

“ He knows nothing and ye’s are all wasting your money.”

(Experiences of a tour guide in St John’s NL.)

The last twenty years as a tour guide have been a fantastic and memorable time. A tour guide’s challenge is to provide an enriching, enjoyable and cultural experience. More than just a job, it can become a calling in which you interact with a wide variety of people. Research and practice are important elements, but above all you need a sense of humor, common sense and you must have a real passion for what you are doing.

Mentors.

When I started first doing tours I gained a lot of insights from the late John Tessier, a former St Johns councilor. On bus training trips for the first cruise ships he demonstrated how a guide should be able to anticipate tourist attractions coming up on the tour. He emphasized, “You don’t ever tell the passengers as the bus moves past Bannerman Park that oh we just missed Colonial Building on your left hand side.”

Another of my greatest learning experiences about guiding and hiking happened in November 1996 when the late Ben Dunne led the four-day D’Ibberville Hike through Avalon wilderness to Ferryland on the Southern Shore. Ben had phenomenal energy and brought huge excitement to all aspects of organizing this 300th strenuous Anniversary hike. Ben prepared for this tour a year in advance and he was a superb communicator and motivator for everyone on the tour.

Safety first.

No matter how good a walking tour will be it is important to be aware of safety concerns. The guide should explain any potential dangers on the roads or footpaths. Jed Butt one of our most experienced tour guides in St John’s gives a great introduction and overview of the tour ahead. Then in a very humorous fashion Jed points out.

”We have many fantastic city pavements and side walks. However be advised they are not always smooth so watch out for your footing at all times during the tour.”

It can happen a person might wander away too far from a tour and get lost. So you need a sixth sense to keep an eye on your group. This can happen when you have a large cruise ship walking tour and often then we employ extra guides. Natural hazards too can interfere with a tour because a few years ago we had the spruce budworm disease, which devastated trees on Government House grounds and Bannerman Park. Only recently hurricane Larry did similar damage and left us with many downed trees and debris. When these events happen we take an alternate route or indeed cancel all tours.

Being prepared and anticipating questions

Today many people select a tour and book on line and show up on the date of the tour. There are always a few who will ask for a precise detailed description of

everything we do the tour. I have learnt by experience to refer them to all the virtual tour section my web page.

A good guide has to think on his or her feet and know how to answer questions. Of course, you don't know everything and you should say so. Travelers today often have more sophisticated or pointed questions such as "Why is Labrador part of Newfoundland?" or "Where is the Royal Newfoundland Regiment Munity plaque?" "What was Commission Government" and can you explain the Churchill Falls deal?

Striking out big time.

On my first bus tour with cruise passengers I was too clever and really struck out big time. I tried to answer this really simple question.

"How come Newfoundland has a special time zone of it's own?"

A quick witty response was all that was really needed. I could have said we are the most easterly point in North America and we are always head of everyone. But being a former geography teacher I started into a full lesson on times zones, longitude, Greenwich etc. and after two minutes I had completely lost my entire group.

At the start of the tour.

Always give guests a little background about yourself and maybe tell the story how you got involved in doing tours. Then you can request guests to briefly introduce themselves and where they live. If you have only Canadians on the tour then you can pitch the tour in a certain manner. Take time at this first stop to make guests feel at ease and tell them if they feel tired or exhausted at any time do let the guide know. Most guides will have water and a first aid kit. Tell the group the number of stops and inform them there is least one washroom break on route. Let tour participants know exactly where the tour finishes and approximate time of arrival. Recently I have invited a few of the out of town guests to join me for a coffee before the morning tour.

Being heckled, protests and good-natured banter?

Yes these are some of the many things that can happen on a walking tour or being a bus tour guide. Once or twice I have been heckled on the walk with a bystander who wants to add his own views on our former premier Joey Smallwood. Another time a person confronted me and our tour outside Colonial Building by asking, "Can you prove there is God?" As a general rule you diffuse these situation. If you have twenty guests on the walk the last thing you want to do is say or do anything that might sour the tour. I learnt this the hard way on one of early tours at the an employee at a tourist attraction argued with me that his former high school team had won the Boyle hockey trophy more than any other team in Newfoundland.

Oh there was the real sunny July day at Bannerman Park when several people wanted a debate on Confederation with Canada. Lesson learned there were many push button issues in the polarized times and so don't be taken off guard.

Sometimes when I have a group close walking close to any government buildings a TV camera crew will ask if there is some kind of strike or protest happening. When you have a large cruise ship on a walk there are always questions and a buzz and of course good-natured banter. So be ready with some self-effacing humor and lighten up for your guests

When guiding a walking tour comments or interruptions may come from a passer-by. Once in downtown St John's, a red pickup truck drove slowly by my walking tour stood at the traffic lights at Cavendish Square and the driver roared out to my group as he put up his fist high in the air.

"He knows nothing and ye's all are all wasting your money."

My walking tour burst out into spontaneous laughter. Then I recognized the driver was a former student of mine from Baltimore High School on the Southern Shore. As he sped off laughing he gave me the thumbs up sign. Yes, these are some of the many things that can happen to a tour guide.

Know your history.

My brother Sean in London England is a well-known "Jack the Ripper" tour guide in recently featured in "Time Out magazine. A few years ago both of us were on a "Famine Village Tour" in Dooagh a remote part of Donegal, Ireland. We had all kinds of testing question for the unsuspecting tour guide but with amazing aplomb the guide impressed us greatly. First of all this guide had a super sense of humor and extremely knowledgeable about everything about the Famine. His answers were quick concise and unbiased. Lesson learnt - many issues and personalities are highly contested and polarized.

Often folks want information on internet service, super market or pharmacy in the downtown. So you must be prepared on your tour and if you get an usual question that stumps you - say so and this gives you an opportunity to use this question on another tour. If someone wants more information then suggest to him or her to have a chat after the tour.

Tour guide has to improvise

A good guide also has to improvise when faced with awkward situations. I was leading a bus group on Signal Hill and I had just given a short talk to a mainly German-speaking group. I still remember some of my high school German and often I will say a few words of welcome in German passengers on the bus. Suddenly an elderly woman came to me in a completely agitated state. At first I was confused what she wanted but I was able to ascertain that she urgently had to go to the washroom. Even today there are no public washrooms on the top of Signal Hill. I had to think really fast to find a solution to her predicament. So I stood guard a few feet away at the door of an empty stone building beside the iconic travel signpost.

Another example is when I led a walking tour for a group attending an Irish Language. When we drew near the house of Sir Hugh Tudor the leader of the infamous Black and Tans in Ireland I was about to stop and give a short presentation

the group leader Harry hurried over and whispered to me to move on as folks in the group didn't want to hear anything about Tudor.

Trying to work with the bus driver from Hell

A bus tour guide you need to have a good working relationship with your bus driver I have been really pleased and happy with the knowledge and support of all our fantastic local drivers. As a general rule the driver and the guide have a chat before the tour. We agree to work as a team and at the end of the day we split tips that we hope to collect assuming we have done a super job. Once I did have the bus driver from Hell. Yes he wanted to take over my job and be the tour guide as well. But early on the tour I mentioned to the passengers that I as a former teacher I knew a good number of things on the history and culture of our province. I casually said I was a humble tour guide since I didn't know everything. I had let the cat in as this was the bait for Mr. Know –It –All Driver from somewhere on the West Coast. As the tour left Cape Spear he kept adding and often contradicting my commentary. When our bus pulled into Petty Harbor the passengers all got out to go shopping. I figured this was my time to make my feelings known and have a set to with him.

I pondered how I would remind him his role was that of a driver and I was the guide. For example cooperation between the driver and guide makes a great tour for the cruise passengers who have paid huge money for a tour. They should not be treated to a gong show between the driver and the guide –like the racket that happened when Concorde passengers came to Bay Bulls a few years earlier. On that infamous occasion rival boat tour operators had a very public squabble as the French passengers looked on in disbelief

But I decided to take the high road and let Mr. Know It All driver ramble on for the rest of the tour. When we came back to St John's indeed my patience was rewarded generously in tips at the end of the tour. Later I checked around with other guides and they knew all about this driver.

Strange and funny things that happen on a tour.

Most people pay promptly for the tour but there was an occasion when one couple left the tour with out paying. Some others on the tour paid for them. And then there was time when I did a tour from The Rooms and gentlemen from parts unknown was reluctant to pay for some how he though if the tour started near The Rooms it should be free.

Guest like value for money and appreciate a guide who is alert energetic and enthusiastic. Having said that I still remember the small party who took the tour on a vicious wet windy day. I tried to be upbeat despite the conditions and had offered to reschedule the tour. When we reached Government House grounds I think that the Lt Governor Edward Roberts took pity on the group because he graciously invited the group inside so that they could do a twenty-minute tour of Government House. I was trenched and really I was hoping to dry out a little but believe it or not the group leader declined Mr. Roberts invite. It seemed she thought they might miss out on something during the rest of the tour. After a cruise tours have invited me to

join them for a meal down town or better still dinner of the ship.. Another charming Irish couple from Cork gave me a book of Seamus Heaney poems. But one July 1 holiday I had no tours or bookings. One person showed up for a non- existent tour and afterwards he wrote a scathing review on my tours. But the up side was it gave me an opportunity to turn negative comments into positive ones. People leave things behind on a tour like a cap hat or stick and once a lady lost her purse and the tour group had to retrace or steps to find it.

Why do people love walking tours?

All kinds of people come on my walking tours to have an enjoyable time learning about our history and culture of this place. Tourist come from everywhere but most are from Canada and the States Another large segment are convention delegates, cruise passengers and returning Newfoundlander but really every year is a Come Home Year. I get prospective house buyers, newcomers who want to know about their new city and if there are any Royal visits or Government meetings often security people sign up for the tour.

Despite all the countless high tech apps and podcasts the ordinary walking tour has a unique appeal for a traveller to a new city. In a way you enter into downtown areas of the city sometimes that locals are inclined to shun. No two tours are the same because guides have different personalities. Some guides have the complete tour scripted while others are more spontaneous .In all cases guests like talking to a local person and above hearing their story. That it is it. Walking tours are low impact and give enormous customer satisfaction. In our virtual digital age meeting and interacting with people have become a lost art. Consider the times when you contact a large organization or a government office and you rarely will hear a real live human voice.

Short stories, speeches, drama recitation, poems and anecdotes enhance a story but in the age of political correctness telling of any jokes is always problematic. A tour guide can't wing it and each year research has to be updated.

Ending of a great tour.

What makes a good tour is had to define? But it is enhanced by interaction between guests and the tour leader. In a way the energy and personality of the guide drives a tour. The last stop on the tour should end with a flourish like the end of a dramatic performance. In a way the tour is like a Camino pilgrimage through the narrow cobbled streets and alleyways. Tour participant's have often told me how deeply moved they were with Ferryland actor Randy Crane's rendition of "The Ode to Newfoundland" at the National War Memorial to finish our walking tour. This is a one way to finish a tour on a high point.

Parting Words.

After the tour it is important to stay around for a while and answer any questions or queries that might come up, Travelers today are very sophisticated and often have penetrating questions or queries. Often they will ask me for suggestions of places to

eat for lunch, other tours, concerts and so on. Then we all wave goodbye and get ready for the rest of the day.

Ah. If only Government tourism organizations and city authorities really knew how important tour guides are as ambassadors for our province and city. It is possible Who knows? I might see some of them this summer but I am sure you will be there.