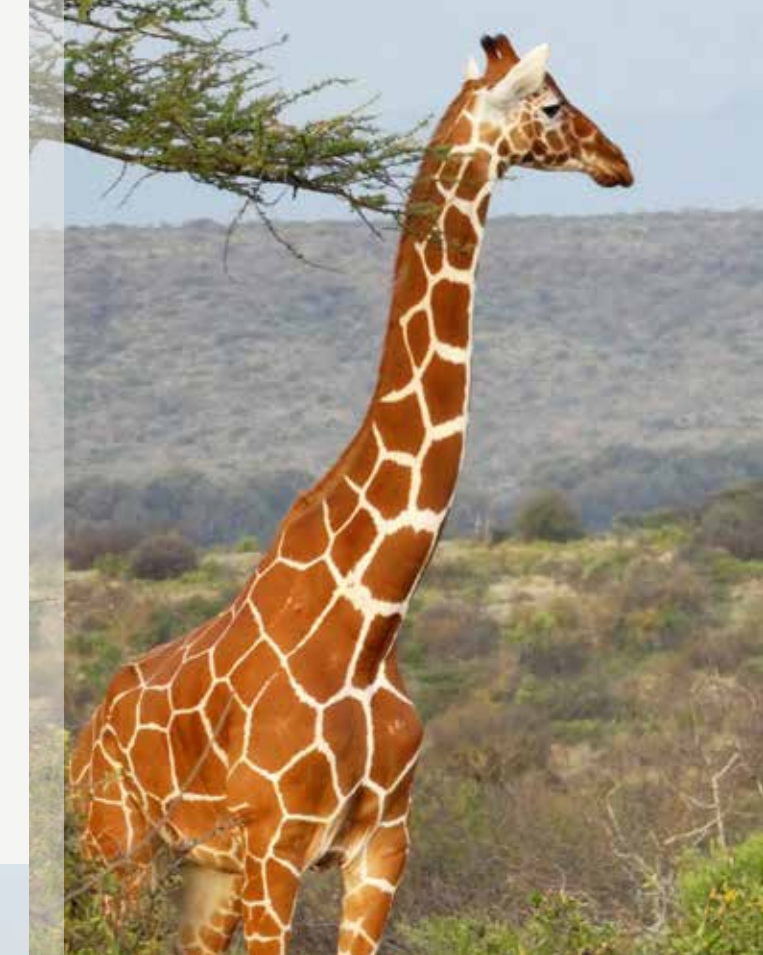
During the afternoon we visited a Maasai Mara Village, where the local people put on some dances for us and we were invited into their mud huts. We discovered they move their whole village about every 10 years otherwise the termites eat the huts!

One last game drive when we saw great herds of animals in their natural surroundings, an 80th birthday to celebrate that evening and then the next day we headed back to Nairobi, stayed our last night at the airport hotel and caught our flight back to London in the morning.

A truly WONDERFUL adventure; the best I've done in 25 years of arranging holidays. How lucky we were to go before the pandemic shut everything down.

Thank you to everyone involved in making the arrangements for us – it was brilliant!

(all photos © Sue Shapland)



In search of GTOs' favourite places

Although some destinations are opening up again, the days of taking large groups on day trips and holidays may still be some way off. To offer you some inspiration for when those days return we asked GTO members to tell us about some of their favourite trips and destinations.

"We'd taken a group to the **Shuttleworth Collection** in Bedfordshire," say *Surian and David Tamsitt* from *Kent Branch*. "The timing of this visit couldn't have been better as there was an air show on the next weekend so some of the planes were having practice flights. A real bonus. Not only were there vintage planes but there was also a collection of vehicles. With a superb guided tour of the **Swiss Garden** there was something there for everyone."

An East Kent Mystery Tour provided the opportunity to visit nearby attractions that hadn't been visited before. "At **Mount Ephraim Gardens** we had delicious sausage baps before heading off for a tour with the truly knowledgeable gardener and owner," says David. "Not only did we hear about the gardens but also family stories. At **Manston Spitfire Museum** our members enjoyed an hour looking at the exhibits an afternoon visit to the **Ramsgate War Tunnels**. The guides were fabulous storytellers bringing everything to life and the staff ensured that people with mobility issues had wheelchairs with suitable wheels for the terrain."

Surian highlights a trip to London to see *Phantom of the Opera*. "This was part of a **City & Village Tours' Jam Buster**

trip," she explains. "The organisation was brilliant and we appreciated the payment system which enabled us to advertise but not purchase tickets until we knew actual numbers. The theatre seats were excellent, so everyone had a good view of this fantastic show. The Jam Buster is such a great idea as after a delicious two-course buffet meal at a nearby hotel we left after the rush hour ensuring that we got home without any delays! Our members couldn't believe the value for money!"

Another AGTO Associate member, David Townsend from **Constantinou Bros Hotels Cyprus**, organised a winter sun holiday at the **Athena Beach Hotel** in Paphos. "There were 41 of us in the group," says David. "Everyone had nothing but praise for the staff, hotel and location. Breakfast and evening meals were of a very high standard and thoroughly enjoyed by everyone. Sunbeds were readily available and were well spaced. Most days people went out to explore the town or to go on a self-organised trip. Buses stopped outside the front of the hotel and there was a wonderful promenade to walk on from the hotel to Pathos Harbour. One of the highlights was a trip up to the mountains to Omodos for a nine-course meze lunch."



The Swiss Garden at Shuttleworth



The Shuttleworth Collection

Last but certainly not least on Surian and David's list was a **12-night British Isles Cruise** with **Cruise and Maritime Voyages** organised by Martin Hay at **GoCruise & Travel**, both companies being AGTO Associate members.

"The cruise was onboard *Columbus*, a spacious and clean ship with exceptional staff," recalls Surian. "They very quickly got to know people's requirements and nothing was too much trouble. There were a couple of ladies in their 90s who had never cruised before and some seasoned cruisers who all found that this was a fabulous experience. The weather allowed us to dock in each of our destinations and the shore excursions were excellent. On occasions members would explore destinations independently. Sharing a road-legal golf buggy with two octogenarians sitting on the back round the Isle of Scilly is a memorable highlight. The Green Bus City Tour of Dublin with live commentary from the driver was one of the funniest bus rides ever! It was like a stand-up comedy show having everyone in hysterics and not wanting to get off! At the end of the cruise members felt invigorated after many laughs and ready to go again!"

For *Hazel Jones*, from *Northern Branch*, it's **Venice** that tops her list of favourite places.



"I could return many times and never be tired of going," she says. "It is such a unique place with so much history. The Doges Palace is amazing with its painted ceilings and treasures. There's a wonderful elaborate theatre where operas and concerts are staged and old churches where concerts are held in the evenings. I enjoy wandering round the narrow streets and alleyways, especially early evening when most of the tourists have left. If you are lucky enough to fly into Venice on a clear day, the aerial view is spectacular."

Hazel says that another place that left a lasting impression is **Iceland**.

"I went in November hoping to see the Northern Lights," she says. "Sadly, they proved to be elusive. Despite that it was a trip full of spectacular sights. Glaciers, volcanos, the majestic geysers, waterfalls everywhere, some of them scalding hot thermal water. We went to a lake to see icebergs that were all shapes and sizes and many of them striped from the layers of snow mixed with volcanic ash. One memorable sight was of two massive twisted steel girders which were all that was left of a very expensive highway which had been destroyed by the

awesome destructive power of a glacier."

Hazel's next choice keeps us firmly across in continental Europe, once again in Italy.

"I love **Puglia**," she says. "It's rural and uncrowded. There are very few tourists with sites varying from the Trulli houses of Alberobella, to the mystical octagonal Castel del Monte and the cave dwellings of Matera. The white hillside town of Ostuni was also a highlight with its steep narrow streets."

Straddling Europe and Asia is the city of **Istanbul**, where east meets west in what is often described as a cacophony of sound and colour.

"Here there are many sights, from the magnificent Hagia Sophia, the Roman Hippodrome and the bewildering market where anything from carpets to spices can be purchased," explains Hazel. "The Topkapi Palace with its secret rooms and courtyards and collection of priceless jewels is not to be missed."

Finally, on what would surely make a wonderful European tour, is **Malta**. "It's a quaint little island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea where there's a church for everyday of the year and the buildings are either half built or half falling down," she says. "It's hot, dry and dusty but they speak English and like British visitors."

Eileen Booker from *Kent Branch* says that her annual visit to the **Brick Lane Music Hall** in London to see a pantomime is one of the most popular trips. "My group love it," she says. "It's a bit naughty but it's all done in the best possible taste." Looking across the water and she highlights **Moulin Snick**, a restaurant in Blendecques, a small village to the south east of St Omer in France. "It's run by an Englishman and a Frenchman and offers wonderful food in the setting of a lovely old water mill."

Describing a visit to the **National Cat Centre** near Haywards Heath in West Sussex as a "wonderful tour and a great lunch" Eileen also highlights the **St Georges Day Lunch** at the **Langham Hotel** in Eastbourne. "It's a beautifully decorated restaurant with lots of flags and hats," she says. "Great food and great entertainment".



For a London tour Eileen highlights 'Legal London', one of the capital's tours organised by **City and Village Tours**. "This is a great tour and a great guide," she says. "In all the years I have used City and Village I've never had any problems, and their guides and itineraries are superb."



Perhaps leaving the best until last, she mentions **Sabrina Boat** in Shrewsbury. "Dilwyn and his team know how to look after groups," she said. "It's a wonderful way to relax and see the sights. However, without doubt the best part of the trip was meeting Martin Wood, Shrewsbury's 7' 2"-tall town crier. He really is someone to look up to!"

To *Southern Branch* and it's the turn of **Jacky Oakley** from *Camberley & District U3A* to reveal her favourite places.

"London has so much to offer, no more so than **Stationer's Hall** and **St Bride's Church** in Fleet Street," she explains. "Stationer's Hall is where all the books published in the UK are 'kept'. We stood in the room where the King James' Bible was spoken aloud to check if it made sense when spoken, and where Shakespeare's friends having gathered his works together, had them approved and printed. St Bride's Church is the one with the wonderful wedding cake steeple. We heard about the ongoing research that the City of London Museum is doing with the bones of victims whose remains were excavated with building works. We looked into the ossuary with its jumble of bones, peering into our future."

Heading south and Jacky's next attraction is **Chichester Cathedral**.

"A knowledgeable guide walked us round the building while we marvelled at the ability of the master masons who constructed it and the foresight of those who funded it," she says. "The clock proved an interesting piece of engineering and was much photographed. After lunch we drove to the **South Downs Planetarium**, located just to the south of the city. We settled back to view the sky, but this time without light pollution, a sight we hadn't seen for a good many years. Watch out for Mars becoming much brighter during the course of 2020."

This year's AGTO Showcase Weekend at Stratford-upon-Avon gave GTOs the opportunity to see a number of local group-friendly attractions, and it's good to see one of them appearing on Jacky's list.

"The visit to the **British Motor Museum** at Gaydon was a most interesting experience, reliving memories of times and cars of my youth. From the early Morris cars through the iconic Mini and on to futuristic models for the very rich,



there was something for everyone - to laugh about with fond memories or to drool over.

Maureen Arrowsmith from *Kent Branch* remembers a really leisurely week-long trip on the **River Seine** in June 2019. "The trip was organised by AGTO Associate member **Riviera Travel** but using our own coach," she says. "We literally travelled from our village to the boat, and were then collected a week later. It was so easy. We enjoyed excellent food, fantastic weather and the sight of many pretty towns and villages, not to forget our day in Paris."



A trip to **Somerset** last Autumn was equally memorable. "Our group of 40 enjoyed fantastic weather, beautiful countryside and excellent company," she says, as was a day trip for 50 of us on a **Thames Sailing Barge** from Ipswich to Harwich, again in glorious weather.



But perhaps Maureen's favourite trip was to **Great Dixter House and Gardens** (see photo above) in East Sussex for a private visit, followed by a tour of the smuggling tunnels in Winchelsea. "This was really memorable, helped by excellent July weather."

From *Central Branch*, *Pauline Johnson* takes us to Germany and **Carl Gruttert's Cuckoo Factory** in Gernrode.

"We were on a tour of the Hartz Mountains but stopped off to see this fascinating attraction," she says. "Whilst we were waiting outside, the half hour struck on the clock on the building and this fluffy chicken came waddling out to the Birdie song. It was followed by a huge Orville-like cuckoo that went absolutely berserk doing a dance after it cuckooed. Everyone fell about laughing. We were so surprised and I think they keep you outside on purpose."



On another tour we were based in **Rambouillet** outside Paris. The tour was based around chateaux and gourmet restaurants, one of which was the Maison Fournaise restaurant in Chatou, the location depicted in Renoir's 1881 masterpiece 'Luncheon of the Boating Party'. At the Chateau Breteuil we were shown around by the Count

who was dressed in his red knitted cardigan. He told us he loved the British Royalty and could name all the princes and princesses, kings and queens who had been his guests. All my ladies fell in love with him with one recently widowed lady saying: "I never wanted anyone but my Roy before but...". He was a charming gentleman and, so I understand, always lead the tours for the English because he loves them so much."

Another day and Pauline recounts the story of a river cruise with AGTO Associate member **CroisiEurope**.

"We were sailing to Bordeaux," she says. "We had a lovely guide, Marie, who took us around **Cadillac** and then to **Roquetaille Castle**. She was prone to saying "Oh la la" about every few minutes and was fantastic fun and very knowledgeable. She also knew the family at the castle, so there was much kissing on the cheeks between her and the Count. We were shown round by the Counts son. We wanted photos but no, that wasn't possible. However, Marie asked, permission was granted, and we ended up with the wonderful photo of Marie, the Count's son, and Geoff, one of our members, sword in hand and the keys to the castle."



Pauline ends with what has turned out be a very popular group-friendly attraction, the amazing **Kynren** at Bishop Auckland.

"No one expected such a feast for the eyes," she says. "Sitting in the top price area with padded seats was money well spent all round."





Jim Silvester from *Kent Branch*, whose tales of his day trips and holidays regularly appear in these pages, has chosen five destinations that he feels deserve special mention.

"**Potters Resort** in Norfolk, an AGTO Associate member, is always a good value break," he says. "There's a choice of either a three day weekend or five days midweek. There's a varied choice of accommodation from low cost bungalows to deluxe hotel rooms. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are excellent and the entertainment is up to West End standard. There are plenty of daytime activities beside Potter's signature activity of indoor bowls. Local attractions include the Norfolk Broads and the city of Norwich."

Jim also highlights a river cruise on the **Douro** in Portugal. "This is a quite different cruise than those in other parts of continental Europe," he explains. "Apart from Porto, which is fabulous in its own right, there are no other major towns or cities along the river. The river meanders through some really deep locks and the scenery with the vineyards is breathtaking. It's extremely relaxing with plenty of sunbathing on the upper deck. Our cruise was with **Riviera Travel** and arranged by Martin Hay of **GoCruise & Travel**".

Leonardslee Lakes and Gardens, (see photo left) near Horsham in West Sussex, reopened in 2019 having been closed for more than 10 years. Jim took a group in May 2019 when the rhododendron and azaleas were in full bloom.

"A new owner had taken on the challenge to bring the lakes and gardens back to their former glory," says Jim. "The results are spectacular. Take a picnic and enjoy the many places to sit and eat and drink."

Jim is equally fullsome with his praise for '**Vintage Essex**', a day trip from **City & Village Tours** that has been covered in these pages before. "It covers the really pretty parts of Essex and the delightful thatched cottages along the 'Rodings', he says. "The icing on the cake is undoubtedly the visit to the garage of Lodges Coaches, a working company with a fleet of modern coaches. You have lunch in the old garage that's been turned into a museum with vintage charabancs. And if that isn't enough, you then get to take trips on two vintage coaches into the countryside."



Last but not least, and surely on the list of top group-friendly attractions in the country, is the magnificent **Thursford Christmas Spectacular**.

"This is always a favourite with groups and last year was no exception," says Jim. "The show included some fabulous dance routines and songs. The highlights being the toy soldiers, Masquerade from *Phantom of the Opera* and Irish dancing from *Riverdance*. If you have members of your group with mobility issues do check that your seats are on the flat, and not in the tiered rows!"

Finally, in our look at some of our GTO members' favourite places, **Anne Bartlett** from *Western Branch* reveals five fascinating places that her group have visited, starting with the excellent **World of Wedgwood** in Staffordshire.

"A superb illustrated talk from Lucy, the Wedgwood Archivist, titled 'Josiah Wedgwood, Potter, Pioneer and Philanthropist' set the scene," says Anne. "We learnt how Josiah developed the business, how he was commissioned to create a special tea service for Queen Charlotte, how he styled himself 'Potter to Her Majesty', and how, by opening showrooms where he encouraged fashionable ladies of the day to both browse and buy the latest fashionable tea ware to show off to their friends at home he developed a global market selling to Catherine the Great of Russia and the Kings of Europe. The Wedgwood Museum is really remarkable and we enjoyed the factory tour. But the best was still to come, enjoying the most celebrated of British institutions, a stylish, luxury afternoon tea in the elegant surroundings of the Wedgwood Tea Room."

From the Potteries to Birmingham to find out about the tallest free-standing clock tower in the world.

"The clock tower, known affectionately as '**Old Joe**' stands in the centre of the Edgbaston campus of the **University of Birmingham**, close to the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, and can be seen for miles around," explains Anne. "We were wowed by the elegance and height of the clock tower which



stands 100 metres tall in its own courtyard surrounded by lawns and mature trees. In a semi-circle to the south of the tower is the striking architecture of the University's Aston Webb building. Over the main doors is a remarkable frieze of sculptured figures from the world of art, philosophy, science and industry."

The attractive Cotswold village of **Broadway** is a favourite stop for coach tours but how many people visit the hidden gem opposite the coach bay on the High Street outside the Horse and Hound pub? Anne explains.

"With a nostalgic nod to the past I took my group across the road to explore **Tudor House**, an old coaching inn dating back to the 17th century, and now the Broadway Museum and Art Gallery. Of particular interest to our group was the room dedicated to the Broadway Colony of Artists and Writers who lived in the village in the late 1880s and gave it the artistic heritage that we see today."

Cliveden House in Berkshire, the Italianate mansion owned by the National Trust and leased as a 5-star country house hotel, provided a memorable tour for Anne and her group.

"There are only a few rooms open for non-residents to see but our guides were excellent in explaining the history of the house," she says. "We heard the intriguing and sometimes scandalous stories of its previous owners – a Prince of Wales, two Dukes, an Earl and finally the Viscounts Astor. On the tour we were keen to see the swimming pool where former



Secretary of State for War, John Profumo first met Christine Keeler, their resulting affair famously bringing down the British government in the 1960s. Sadly, it was off-limits, but there's still much to see, including the huge dark oak-panelled Great Hall which has a splendid portrait of Nancy Astor by John Singer Sargent, and is furnished with 18th-century tapestries and suits of armour. We also visited the beautifully ornate French dining room with 18th century Rococo panelling and ceiling dripping in gold leaf which was originally part of a chateau in France, leased to Louis XV and Madame de Pompadour as a hunting lodge. When William Waldorf Astor saw it on a visit to Paris he realised that the proportions exactly matched those of the dining room back at Cliveden so he bought the room and had it transported and re-built inside his Berkshire mansion."

As we approach the end of our look at GTOs' favourite places there's time for one more from Anne.

"What do you think a battered old pram, an easel and a box of paints have in common," she asks. "These were the tools of the trade for Sir Stanley Spencer, a prolific as well as one of the best known 20th century artists. He made his living by selling paintings of scenes around his beloved village of **Cookham**, a place he described as "Heaven on Earth", sitting on the banks of the River Thames in Berkshire. Large

groups are split into two, one enjoying a guided walk around the village to see the house where Spencer lived, plus the places and views that he incorporated into his paintings. The other group enjoyed a guided tour of the Stanley Spencer Art Gallery to hear the back stories of some of the paintings and their links to the village. We then swapped over. We loved hearing about the works of art and the extraordinary stories about this eccentric man who carted his easel, paints and brushes plus large umbrella around the village in a battered old pram."

Giving your group the opportunity to discover new places and enjoy memorable experiences is at the heart of what being a GTO is all about. But for Anne and her group of 'Friends of The Wilson', formerly the Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum, there was another reason for their visit to Cookham. The Wilson proudly owns and displays one of his paintings 'Village Life' otherwise known as 'Village Gossips'. As Anne says: "We were thrilled to learn so much more about the artist."

If you want to know more about any of the places mentioned above, or to contact the Associate members mentioned, go to the Members' area of the new AGTO website – www.agto.co.uk

Cliveden House



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ITINERARY

Wednesday 6th January 2021

- 11.45** Check in
- From 12.00** Buffet lunch and afternoon tea
- 15.00** Welcome on board from AGTO Committee & FOCL Team
- 19.00** Dinner – Glentear Restaurant
Evening show and entertainment

Thursday 7th January 2021

- From 07.30** Breakfast – Glentear / Brigadoon Restaurant
- 10.00** Associates Exhibition
- 11.30** Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines Groups Team will be available for meetings
- 12.00** Lunch – Glentear Restaurant
- 15.00** AGM Meeting
- 16.00** Leisure
- 18.00** AGTO Drinks Party Reception
- 19.00** Dinner – Glentear Restaurant
Evening show and entertainment

Friday 8th January 2021

- 07.30** Disembarkation will commence

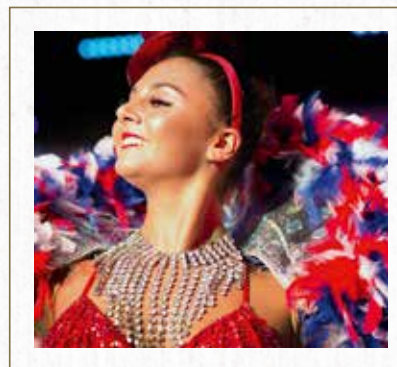
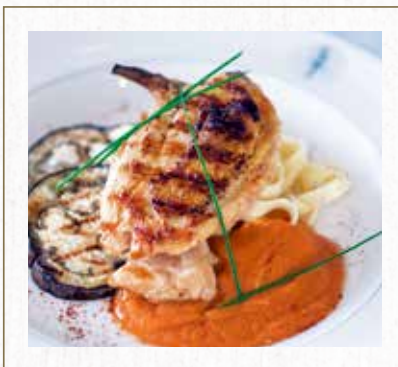
For more information about the AGTO Showcase Cruise 2021 contact the Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines Reservations Team on **01473 742 424** quoting **'GRP0138'** and cruise code **'W2101'**

Car parking is chargeable at Southampton and Liverpool Cruise Terminals. One way coach transfers available - Southampton to Liverpool / Liverpool to Southampton. £20pp one way, at beginning and end of cruise. Please advise to book the coach transfer at the time of booking. Itinerary is subject to change, a final itinerary will be issued in your cabin on board. Fares are per person, based on twin occupancy of the lead-in twin cabin, subject to availability. Offers may be amended or withdrawn at any time without prior notice, are subject to availability & cannot be applied retrospectively. All bookings are subject to Fred. Olsen's standard terms & conditions, available on fredolsencruises.com & on request. Some ports may be at anchor, intermediate days are at sea. FOCL reserve the right to amend itineraries for operational reasons. The free group drinks party on board includes house wines, sherry, soft drinks & cold canapés, subject to minimum numbers. To be hosted by the group leader. E&OE.

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Pauline Johnson
Jo Blair (Success Tours), Sally Davison,
& Stuart Parker (InterChoice Holidays)

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Secretary
Magazine Co-ordinator

Committee members

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Vice Chairman
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For contact information, go to the new AGTO website: www.agto.co.uk



THOUGHTS FROM our Branch Chairs

The impact of the pandemic and the resulting lockdown has affected our usual look at what AGTO branches have been doing. So, instead of the usual branch sections we've put together a mix of stories that you've kindly sent in to the editorial inbox. But to start with, here's a selection of thoughts on the current situation from our Branch chairs.

Julia Passmore, chairman of Central Branch, writes: What a strange time we are living in at present: such big changes since the last magazine! Travel is slowly opening up but it looks like it may be some time until we're out and about again. We are just monitoring the situation daily.

How have you been entertaining your groups and keeping their interest and spirits up? We have been sending out a weekly quiz and inviting members to send in jokes and anecdotes to share. One Central Branch member daily contacts his members with a quiz and jokes. I am very fortunate to be copied in and find them really entertaining. I do hope, whatever you are doing, you are keeping well and safe.

We've been phoning all our members to see how they are and asking them if they have any tips or helpful advice they would like to share with other members or if they have any problems or queries.

We are in very challenging times but I've been very uplifted by the positive way that everyone in the country has pulled together and helped each other. We will come through this if we all keep strong, work together and pool our resources.

.....

Catherine Skeggs, chairman of Eastern Branch has been discovering a new online world. She writes: What a time to be elected Chairman of the Eastern Branch of AGTO! Following a wonderful showcase weekend at Stratford-upon-Avon (and doesn't that seem a long time ago now?) we had our first branch meeting and a trip to Spencer House in March before everything changed. From actively meeting our groups in person, everyone is now self-isolating, only undertaking necessary trips under social distancing and practising staying safe. But that isn't all we as AGTO members are doing...

As group travel organisers we are doing what we do best and that is adapting to the situation. We are finding ways to keep in touch with our members online and offering activities that can be done from the safety of our own homes. From seeing plays at the theatre we are watching plays online. I've seen more fantastic stage shows in the last four weeks than I have in the last few months. We are investigating murder mysteries, and interrogating suspects via Zoom instead of over dinner. We are playing escape rooms, both online and as boxed games, and sharing the games between members. There are also virtual visits to places of interest available online.

The only thing that is really missing is the travel – and, boy, do I miss that!

As for the Branch, we've set up a Facebook Group for members and have moved branch meetings onto zoom during the lockdown.

I look forward to the time when we can all meet again in person, but until that is possible; meeting virtually will have to do.

Stay safe.

.....

Jim Silvester, chairman of Kent Branch recalls the (almost) carefree days of the AGTO Showcase in Stratford. He writes: I truly hope that you are staying safe during this current crisis. All of us I'm sure were pretty busy during the start of the coronavirus having to cancel or postpone day trips and holidays and in some cases having to work through refunding our own club members, all extremely hard work. Hopefully nobody has suffered a financial loss.

Previous trips now seem a long way off. A number of members attended the Showcase Weekend and AGM in Stratford-upon-Avon where the only worry was the high

water level of the Avon resulting in the boat cruise being cancelled. The highlight was the Gala Dinner when delegates were encouraged to dress for the theme of *The Great Gatsby* or *Peaky Blinders*. Photos of the members enjoying the evening appeared in the last issue of this magazine. Pride of place on the front cover went to our very own David and Surian Tamsitt of Beyond the Valley Travel, Barham. In the following weeks I spent time putting together my list of favourite places for this issue. It was very fruitful and rewarding to go back over places I have organised for my group and it made me appreciate the time when we had virtually no restrictions. Good times will return!

Best regards, and stay safe.

.....

At the AGM in Stratford, Jenny Robinson stepped down as chairman of Northern Branch. She offers a few reflections:

As outgoing chair I have taken some time to reflect on the many years I have been a member of GTOA and AGTO. I would like to thank all the friends and colleagues I have met and received help and advice from throughout the years.

We've had some very good trips and fairs and we've appreciated the work and consideration that has been put into everything for our benefit. We have a lot to thank our Associate members for. They do a marvellous job providing us with the best products at the best price they can negotiate for us.

For me now I have a small group and we did have a holiday and some trips and shows planned. Sadly, after all the cancellations, all we have left is a few days in the Lake District and a concert at the Royal Albert Hall. I'm keeping my fingers crossed that these will go ahead.

We must as always continue to hold our groups together and of course encourage new members and look forward to the future. It is a very strange time and we will come through, but things will be different I'm sure.

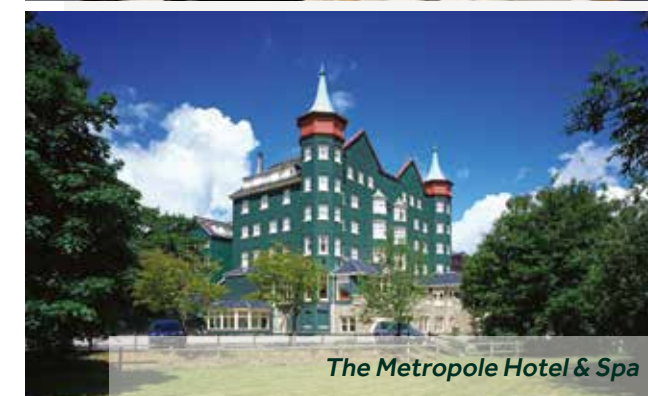
But for now I would like to say "Thank You" to everyone, especially to my colleague and treasurer Judy. Thank you also to friends and colleagues of the Northern Branch; always welcoming and enthusiastic. It was a pleasure to work with you.

So, all good wishes for the future. Don't give up hope and things will be better and a new normal will arise.

.....

Roger Sims, chair of Western Branch, writes: In these uncertain times it is imperative that we all follow the strict Government policy to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, and in doing so support the NHS in its endeavours. Although

physically isolated from our group members I hope we are all positive and are being proactive and making use of the internet for keeping in touch and researching future visits. Looking ahead we have our Western Branch AGM which this year takes place at The Metropole Hotel & Spa in Llandrindod Wells in central Wales from Friday 13 to 15 November. We of course now wait to hear if this will go ahead.





Discovering ‘Mother in Law’ in the Azores

Hazel Jones from Northern Branch looks back at an enjoyable visit to the Azores, and recalls the day she had ‘Mother in Law’ for lunch.

It's 4am and we've arrived at our first hotel in Ponta Delgada in the Azores. We're four hours late due to aircraft delays. After leaving Marple in Cheshire at 3pm the previous day we were glad to arrive after suffering much anxiety due to the travel disruption.

But now we were at our holiday destination and we could relax, well, sleep first.

18 of us had joined a similar number who had boarded at Gatwick on this trip, excellently organised by SAGA Holidays.

During our stay we toured four islands in this archipelago, visiting volcanoes (both ancient and modern) and actually going inside one on Terceira Island. We visited many botanical gardens, tea and pineapple plantations, cheese sampling outlets, wineries and old whaling factories.

The islands, and there are nine in all, are part of Portugal, having been first colonised in the 15th century by people

mainly from Portugal and Flanders. They have retained many of the original traditions. We headed over to Pico Island, home to Mount Pico, the highest mountain in the whole of Portugal at 7,700 feet (2,350m).

One day on the island of Terceira, we had a special lunch which included ‘Mother-in-Law’ soup (Sopa de Sagra) followed by Alcatro stew- chunks of beef braised gently in a stock of white wine, uncured bacon onions, butter, salt and black Jamaican pepper. When we eventually got through this lot we were then treated to Queen Amelia cake, named after the Queen of Portugal in 1901. This was made from corn flour, spices, raisins, honey and eggs – what a delight.

The islands are extremely green with literally millions of hydrangeas on each of them, together with wild ginger plants, morning glory

trailing everywhere and masses of Bella Donna lilies.

The temperature throughout our stay was pleasantly warm with only one half day of showers during the two weeks. It was wonderful to be able to walk around in short sleeved shirts and shorts all the time.

Our return flight was 30 minutes early coming back into Manchester. Notwithstanding our outward delays I can honestly recommend the Azores for an interesting and enjoyable holiday.



GTO snookered by member request

Booking tickets in advance for a sporting tournament can sometimes mean you don't get to find out who will be playing until much later. But as Julia Passmore from Central Branch found out, members expect you to know.

We always used to visit the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield for the World Snooker Championships, which took place at the end of April and the beginning of May each year.

When booking tickets you had to fill in the form with your first, second and third choice of tickets and write the

maximum amount the cheque could be cashed for. The Crucible's admin team then filled it in, depending on which value seats you were given.

This particular year I was very excited because for the first time we had drawn tickets for the final. I couldn't wait to let those of the membership interested in snooker know.

I duly sent out the circular and waited for the forms for tickets to come in, expecting the tickets to go very quickly.

Within hours of the message going out I received a phone call, which I thought originally was a hoax. The

member wanted to go to the snooker championship but wanted to know who he would see playing!

I explained we had been extremely fortunate to receive tickets for the final and it would be the last two in the competition who would be playing.

He stated he wasn't an idiot, he watched snooker all the time, and played as well. He just wanted to know who the two players would be, in case he didn't like them!

Needless to say he didn't go to the snooker, but all of those of us that did had a fabulous time.

MUSICAL TREATS FOR THE GROUP IN CARDIFF BAY

Savvy GTOs have long realised that regional theatre can often provide West End-quality without the costs of travelling up to London. Lis Bird, of Yatton Outings Club, and a member of Western Branch, reports on a recent trip to Cardiff Bay.

Going to see a show at the Wales Millennium Centre (WMC) in Cardiff is always popular with my group. We're based in Yatton between Bristol and Weston-super-Mare so it's an easy journey. We aim to arrive around midday with time for a leisurely lunch before the 2.30pm matinee. This time we pre-booked at Demiros, a very different restaurant to the others in the Cardiff Bay area, but only a short walk from the WMC. Some of our group chose to eat in the Theatre itself. There are so many different restaurants easily accessible to the theatre in this area.

Demiros serves Welsh, Italian and Spanish dishes with a lunchtime special menu of two course for £15. But what makes a visit special is a female singer who entertains diners. It makes for a great atmosphere. On this visit the singer

serenaded a couple of the men in the group. I think they secretly enjoyed it!

Then we were ready for the show, the Rodgers and Hammerstein classic *The King & I*, stopping off in Cardiff on its UK tour. With songs including 'I Whistle a Happy Tune', 'Getting to Know You' and 'Shall We Dance' and a company of more than 50 world-class performers and a full-scale orchestra musicals, we all loved it.

Group booking at the WMC is easy with a free place offered if the group is 40 or more. We book seats in the stalls as soon as a show is advertised, and book the maximum for our coach size, returning any unused tickets and paying for the show about three months beforehand. We look forward to returning at some point in the future.



Helen makes a Delft move just in time!

It's Sunday 15 March this year and the coronavirus is creeping ever nearer to these shores. Across the water, parts of continental Europe are starting to shut down. Helen Sims, from *Western Branch*, is in the Netherlands with a group and facing the imminent threat of border closures. Will the group return home before it's too late?

In hindsight I've been extremely fortunate that two weekends I've organised in 2020 were able to go ahead before lockdown. The first was in Bournemouth in January. We've been staying at the Trouville Hotel for about 25 years so the weekend almost organises itself. People can stay one, two or three nights with a disco and party on the Saturday. It's a good hotel and suits our needs perfectly.

Our second trip was to Den Haag in the Netherlands. We went on Friday 13 March, a date that was clearly an omen! We struggled to get the minimum number, but eventually did and off we set. There had been high winds the day and night before so there was some disruption in ferry times, meaning that we caught the traffic on the famous Antwerp ring road. However, we arrived at our four-star Marriott Hotel

with enough time to go out and find a restaurant. Some of the group stayed in and used the restaurant in the hotel. After a long journey I'm not at all surprised!

On the Saturday our coach took us to Delft, famous for the blue and white pottery. What a lovely place! Canals all around, pretty shops, a large cathedral square and busy market. Unfortunately, we couldn't locate the source of a canal trip but maybe we were too early in the season. But it was a lovely sunny day and enjoyed by all.

We returned to Den Haag and had free time. Some visited the shops, others the beach. Most took the trams. You could buy an all-day ticket for just over seven euro and we certainly took advantage of it, even travelling back to Delft!

But the impact of the coronavirus was starting to appear. Tram drivers had new screens in their cabs protecting them from passengers. Restaurants were reeling from cancellations, which was lucky for us as we could easily get a table. The Dutch were so friendly and helpful.

On the Sunday we found out that our chocolate stop in Belgium was closed. Many places were shut for the weekend and, more seriously, France was threatening to close its borders. We had been due to visit Middleburg, the famous walled city, but everyone decided it would be best another time. So, in view of all of that we decided to travel straight back to the UK. Hindsight again, but I'm really glad we did, and returned safe and sound to our homes.

So, like everyone else, we are now living on our memories and staying in. Stay safe everyone.

the hotel's attic until he recovered, and was looked after by his fiancée who worked there. When he left to continue harassing the Germans none of the officers commented on the fact that the young lady was pregnant as they all assumed it was one of them that had caused it!

You can image then that Saso, coming from such passionate Slovenian stock, wanted to show us the country he so loved to its best advantage. One of the day trips was to a farm that made mead and various delicacies made from honey, and it was right in the middle of nowhere. To get there we should have taken the new motorway. But Saso and his long-time friend Peter, who owned and drove our coach, decided that rather than the 'concrete monstrosity' route they would take the pretty route, passing through the village where Saso and Peter were born and bred. Saso and his parents still lived there and Saso had recently inherited his grandfather's house. The cellar still contained a home brew of very strong schnapps made by his grandfather.

Our road soon became little more than a single track through scrubland. We

came to a small hamlet of 24 people. They hadn't seen a coach for 25 years, and that had been a small school bus. Several of the houses had balconies that overhung the street. We pulled to a halt near one of them and the elders came out to greet us. Image if you will actress and comedienne 'Hylda Baker', for those that remember her, hair in rollers and still in her nightdress, with a low neckline, and a massive cleavage showing, supported by the window frame, leaning out, with her cat, to see what was going on.

Saso and Peter got out and there was a lot of head scratching, a tape measure was produced and the coach measured against all the balconies and the width of the street. With care we could get through. BUT, there was a narrow bridge over the river at the edge of the hamlet half a mile away, so off they all went in a car leaving the dog sitting by the coach to 'guard' us. By this time all the inhabitants, and their dogs and cats, had come to see what was going on.

Eventually the reconnaissance party came back and told us we could proceed. During all this we had all sat watching. Do any of us have pictures?

I wish we did, but we were all so mesmerised by the goings on we didn't think about capturing the scene.

We did get to the farm and only slightly later than we should. The mead flowed and was more potent that we realised. The food was good and when they started the singing we were all in VERY good voice. This sense of bonhomie, fuelled by the alcohol, continued when we boarded the coach. Yours truly decamped to the rear of the coach and led the singing all the way back to the hotel, and yes, everyone joined in again. Needless to say we came back via the motorway, which none of us really noticed.

The rest of the tour, before and after this 'day to remember', was excellent, but even 12 years later all who went still fondly remember it. You get a sort of dreamy expression in people's eyes – mine included. We are equally sure that the exploits of that day will be a topic of discussion for years to come in the village. It might just have made their day as much as it did ours and we don't think Saso or Peter will forget it in a hurry.



A funny thing happened on the way to – the farm

So what do you do when you find yourself in a tiny Slovenian village being watched by a 'Hylda Baker' lookalike with an enormous cleavage? Pauline Johnson from *Central Branch* tells the story.

Some years ago I took my group to Slovenia where we stayed in a hotel by Lake Bled. Our guide was a very pleasant and extremely knowledgeable young man in his early thirties by the name of Saso. His grandfather had been

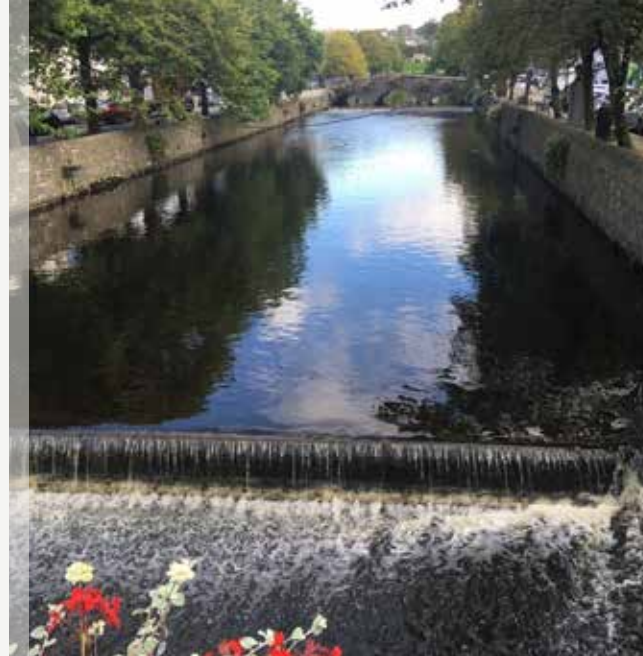
in the Resistance during the war and Saso's father was conceived, literally, right under the noses of the Germans who had commandeered a hotel on the far side of the Lake. Grandfather was injured and was being hidden in

DISCOVERING IRELAND'S BEAUTIFUL CORNER

In September 2019 Geoff Lewry, chairman of the National Trust Orpington & Chislehurst Centre, and a member of AGTO's *Southern Branch*, took a group on a six-day tour to the west of Ireland, staying in Westport in County Mayo. In this report he reveals what there is to see in 'Ireland's Beautiful Corner'

We arrived at Knock Airport (officially Ireland West Airport Knock) in County Mayo on the Sunday and were collected by Gerry, our coach driver for the week. He was excellent and very friendly and nothing was too much trouble. Arriving at our hotel we were welcomed with plenty of tea, coffee and very nice scones and jam. We had been travelling since 4am so this was very welcome.





The town of Westport was much bigger than I had anticipated, with lots of individual shops and plenty of pubs and eateries. The picturesque tree-lined boulevard, the Mall, built alongside the Carrowbeg River, runs through the town. The large Catholic St Mary's Cathedral Church and Holy Trinity, a small Anglican church are both worth a visit.

On the Monday we headed for nearby Westport House, one of Ireland's best loved heritage attractions. There's been a 'big house' on this site since the 1500s, when Grace O'Malley, the famous Pirate Queen, built one of her castles here. Her dungeons still remain in the current house and can be visited. Our excellent guide, Ann, was very knowledgeable and passionate about the house. We also met the owner's son who updated us on future plans for the house. Back on the coach and Gerry took us to the Quay area where we had a couple of hours for lunch and a good walk and a visit to the Heritage Centre before returning to Westport.

If you've ever looked into visiting this part of Ireland you'll know about Kylemore Abbey. It's an absolute delight. We visited the Abbey itself first and then took the shuttle bus down to the beautiful walled garden laid out in a formal style with a variety of plants and shrubs. Sadly, the garden was so interesting we ran out of time to visit the Gothic Church, but others in the group said it is well worth the visit.

Moving south into County Galway and we arrived at Killary Fjord in north Connemara for a cruise. The Killary Fjord boat was very comfortable with a bar serving tea, coffee, alcoholic beverages and snacks. The fjord was like a mill pond which acted just like a mirror, adding to the enjoyment of the picturesque scenery. A good audio commentary kept us all fully informed about what we were seeing.

I had never heard of Achill Island prior to arranging this tour for my group, but in doing my research I was recommended a guide for the Tuesday, Michael Murphy. During the full day tour Michael lived up to his recommendation, bringing the island and its stunning scenery and majestic coastline alive with a number of stories. We even visited a wonderful beach

at the very tip of the island, giving some of the ladies in our group the opportunity for a paddle.

It's worth noting that our coach driver Gerry wasn't familiar with the island, but with the assistance of Michael we were able to travel along roads that traversed many of the high cliffs and mountains. I would really recommend that any tour of the island would benefit from the addition of a guide of the calibre of Michael.

On the Thursday we stopped off at Foxford Woollen Mills. The tour is very short with, in my opinion, little to see, but it did give the group an opportunity for some retail therapy, and the prices were certainly cheaper than we had seen in some of the other shopping outlets. We then moved on to Castlebar, the county town of Co. Mayo. The town has some larger shops than Westport but a lot less charm, but it was good to see.

Friday was our final day but before heading home we visited the free-to-enter National Museum of Ireland – Country Life. It's located in Turlough, about four miles from Castlebar. The museum was laid out extremely well and gave a good indication of what life was like in days gone by. There were a great deal of exhibits complete with full explanations and you could easily spend several hours going around the four floors. In addition to the galleries there is Turlough Park House which has three areas open to the public. The estate goes back more than 350 years being the home of the Fitzgeralds, a family of Norman origin who came to Ireland in 1169.

In a tour full of surprises there was one more. At Knock Airport each member of the group was surprised to be asked to pay a 10 euro 'Development Fee'. Something for GTOs to be aware of.

The trip was organised by Greatdays Travel Group. In particular I'd like to thank Dawn and Sarah, who I had most dealings with, for putting together a well organised tour which my group thoroughly enjoyed. Greatdays is an AGTO Associate member and I would have no qualms in recommending the company as a good group travel operator.

Why dogs don't like 'Whipmawhopmagate'

York is one the UK's most popular visitor destinations. With its mix of history, heritage, river and shopping it makes an ideal place for a day out or as a base to explore the wider area. Jenny Robinson from Northern Branch, who lives in the city, offers a few thoughts on what to see and do.

Come to the ancient city of York. There's much to see, from the world famous York Minster to the Viking Centre and York's Chocolate Story, part of AGTO Associate member Continuum Attractions' UK-wide portfolio.

When I'm hosting visitors I always suggest taking a walk along the top of our city walls. The views across the rooftops and over to the Minster are magnificent.

In the historic centre you'll find Shambles, one of the best-preserved medieval shopping streets in Europe. Although none of the original shop-fronts have survived from medieval times, some properties still have exterior wooden shelves, reminders of when cuts of meat were served from the open windows. Today, the beautiful old buildings have been restored and now house a range of cafes, quirky boutiques and the ubiquitous souvenir shops.

One point to note is that the street isn't called 'The Shambles'. It's just 'Shambles'. It's important to have these things right!

Another of our special places is 'Whipmawhopmagate'. The longest street name in York is also the shortest street in York, at just 32 metres. According to the Secret York website the name possibly derives from a local custom of whipping small yelping dogs called Whappets, which was apparently observed in this area in medieval times.

'Whipmawhopmagate' may also translate as 'Neither one thing nor the other'. That clears that up then!

A special occasion is our horse racing programme held at the racecourse close to the city. The programmed two and three-day meetings are held between May and September. Very popular are the July and August meetings, one of which offers a Ladies Day. This is a very busy event and on a good day the colours and fashions are wonderful to see. Only time will tell when race meetings can start again.

York is also a good base from which to explore the surrounding area. An easy destination to reach is Castle Howard, a magnificent family home and one of Britain's finest historic houses. The house and gardens are attractive all year round and are situated within almost 1,000 acres of Grade 1 listed parkland.

Slightly further afield are two of the UK's most popular coastal towns. Scarborough has plenty to offer with its attractive clean beaches, open air swimming pools, woodland walks and a traditional seaside feel.

Whitby is completely different. The birthplace of Captain Cook, and you can find his museum amongst the tiny cobbled streets in the old town, the town not only has links to Bram Stoker's Dracula and holds Goths' weekends, but is also famous for its fish and chips and Whitby jet, the beautiful glistening



black stones that are made into elegant jewellery.

If your legs will manage it, a climb up to Whitby Abbey will give you spectacular views across the town.

I could go on making suggestions but I think please come and see for yourselves. Hopefully towards autumn our lives will have some normality and we will be able to enjoy these fine and interesting visits with our friends, family and of course our groups.



EASTERN AND SOUTHERN BRANCHES VISIT SPENCER HOUSE

Recognised as one of the most sumptuous private residences ever built in London, and a building of unique importance in the history of English architecture, Spencer House is undoubtedly well worth a visit. Joan Hanks from Eastern Branch reports on a visit made just prior to lockdown.

Little did we know that our visit to Spencer House in central London on Sunday 8 March would be the last time we would be able to meet before lockdown. Strange too that I personally sensed an air of quiet before the storm!

24 members of AGTO's Eastern and Southern Branches came together to book for this familiarisation trip to one of London's oldest and iconic royal houses.

But we very nearly didn't make it there. Train cancellations, diversions to bus routes and the planned closure of King's Cross station for engineering works conspired to make travel more problematic than usual. In the end I chose to drive into central London. On arrival we encountered numerous road works which we managed to navigate before arriving in Pall Mall. Here we parked (it was a Sunday!) and took the short walk to Spencer House. The only sign of people were the queues into St James, otherwise the streets were deserted.

On arrival at Spencer House we were welcomed by the staff and shown into a reception room to await Maurizio, the chief guide, for the tour. From the start Maurizio's knowledge and personality had the group hanging on his every word. His enthusiasm for the House was boundless as he explained

the decor, paintings and other artefacts which make up this wonderful property.

Built in 1780 for the First Earl Spencer the house is extravagant in the extreme, designed to show his status in London and as a labour of love dedicated to his wife. Since then the house has stayed in the Spencer family and is currently owned by the 9th Earl Spencer, Charles Spencer, Princess Diana's brother.

Since the Second World War the house has been continually 'Let out'. From 1948 to Christies, the auctioneers, in 1956 to the British Oxygen Company, and in 1963 to the Economist Intelligence Unit. Sadly, by then it was becoming somewhat dilapidated.

Then in 1986, RIT Capital, the family of Jacob Rothschild, the 4th Baron Rothschild, secured a 96-year lease with an additional 24-year option. So began a restoration programme to return the State Rooms and Garden to their original opulence.

In 1990 the newly renovated Spencer House was officially 'opened' by Princess Diana.

An added interest on the day of our visit was that one of my guests worked as PA to Lord Rothschild from 1990 until 2000 and was able to regale us with stories about some of the wonderful dinner parties and functions that took place during this time. The House is still used by Royalty to hold more private, intimate events.

Leaving the house we said good bye to our friends from Southern Branch and headed to The Golden Lion in nearby King Street for lunch.

There has been a pub here since the 17th century. We were greeted by the landlord and his partner and shown to a room above the bar. The old pictures on the walls and scrubbed wooden floors and tables reminded me that not much seemed to have changed over the years.

It was warm and friendly and our food arrived promptly and was eagerly eaten. All agreed it was good value for money. After lunch we held a short Branch Meeting bringing everyone up to date on future events. Mine host provided tea and coffee for the meeting and then we all said our goodbyes and headed home. Spencer House is a Grade 1 listed building on the National Heritage List for England and is well worth a visit.

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Carol enjoys life at sea in a RNLI lifeboat

There's always an eagerness to get out and about after the Christmas and New Year period, even if the weather can sometimes make travelling difficult. Carol Swiecicka from the Newton Abbot Travel Club, and a member of Western Branch, reports on her group's activities and reveals how she ended up at sea with the RNLI.

Our group always has a day trip between Christmas and New Year, usually to National Trust properties, followed by a visit in the first week of January to panto at Plymouth. This year it was *Cinderella* with the excellent Brian Conley.

We then had a short break to Bideford staying at the Royal Hotel. The group enjoyed their stay so much we booked in again for the end of February.

On the way home from a short break in Looe in January we

Appreciation for our Associate members

A number of GTO members have expressed their appreciation for the support being given by Associate members during these challenging times. Carol Gower from Kent Branch surely reflects the views of everyone.

I am sure I speak on behalf of all GTO members in expressing sincere appreciation of all Associate members and their staff in these difficult and uncertain times. Over the years Associates become much more than 'suppliers'. The connections we build up with them, by meeting up at both AGTO events and wider industry exhibitions lead to them becoming trusted friends. Certainly they make our tasks as GTOs much, much easier.

Whilst, I am sure, we GTOs are licking our wounds given the time we have spent cancelling or moving on bookings to dates later in the year or into 2021 where appropriate, perhaps getting cheque-books out refunding up-front payments – we are, on the whole, volunteers doing our bit for our various clubs and societies. But this pales into insignificance with the awareness that our Associate friends have suffered the blow of seeing their businesses abruptly pulled up to a full stop, staff furloughed and facing the uncertainty of the period of time for which this will remain the case. Add to that the inevitable slowness in business picking up again, questions as to how quickly our members' confidence will be restored in travel and socialising and, equally, if not more so, the inevitable financial and stability concerns around this.

I will not use this letter to mention specific individuals with whom I've been dealing, unscrambling holiday plans and day trips for 2020, but they know who they are and I send my heartfelt thanks and warm thoughts to them here. All members will have their own 'heroes' to whom they also feel hugely indebted, and would want to express their sympathy and support in this difficult time.

So, on behalf of us all – to our suppliers, groups departments at venues, our coach companies – we send our thanks, appreciation and good wishes. We look forward to getting our diaries out together in the not-to-distant future!

stopped in Truro and visited Shelterbox, a charity we've supported over the years, to present a cheque for a family tent.

Our next trip was our annual short break to Bournemouth, coinciding with the arrival of Storm Ciara. This year we stayed at The Cumberland, part of the Oceana Hotels group, and had an excellent stay, visiting the excellent Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum.

Our itinerary included a visit to Poole where the majority of the group visited the RNLI Discovery Centre for a guided tour. The new training simulator wasn't being used at the time so we were able to experience the feeling of being at sea in a lifeboat. It brought home how brave the RNLI volunteers are, going to sea in often atrocious conditions. We have since donated £250 to our local Teignmouth Branch of the RNLI.

The following weekend we were due to go to Welford Park near Newbury for the snowdrops, staying overnight in the area and then going to Slimbridge Wetland Centre. But then Storm Dennis hit and Welford Park, along with other outdoor attractions, closed. That presented a problem in finding an indoor attraction that we hadn't visited for a while that could

take 45 people at 24 hours' notice. Luckily the Fleet Air Arm Museum at Yeovilton was happy to accommodate us and we had a very good visit in the dry. A road very close to the museum was flooded to such an extent we thought it was a river until we saw a recovery vehicle trying to rescue a car!

Our visit to Slimbridge went as planned although the Bewick Swans that we had planned on seeing at the floodlight feed had already left for their return to Siberia.

But now, under lockdown, the time is spent issuing refunds to members and sending quizzes and jokes to stop them feeling isolated. As we're unable to support local charities by running trips, I suggested that as most members have a coffee and cake, lunch or an ice cream on a trip, perhaps they might like to think about donating the cost of one of those to charity instead. I'm pleased to say that the response has been excellent with some members donating much more.

Whilst things might never be quite the same again, I am sure others like me will want to show support to the coach companies, hotels, theatres, attractions and other suppliers that have been understanding during the pandemic, hopefully helping them to restore their businesses.

'X Factor' moments bumping into celebrities and the famous who have helped make our excursions even more memorable!

Our Christmas Market visit to the Weald and Downland Museum in West Sussex reaped a *Repair Shop* benefit when Jay Blades (below left) and team were in situ...never one to miss a photo opportunity, we took full advantage! Jay is an amazing friendly guy, it's no wonder he is so popular now on primetime TV.

At September's Chatsworth Country Fair, one of our group, Cath Mison, was over the moon to meet up with the Hairy Bikers, Si King and Dave Myers, at their book signing (above right). Cath organises a number of sea-themed events in our home-town of Folkestone including the annual Trawler Race and Sandcastle and Fish Pie Competitions. Cath had featured her own Fish Pie recipe on the Hairy Bikers Show too so it was great to be able to meet them!

Wearing my own volunteering hat as trustee for the Shorncliffe Trust, a heritage and education charity, I also plan battlefield tours to support the Trust's educational programme. On a tour of the Somme we were delighted to meet *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* producer and director Sir Peter Jackson at Lochnagar Crater (below left). Sir Peter is an avid historian and collector of military artefacts. He also used state-of-the-art technology to restore original archival footage to create the film *They Shall Not Grow Old*. He had already supported the Trust's aspirations to create a heritage centre in former military buildings at Shorncliffe Garrison, so it was truly amazing to be able to talk with him and give him updates on the work we do.

You may be interested to know that the Shorncliffe Trust can offer AGTO members the services of its own fully planned and guided heritage and battlefield tours. Itineraries include



the Somme, Flanders, Dunkirk and the Normandy beaches linked to the First and Second World Wars, and to Belgium for the Battle of Waterloo. Email me at viv@realsocialising.co.uk for more information or go to www.realsocialising.co.uk.

So, here's to creating more wonderful memories when the time is right, but till then, keep safe!



Celebrity moments with REAL Socialising

The opportunity to meet a celebrity while enjoying a day out can be an unexpected bonus. Kent Branch member Viv Kenny, from Folkestone-based group REAL Socialising, recalls a number of recent encounters.

When I started organising trips through 'REAL Socialising' seven years ago

coming up with the right name for the group was a bit of a struggle. Then out of the blue came the statistic that 26% of people 'sofalisied' instead of 'socialised'. So that is how 'REAL Socialising' was born!

They say what goes around comes around and due to Covid-19 we

currently have no option but to 'Sofalise'. We're all eagerly waiting for the time when we can socialise again, for REAL!

But whilst we are waiting for a safer future, we can look back on some great memories on our days out and short breaks. These include some REAL

FISH AND CHIPS, AND A POCKET FULL OF RYE

Organising a successful day trip requires careful research, and perhaps a bit of luck thrown in for good measure. But as Carol Gower from Kent Branch reveals, a spot of divine intervention can sometimes help as well!

I decided to arrange a trip for my group to Rye last May with just a couple of specific ideas in mind: a guided walking tour of the town and fish and chips at Dungeness. Nice and simple.

As I sat putting the day together I concluded that we should go on a Thursday, Rye's weekly Market Day. I'd been advised to arrive early as the coach park, which is quite considerable in size, fills up quickly with coaches on day trips out from the many hotels in Eastbourne.

The first requirement was, of course, the toilets (handy in the coach park), then a cup of coffee. Now Rye is full of smallish coffee shops but to reach them there's quite a climb into the town centre. I had arranged for two Blue Badge guides to take about 25 people each on an easy route around the town. But keeping people together would be a problem.

The solution came to me as I searched on Google Maps. There, in just the right place and within 100 yards of the coach park was the Baptist Church. A God-send, I thought!

I made contact with a member of the church who confirmed that they had a large meeting room and would be delighted to have 50+ visitors in for coffee and biscuits to start our day. I made a donation of £100 to cover this and everyone was happy. This also provided a meeting point for the guides to join us, divide us in half, and set off in two different directions for a little over an hour or so..... as we do!

The tours were informative, much enjoyed, taken at a sensible pace, and ended near the top of the town leaving folk in just the right spot to find a light lunch or eat their picnic.

St Mary's Church sits high on the top of the town with far reaching views in all directions. One lady in my group, like myself, very much wanted to go to the top of the church tower. So we paid the £3 fee and started to climb. For a while it was a wide, 'ordinary' staircase. This then became a narrower staircase, which then became slatted wooden steps, which then became a ladder! The lady accompanying me would have been a good 10 years my senior but she took this all in her stride, so I thought I had better do the same. At the top of the ladder we took a leap of faith onto the platform which took us outside and gave access to all sides of the top of the tower, and boy, was it worth it! The weather was good, views were clear and we soaked it up until it was time to make the tricky

descent, sometimes backwards, sometimes sideways and finally, near the bottom, facing the downwards direction. Hairy in parts, but we wouldn't have missed it!

Heading off to Dungeness for our fish and chips we had time to stop at Brookland Church on Romney Marsh, unique in the fact that the steeple was never built onto the church in the traditional way, but sits alongside it in the churchyard. The churchwarden unlocked the building for us before our arrival

and we found plenty of useful information and artefacts within the building to self-guide ourselves. Very interesting it was, too!

Then back on the coach to The Pilot Inn at Dungeness, a very well-known family-run restaurant and pub, where the fish and chips, served with bread and butter and a cuppa, were every bit as good as the last time I went in there (years ago). The staff were friendly and helpful, and we all came home happy.

It shouldn't happen to a group organiser* (*but it does)

It doesn't matter how much you plan, there are always things that seem to crop up to surprise you. Catherine Skeggs from Eastern Branch has had her fair share.

As group travel organisers we are used to adapting to situations as they arise. Being in lockdown is a very big 'situation' to deal with, but just think back to some of the situations you've found yourself in, or situations you've seen fellow group travel organisers in.

I'm sure a few AGTO members will remember the ill-fated trip to the NEC in Birmingham when the coach was an hour late arriving in London, even later at the subsequent pick-ups and then managed to pick up the wrong people!

We realised they were on the wrong coach when they wondered why we were heading north for a trip to Dover. Back tracking to where they'd boarded, our coach just made it in time to meet their delayed coach. On the way back I can remember a lady saying she'd had to get the train up as the coach was so late.....making me wonder if she had taken someone else's place on the return journey. Had we left someone in Birmingham, I've often wondered?

Having things go wrong can be a chance to put in additional safety measures. After a group of treasure hunters read 'St Mary-le-Bow Church', which is in



the City of London, and hopped on the Underground to Bow in east London to find the church, we made sure we gave players a map, told them not to go off the map, and not to use public transport.

But even with a map there are some things you can't plan for. I can't be sure, but I think another group of treasure hunters went through Horse Guards Parade and ended up at the wrong end of Downing Street. They arrived at that evening's Treasure Hunt Dinner a little late but full of tales of being questioned by police with guns!

Another group of treasure hunters asked members of the public for directions to the YMCA. Without

checking the address, they ended up at the wrong YMCA. Wearing funny hats and asking for the party room, reception had no idea what they were talking about. They rang my assistant and confusion ensued as she was waiting for them in the foyer and they were in the foyer of a different YMCA. Luckily she was able to direct them to the right location.

But all's well that ends well. GTOs are a resilient lot. We have to be. Things usually work out in the end. I'm sure we'll come out of this lockdown with more funny stories of things that have happened during this unprecedented situation.

Take care.



PLYWOOD, RIBENA AND JK ROWLING

The Forest of Dean has become famous for being a tour guide's paradise, with a plethora of quirky facts to impart. Jim Silvester from Kent Branch recalls a weekend break that included Marigold gloves and Horlicks!

They say it's better to be born lucky than rich. That was certainly the case when 51 members from my group went to Warner Holme Lacy House Hotel near Hereford for a weekend break in March 2018.

The 'Beast from the East' had arrived with a vengeance the weekend before and I doubt we would have got the coach out of Kent and certainly not down the country lanes in Herefordshire.

A week later the weather was fine again, producing a great weekend with entertainment focusing on the 50s and 60s.

On the Saturday we enjoyed a short excursion into Hereford, enjoying a visit to the famous cathedral. On the Sunday we left Holme Lacy by coach to pick up our guide at Kerne Bridge on the edge of Ross on Wye. He was a very enthusiastic guide and passionate about the local area. Our route took us on a tour of the Wye Valley and Forest of Dean, including the well-known beauty spot at Symonds Yat and into the Welsh town of Monmouth.

As we toured the Forest of Dean our attention was drawn to

the road in Cinderford where radio presenter Jimmy Young was born, we glanced at the house in Ruardean where the Horlick brothers, founders of Horlicks, were born, and we passed by author J K Rowling's school in Wyedean.

We saw the Plywood factory in Lydney and visited the small marina that's only large enough for a couple of boats. We saw the factory where they used to make Marigold gloves, and just down the road, the Ribena and Lucozade factory. Our guide also pointed out the maternity hospital in the Forest, which was under threat of closure. We were told that if that happened there would be no children born in the Forest of Dean who could become miners! Indeed!

The day ended with a ride behind a steam locomotive on the Dean Forest Railway from Norchard. We went up and down the line before heading to the station café for a delicious cream tea.

All in all a delightful and fascinating weekend away.



DAY TRIP SNIPPETS

The days of simply popping out for a day trip with your group seem a long time ago. Here are three reports from happier times.

64 members and friends of the EXEL Retired Staff Association celebrated their 28th Anniversary in February with a luncheon at the Sharnbrook Hotel, near Bedford, writes **Yvonne Hodson** from *Eastern Branch*. Many members of the group worked together in Bedford before retiring and, apart from their trips, they still meet up once a month at the local library for a lecture or interesting talks covering a wide range of subjects. On occasions AGTO Associate Members also come to talk to the group. Trips are now mainly confined to day trips, usually booked through Associate Members, who have such a wide variety on offer. Here's to another year with AGTO and EXEL.

In November 2019 I took a group to Arras, a lovely cathedral city in northern France, writes **Gill Brooker** from *Western Branch*. Our main purpose was to visit the Christmas market (pictured right) and on the Friday night it wasn't too busy. Our hotel was the Ibis in the centre. It was a bit tired, but the beds were huge and comfy which made the rooms small, but perfect for a central location. The markets, shops and restaurants were literally on our doorstep. On the Saturday morning we woke up to a good breakfast. Just outside the hotel was a huge market in the cathedral square selling everything and anything. Some of the group went on a First World War battlefields trip, with others staying around Arras and some exploring the underground tunnels. Our route back to Calais was via Amiens, another beautiful cathedral city and somewhere worth a visit of its own. The group were thrilled with this trip and thoroughly enjoyed it.

During 2019 the Shefford Leisure Group visited Stowe House and Gardens (pictured above right), writes **Edith Pamment** from *Eastern Branch*. It was a glorious day, enhancing the beautiful scenery in Buckinghamshire, which surrounded the gardens. We had a superb guide who explained the background history of Stowe and how, at one point, the estate fell into liquidation and was finally purchased and the beautiful building turned into a residential school. The school was originally for boys, but currently it is mixed, with several students from notable families.

We were exceptionally lucky, as the day chosen for this visit was not only beautiful but was an 'Open Day' for students and their parents, which made our visit so interesting.



After our visit to the school it was time for us to hop on our coach for our visit to the grounds of Stowe Gardens run by the National Trust, with wonderful grounds and lakes. Just inside the gardens there is a superb restaurant and cafeteria (reasonably priced), with friendly and helpful staff. Buggies were also available for those people not wishing to walk round the grounds. It was lovely to see just how many families with their pets (all well controlled) were visiting Stowe and enjoying the beautiful scenery both there and in the surrounding area. This is certainly a visit to put into one's diary for the summer months.



Life in 'sausage roll' lockdown

One of the group travel industry's best known faces, Harold Burke, sales director with just for Groups! retires later this year. But for someone whose work ethic is second to none, what's it like being in lockdown, and what's all the fuss about sausage rolls? We'd better let him explain.

Having started my career in group travel almost fifty years ago little could I have imagined that this would start to wind up, as I approach my retirement, sitting at home working from my dining room table and contemplating the cancellation of the next batch of tours scheduled to depart later this year. Yet this year started off so well with a determination to end my career on a high and my team doing an excellent job in making sure that was going to happen as sales continued to flow in.

At first, when the effects of the Covid-19 virus started to impact on the early March tours, there was concern that this could prove to be disruptive. This was followed by a gradual realisation as to just how disruptive it was to become following the government announcement to stay at home. Suddenly we were cancelling tours for the next five months knowing the majority of our clients were within the most vulnerable age groups. Now I am a home worker making sure I not only maintain regular communications with our valued clients but also with the rest of my team whilst they are in furlough and anxious to know their group leaders are safe and well.

Working from the comfort of my dining room has however proved to be an inspiration and there has been a great deal for me to appreciate. Being able to

communicate on a personal level with all of our group leaders has been truly inspiring, due to the great patience and understanding they have shown as to the challenges we face.

Equally inspiring has been their interaction in response to my regular email updates as to our progress, my love of sausage rolls, and my garden.

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... so I'm always
in sausage roll
heaven!

I have never been known to refuse a sausage roll and quite often we are treated in the office to homemade versions. In fact Hannah lives so close to the office that hers are still warm from the oven. Next door to our office is Sainsbury's where Cheryl often picks a hot one (or two on occasion) up for me when I'm having a working lunch day! Then there is our amazing operations team who have a preference for Greggs after an early shift, so I'm always in sausage roll heaven!

To give my team something to look forward to when we are finally allowed

to return to our office I promised them I would learn how to make sausage rolls myself. Over one weekend last month I did just that with two versions, one with blue cheese for me, and another for my wife, which I also ended up having most of! Now they are even more keen to get back to work!

I am also fortunate to look out on to my lovely garden. Had I been in the office I would have missed the pheasant that came to the dining room patio door daily during March and in early April, the monk jack deer wandering through in daytime. I also enjoy the nesting birds, including the two hard working great tits I can see going back and forth feeding their hungry brood which will soon be ready to fledge. I mustn't forget to mention the wild rabbits of which I've so far identified around nine of the flower munching darlings!

When I look back on this defining moment in my career I will at least be able to take some comfort knowing it was not all bad and that in many ways it has helped bring more of us closer together. That augurs well for the future.

Do you have a story to tell? We welcome contributions to this page from Associate members. For more information email us at editorial@agto.co.uk

Quirks & CURIOSITIES

As our Associate members look forward to both working with you in the weeks and months to come, here's a slightly sideways look at some of their products.

Lockdown has sometimes felt that our home has been a bit like a prison. Well, maybe not, but it's a good link to our first Associate member, Shepton Mallet Prison and Shrewsbury Prison.

In 2013 the Ministry of Justice closed seven prisons, including the two in Shepton Mallet and Shrewsbury. Today, visitors are offered an authentic Georgian, Victorian and modern-day prison experience, led by ex-prison officers with a wealth of experience and time 'served'. Here are a few quirky facts to whet your appetite for a visit?

Shepton Mallet Prison

- Shepton Mallet Prison was the first prison the Kray Twins were transferred to after a brief stay at the Tower of London in the 1950s. It was at the prison that they met Charlie Richardson the head of the notorious Richardson gang, the main criminal rivals to the Krays in the 1960s.
- In 1610 Cornhill House was envisaged as a prison along with its one acre of land. It was bought for £160 and by 1625 the first men, women and children prisoners were being accommodated at 'Shepton Mallet Correction House'.
- The prison was closed in the 1930s due to a declining prison population

with an average of 51 prisoners. It was re-opened in 1939 as a Military 'Glasshouse'.

- The Americans used Shepton Mallet Prison as a Military Prison between 1942 and 1945.
- 300 tonnes of British Artefacts were stored in C wing during WWII including the Domesday book and many other important documents.

Shrewsbury Prison

- There are a series of tunnels under the prison, one leading to the now disused Platform 8 at the railway station, masked from the opposite platform by a high wall. This was used for transporting prisoners between 1868 and the First World War.
- The prison you see today was built on top of the original prison (1793 – 1877). You can still get down to the old original Georgian prison, where you can see original holding cells and normal cells, as well as the governor's wine cellar.
- Shrewsbury Prison held both men and women until 1922 when it became a men's only prison.
- The original building was constructed by Thomas Telford.
- A report in 2005 named Shrewsbury

prison as the most overcrowded in England and Wales.

- Albert Pierrepoint conducted four executions at the prison during the 1950s.
- During a redevelopment in 1972 the remains of 10 unnamed prisoners executed at the prison were dug up. Nine were cremated and one set was handed over to relatives.

For more information go to www.shrewsburyprison.com and www.sheptonmalletprison.com

Hever Castle

From prisons to a magnificent visitor attraction that needs little introduction, Hever Castle.

Sarah Cole, Hever's marketing and communications manager, reveals some of the castle's quirks and curiosities. Over to you Sarah.

So, many people will know that Hever Castle was the childhood home of Anne Boleyn, but do you know which other Queen lived at the castle or how many men it took to dig the lake at the end of the Italian Garden? I've been lucky enough to work at Hever Castle for six years now. During this time I've discovered lots of quirks and curiosities about the Castle and gardens, so here we go.



Shepton Mallet Prison



Shrewsbury Prison



Hever Castle

TWO QUEENS LIVED AT HEVER CASTLE

Whilst Anne Boleyn spent her childhood at Hever Castle, another of Henry VIII's wives, Anne of Cleves, owned Hever Castle until her death in 1557. Following her divorce from Henry he awarded her the honorary title of 'The King's Sister', £500 a year, a sufficient household and two houses. In addition, he allowed her to lease a number of manors to enhance her status and income, including Hever Castle, at an annual rent of £9-13s-3½d.

ANNE BOLEYN'S PRAYER BOOKS

We're privileged to have on display two prayer books which belonged to Anne Boleyn in our collection. The first is the earliest and most poignant of the books. Not only does it contain her signature and a most touching inscription, but other leading members of the Tudor court recorded their signatures on the blank folios and margins. This illuminated manuscript is the only book known where her personal annotation survives intact and is thought to be the book that she took to the scaffold.

THE 38-ACRE LAKE WAS HAND DUG BY 800 MEN

The beautiful gardens were laid out between 1904 and 1908 by Joseph Cheal and Son, turning marshland into the spectacular gardens you see today. One of the most magnificent areas is the Italian Garden, which was designed to display William Waldorf Astor's collection of Italian sculptures. Over 1,000 men worked on the grand design, with around 800 men taking two years to dig out the 38-acre lake at the far end of the Italian Garden.

HEVER CASTLE HAS ITS OWN ROSE

We have our own rose which was launched by Dame Judi Dench in 2011. The Hever Castle Rose is just one of the varieties in the walled Rose Garden which is the setting for over 4,000 roses which flourish from June until the end of September.

YOU MIGHT WANT TO BRING A TOWEL!

Did you know that Hever Castle has a



New Lanark World Heritage Site



Ramsey Park Hotel

Water Maze? Situated on Sixteen Acre Island it is a maze with a difference! It consists of a series of concentric stepping stone walkways sitting over water. At intervals the stones tilt when stood on and hidden water jets spring into action to soak the unwary visitor. The aim is to reach the stone grotto in the centre without getting wet. Few are successful although it is great fun and challenges young and old alike.

There's so much more I could tell you, and because of lockdown (at the time of writing) I'm really missing being there. Do have a look at our website – www.hevercastle.co.uk – and I look forward to seeing you again soon.

Royal Horticultural Society – the RHS

Lockdown has caused a great deal of disruption and no little disappointment for GTOs, especially those who enjoy discovering the country's many different gardens. Excitement was building about the opening of the new RHS Garden Bridgewater in Salford. As you'll have read, because of the current situation the opening was postponed and will now take place in May 2021.

The RHS prides itself on the advice it offers to gardeners of all capabilities, giving a month-by-month guide on its website. You can see more at www.rhs.org.uk/advice/in-month/june

But this is a feature all about quirks, so what might the RHS have to offer?

QUIRKY FACTS ABOUT GOOSEBERRIES!

Cultivation of gooseberries was first recorded in England as far back as the 13th century. By 1831 the Horticultural Society's London garden housed a collection of 360 different gooseberry cultivars. The 19th century saw a great rise in the prominence of the gooseberry. They were so popular that 'gooseberry clubs' were formed across the UK, with their members competing to grow the heaviest fruit. They were most numerous in the north of England where a few of these wonderful old clubs are still in existence today. There was even a national publication for enthusiasts called 'The Gooseberry Growers Register', which in 1845 listed 171 separate gooseberry shows.

The long history of gooseberries in the UK has led to a great number of local names: 'Carberry', 'Daberry', 'Dayberry', 'Dewberry', 'Fayberry', 'Feaberry', 'Fabes', 'Fapes', 'Feabs', 'Feaps', 'Goggle', 'Golfob', 'Goosegog', 'Goosegob', 'Groser', 'Groset', 'Grizzle', 'Honey-blob', 'Thapes' and 'Wineberry', to name few!

'Gooseberry' was one of many historic names given to the devil and it is thought that this may be why the 'unwanted' third party accompanying a romantic couple is sometimes referred to as a 'gooseberry'.

New Lanark World Heritage Site

New Lanark World Heritage Site is a unique 18th century mill village sitting alongside the picturesque River Clyde, less than one hour from Glasgow and Edinburgh. Visitors can discover Scotland's hidden past and see how villagers lived, learned and worked with recreated millworkers' houses and historic working machinery. The Mill Shop offers an extensive range of contemporary gifts, souvenirs, Scottish produce and the New Lanark Wool & Textiles range. There's also the 4-star, 38-bedroom New Lanark Mill Hotel that gives groups the opportunity to stay in the village overnight and have the privilege of waking up the next morning in the middle of a UNESCO World Heritage Site!

So here are five quirky facts:

- The 'Annie McLeod Experience' is a 'dark ride' that sees the ghost of mill worker Annie McLeod telling the fascinating yet sobering story of life in New Lanark in 1820. But it's at the very end of the ride that your heart gets a punch. As virtual 'Annie' says goodbye, she looks you straight in the eye and says: "Don't forget me". And indeed you don't!
- A short walk along the riverside path are the famous 'Falls of Clyde', a series of waterfalls. After heavy rain these are really rather spectacular.
- New Lanark has an important link to the Harry Potter films. New Lanark

yarn, spun onsite using original machinery, was used to make the original jumpers worn by Harry and Ron in the first film. Potter fans will know them as the 'Christmas Jumpers', knitted by Ron's mother as an initially unwelcome gift for her son and for Harry. Today, there's a team of eight making the wool for the international Harry Potter franchise.

- It can come as a surprise to discover a rooftop garden sitting on top of Mill No.2. The decision to develop it was influenced to a large extent by the views of mill-owner Robert Owen. He believed strongly in the importance of the environment and natural history, and argued that a pleasant environment was essential for happy, healthy communities.
- When you arrive at New Lanark you look down on the village from the road above. That spot has become known as 'Wow' spot, because of the comments that visitors make when they first see the village in the valley below.

For more information go to www.newlanark.org

Ramsey Park Hotel

For our final set of interesting facts we head for the Isle of Man. Ramsay Park Hotel, opened in 2012, and part of the portfolio of Associate member Classic Lodges, is located in the town of Ramsay in the north of the island. The location offers GTOs a group-friendly alternative to staying in Douglas, and can act as a base to explore the northern half of the island. The hotel says that due to its location, Ramsey has more sunshine days than any other part of the island! The hotel prides itself on the quality of its food, focusing on using local Manx produce. It has retained three major awards for seven years running.

So, any quirky facts? Of course!

- The town of Ramsey is rich in history. Famous ships such as the *Star of India* and tankers such as the *Janet* were built here.
- Ramsey is home to the Grove

Museum of Victorian Life. Built by the Gibbs, a wealthy merchant family from Liverpool as their summer retreat, it later became the permanent family home. The Gibb sisters, Alice and Janet continued to live in the house until their deaths in the 1970s. The house provides a real insight into the lives of this family from Victorian times to the 20th Century.

- Ramsey has also been popular amongst royals throughout the years. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert visited in 1874 and King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra in 1907, which is why the town is often referred to as Royal Ramsey.

For more information go to www.classiclodges.co.uk/ramsey-park

If you're an AGTO associate member and have some quirks and curiosities you'd like to share with readers, get in touch by emailing us at editorial@agto.co.uk

Indus ad HP

Carlie's Theatre Tips

Theatres may be closed, but to misquote the famous saying, the show goes on...line! GTO Carlie Newman has been delving into the internet to discover what theatrical treats are there for you to enjoy.

Well folks, we are still in lockdown and it looks as though we shall be for a while longer. Theatres are closed, but don't despair, there's lots to watch on the internet. Shows are streaming from a number of theatres and other special sites recently set up.

People are getting creative with how they socialise while isolated, and this is another opportunity.

Why not organise a date and time to simultaneously settle down with your group for a show? Here's a selection of theatre experiences that groups can find online:

Royal Shakespeare Company

The RSC has put 17 of its performances on a service called Marquee TV. You can now sign up on its website for a 30-day free trial, providing a month's access to RSC productions. Productions include *The Tempest*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Cymbeline*, *Hamlet*, *Henry IV Part 1 and Part 2*, *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Love's Labour's Won* (*Much Ado About Nothing*), *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, *Richard II*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

Marquee TV also hosts recordings of other classic plays, including Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and performances from Shakespeare's Globe. Visit www.marquee.tv/viewplans

National Theatre

The NT, under the title 'National Theatre at Home' has been offering a series of free online shows. The project started with *One Man, Two Guvnors*, a reworking of Carlo Goldoni's 1743 comedy play starring James Corden. This was extremely well received. Adaptations of *Jane Eyre* and *Treasure Island* have also been shown, as well as a version of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* starring Tamsin Greig. The National Theatre says it is putting each of these on its YouTube channel, but for how long remains to be seen. It's certainly worth checking it out to see what's there.

Go to www.nationaltheatre.org.uk

Royal Opera House

If opera is your choice of stage entertainment, London's Royal Opera House has launched a programme of free online content. Each performance is shared at 7pm on specific dates on the ROH's Facebook page and YouTube channel, allowing viewers to watch on their preferred platform. The ROH is saying it hopes

opera fans will choose to make an event out of it. Lots of operas have been shown so far, including *Peter and the Wolf* (The Royal Ballet), *Acis and Galatea* (The Royal Opera), *Così fan tutte* (The Royal Opera) and *The Metamorphosis* (The Royal Ballet). If you miss one, don't worry, the videos will remain online afterwards for audiences to catch up on.

The ROH is offering a free programme of curated online broadcasts as part of its #OurHousetoYourHouse series. Full-length productions, musical masterclasses and glimpses behind the scenes can be seen on demand of Facebook and YouTube, for free, anytime, anywhere. Check the website to see what's coming up at www.roh.org.uk

Other ROH content will also be available on Marquee TV, too, including *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *La Traviata*.

Sadler's Wells Theatre

Dance organisation Sadler's Wells Theatre has a free online platform called Digital Stage, where digital premieres of dance performances are being presented. There'll also be specially created dance workshops for the over 60s to engage with while at home (and no doubt a few under 60s as well!). Various shows are being included, including *Deluxe* by BalletBoyz, a multi-award winner dance group first formed in 2000 that I've written about before. www.sadlerswells.com

The Show Must Go Online

The aptly named 'The Show Must Go Online' is a creative initiative that brings together actors from around the world in one place - an online chat. Actors will perform all of Shakespeare's plays in the order they were (believed to be) written. Again, if you miss any performances, you can catch them later on YouTube. For details, go to www.robmyles.co.uk/theshowmustgoonline

The Old Vic

The Old Vic is streaming archived shows for free on YouTube. The first show, the award-winning production of Patrick Ness' *A Monster Calls*, directed by Sally Cookson, and featuring the original cast is available to watch until 11 June. www.oldvictheatre.com

Shakespeare's Globe

Shakespeare's Globe, located on London's Southbank, is utilising YouTube in a similar way to many other producing theatres. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (2019)

runs until 14 June and will be followed by *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2013) running through to 28 June. Others are to follow. www.shakespearesglobe.com

Jermyn Street Theatre

The little Jermyn Street Theatre near Piccadilly Circus has joined the online streaming arts community. The theatre says: "Our doors are closed, but our theatre is open! During the time of social distancing we're running the Brave New World Season. We're bringing the drama to you, entertaining our audience in the safety and comfort of your own homes." Have a look at www.jermynstreettheatre.co.uk to see what's on and what's coming up.

...and many others

Other arts organisations using YouTube include New York's Metropolitan Opera which is posting film versions of operas, and many others. Composer Andrew Lloyd Webber, a veritable institution unto himself, is pitching in as well. The composer's Really Useful Group, in partnership with Universal, is offering free broadcasts of musicals including *Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera*. I've watched these and both were excellent. A different Lloyd Webber musical streams each week on 'The Shows Must Go On!', a YouTube channel devoted to this project. Each show goes live on the channel on Friday at 7pm and usually remains viewable for 48 hours afterward.

Here's one that's great for younger viewers: *The Wind in the Willows the Musical*, which was filmed when it played at the London Palladium in 2017. This musical adaptation was put together by *Downton Abbey* creator Julian Fellowes, and places the characters of Ratty, Badger, Mole and Toad on the stage. The show can be enjoyed by simply visiting the website at www.willowsmusical.com.

Over on the Eugenius! Facebook page, viewers can watch a never-before-seen recording of the show recorded at London's The Other Palace theatre in 2017/18. The musical follows Eugene, a boy who wants to turn his comic book into a superhero film. I saw and enjoyed the original theatre version.

Finally, here's a link to 'The Showstoppers', a theatrical team whose affectionate homage to the delights and vagaries of the Eurovision Song Contest (and other work) is earning them plaudits. Check out this link. <https://bit.ly/3eJvyF9>



A Monster Calls. The Old Vic © Manuel Harlan



Shakespeare's Globe



The Tempest © RSC, Topher McGrillis

TEST YOUR knowledge

How well do you know your destinations and visitor attractions? Can you identify the locations of the following photos. Some are certainly easier than others. You'll find the answers at the bottom of p48.



| Date | Branch | Events | Contact |
|--------------------|----------|---|--|
| 10th September | National | Go Travel Show, Kempton Park | www.gotravelshow.com |
| 8th October | National | Group Leisure & Travel Show, Milton Keynes | www.grouptravelshow.com |
| 2nd-4th November | National | World Travel Market, Excel, London | www.london.wtm.co.uk |
| 13-15th November | Western | AGM and BRANCH weekend Metropole Hotel, Llandindrod Wells | Martin Gibson For contact information, go to the new AGTO website: www.agto.co.uk |
| 20th-21st November | Kent | Autumn Break, Daish's Holidays for Groups, Kendal | Jim Silvester For contact information, go to the new AGTO website: www.agto.co.uk |
| 10th December | Kent | Christmas Get Together at either Eastwell Manor or Grand Hotel, Folkestone | Jim Silvester - For contact information, go to the new AGTO website: www.agto.co.uk |
| 2021 | | | |
| 6-8th January | National | AGTO Showcase and AGM aboard Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines <i>Black Watch</i> , Liverpool to Southampton | agto@agto.co.uk |
| 23rd January | National | Excursions™ 2021 Alexandra Palace, London | www.excursionsshow.com |
| 24th-25th March | National | British Tourism & Travel Show, NEC Birmingham (no show in 2020) | www.tourismshow.co.uk |

If you're planning an event and would like the details shown on this page, please email editorial@agto.co.uk

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Answers to 'Test your knowledge': 1: Beamish 2: Banqueting House (Historic Royal Palaces) 3: Falkirk Wheel 4: Poole's Lacey (NT) 5: Southampton 6: Dinant (Belgium) 7: Bournemouth 8: Festingog Railway 9: Royal Yacht Britannia 10: Hever Castle 11: Salisbury Cathedral 12: The World of James Herriot 13: Eismeer Station, Jungfrau Railway, Switzerland 14: Newark Castle 15: Lakeland Motor Museum, Cumbria.

Are you making the most of your AGTO membership?

Whether you're a GTO or an Associate member, AGTO membership offers a wide range of benefits. Here's a summary of what they are.

FOR GROUP TRAVEL ORGANISERS:

- Discounted entry and tickets for theatres, attractions, hotels, travel and more via our 'GTO Offers' page.
- Exclusive FAM trip invitations from our Associates on our 'GTO Offers' page
- Invitation to the annual AGTO Showcase Weekend and AGM
- FREE Supplier search facilities in the Members-only section of the AGTO website
- EXCLUSIVE discounted GTO insurance cover with Towergate Insurance
- EXCLUSIVE Organiser Liability Insurance
- FREE dedicated AGTO advice line
- FREE copy of the quarterly AGTO Magazine containing news, reviews and articles from GTOs, Associates, our Branches, and across the travel and tourism industry
- FREE listing in the annual AGTO Handbook
- VIP registration to many trade shows and events
- FREE membership of your local AGTO Branch
- FREE access to contact your fellow GTO members
- Use of the AGTO logo on your literature and website
- Networking opportunities with fellow GTOs, Associate members and other industry professionals at free or low-cost events
- FREE membership to English Heritage
- FREE membership to National Trust
- COMPLIMENTARY access to National Trust for Scotland properties
- COMPLIMENTARY copy of the National Garden Scheme Yellow Book
- Discounted product training
- Advice and discounted PR support
- Advice and discounted Social Media support.

FOR ASSOCIATE (SUPPLIER) MEMBERS:

- EXCLUSIVE access to the AGTO GTO member database – with full GDPR compliance
- Discounted business planning, itinerary planning and marketing services
- Opportunities to present your business and products to GTOs at regional AGTO branch meetings
- Opportunities to host GTO familiarisation trips to showcase your products
- Invitation to the annual AGTO Showcase Weekend and AGM to mix with GTO members in both a commercial and social setting
- Opportunities to promote package or discounted entry/tickets for your business via our 'GTO Offers' page.
- Free editorial/advertising opportunities in the quarterly AGTO Magazine
- Free copy of the AGTO Magazine
- Free listing in the annual AGTO Handbook
- Free company listing with details and logo included in the Associate database on the AGTO website, with a link to your website
- Reduced costs for exhibiting in AGTO area at trade shows
- Representation services at networking events and tradeshow
- VIP registration to trade shows and events
- Have your press releases shown on the AGTO website
- Free promotion via our social media feeds, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Twitter, YouTube
- Wide range of additional sponsorship opportunities
- Free access to AGTO Branches
- Free use of the AGTO logo for your literature, website and tradeshow
- Networking opportunities with GTOs, fellow Associate members and other industry professionals at free or low-cost events
- Discounted PR advice and writing services
- Discounted Social Media advice and services
- Discounted business planning, itinerary planning and marketing services for the groups market
- FREE job vacancy advertising via the AGTO website.

TO FIND OUT HOW TO ACCESS THESE BENEFITS, LOG IN TO THE MEMBER SECTION OF THE NEW AGTO WEBSITE.

www.agto.co.uk

Will Zoom unlock the online world?

Since the start of lockdown the importance of technology in keeping communities connected has become clear. Many people, some of whom would have been hesitant in going online before the pandemic, have embraced the likes of Zoom, Google Meets and Skype. But will this new found confidence mean that a new generation of people start to appreciate the benefits of online research and information? AGTO chief executive Wendy Hartley-Scarff reviews what's been happening.

If you're reading this page after having read the rest of the magazine you'll be all too aware of the role that technology has played, and is playing, during the lockdown in helping GTOs keep in touch with their groups. Not only with their groups of course but also with Associate members and the wider travel and tourism industry.

Webinars, the name for an online seminar, have popped up all over the place giving an opportunity for you to find out about the future of river and ocean cruising, air travel, domestic and continental holidays, and, well, almost

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Far from being frightened off by the online world, many have been embracing it wholeheartedly.

every aspect of holiday travel, and all from the comfort of home. Enjoying a theatre production, an opera or a stage musical during lockdown have suddenly all become possible.

For an older population, perhaps only just getting to grips with Skype to talk to their families in other parts of the country (or world), this sudden explosion in communication technology could have been all rather scary. But in talking with a wide range of people in the over 65 age group, I've discovered that far from being frightened off by the online world, many have been embracing it wholeheartedly.

Part of this has been down to a friend or members of their families taking them through the process to set up a Zoom video call. With that in place it's a short step from clicking on the Zoom icon on the laptop, tablet or phone to clicking on Google Maps, or just Google itself (and yes, other search engines are available, whatever a search engine is!).

And therein lies the challenge. Terminology such as 'search engine' and 'browser' can leave many older people feeling disconnected with the modern world. Show these same people how to click on the 'blue button with an outline of a video camera on it' and you're away.

Let's be clear of course, for a great many older people, including most GTOs, going online has been something

they've been doing for many years. Now, I'm not suggesting for one moment that this recognition of both the importance of communications technology and the benefits of going online is universal. But as we look for any positives arising out of this appalling situation, it would be rather pleasing to think that in seeing what technology can do, a growing percentage of older people now have the confidence to go exploring online, discovering, like we all do, places they might not otherwise have found.

Over recent months AGTO has been increasing its presence across social media, posting and engaging on channels including Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and LinkedIn. On Facebook we have separate pages for each Branch. These can be useful ways to keep in touch with each other and keep up to date with what's happening. We also have our own new website (see page 3) I would urge you to visit these sites and 'like', 'share' and 'follow'. If you do post then don't forget to use the handle @AGTOUK and hashtag #AGTOUK and let's keep the conversation going.

