

BLACK COUNTRY LADIES By Joan Blundell

A few years ago I spent a week touring Italy by coach. It was a holiday which made me very proud to be British. (Yes, it really did) It showed me Black Country women at their best. A week isn't very long in which to tour Italy and the elderly ladies on our coach made the most of every minute.

Our pick-up point was Dudley Zoo. The coach arrived promptly at 9am and I was greeted by row upon row of smiling faces. Most of them were elderly, to a lesser or greater degree, and there was one very plump boy of about ten on the front seat, who was unsmiling.

It soon became evident that most of these ladies knew each other. Apparently they all used a hairdresser called Elaine, who took it upon herself to organise coach holidays for them. She had seen to it that they had their regular courier for this trip, Phil, who obliged with a non-stop comedy routine when interest in the scenery flagged. He made time for communal games of bingo in the small hours when no one, except Tim, in his front seat, wanted to sleep. Though I am surprised we didn't all sleep all the way across the continent as the tea and coffee Phil served at regular intervals, day and night, was liberally laced with spirits, upon request. The more elderly the traveller, it seemed, the more frequent the request.

The whole party disappeared briskly into the bar as soon as we boarded the ferry out, with Tim bringing up the rear as, once over the channel, we were to spend our first night on the coach and we needed to be well fortified. After a film, a game of bingo and a nightcap we slept through what the driver informed us had been the most spectacular alpine thunderstorm he had ever seen. Hence Switzerland went unnoticed.

Another day on the road saw us a little unkempt, for want of a proper wash and all with feet swollen to abnormally large proportions. I was decidedly out of sorts, but did my companions grumble? No they did not. At each service station we hobbled around comparing our feet and doing ankle flexing exercises. No one bought refreshments, of course, as we'd brought our own. Out came the cool boxes, bags, flasks and holdalls. I don't know how the coach had negotiated the Alps at all carrying so much baggage. I did feel I was letting the side down a little with my meagre supply of Arrowroot biscuits, apples, cream crackers and cheese.

Maybe I was being over cautious with my conservative English digestive system, but it was very worrying to see all our party plying Tim, slumped in his front seat, with a frightening mixture of sweet and savoury snacks as they got on and off the coach. He washed them all down with an endless supply of Diet Coke. There was even a flicker of a smile. However, it wasn't surprising that on arrival in Italy at the elegant spar town which was to be our base camp, he was confined to his room with a chronic bilious attack. He consequently missed our trips to Florence and Pisa. He was totally incapacitated for 48 hours, re-emerging hand in hand with his proud

mom, pale, smiling bravely and looking not one ounce thinner. The elderly ladies fussed and petted him and our driver, a large affable man who said very little, took him under his wing. Man to man they spent most of their spare time sitting together, eating the odd bag of crisps and surveying the world with an air of silent male superiority.

Although there was a smattering of husbands, the bulk of the party was female and the most memorable were those elderly ladies, those empire building matriarchs who never ever faltered in their resolve. They were always there for breakfast, smart and freshly combed, chatting and eager to embark on the day ahead. They never missed a trip, no matter how tired they must have been, it was on the agenda, paid for, so they went and enjoyed themselves.

It was Elsie (83), tall and thin as a bean pole, who led our party through Rome. It was 104 degrees and I was flagging badly and frantically looking for a McDonalds, where the air conditioning produced icicles. Elsie however, was looking for the Trevi Fountain. She was wearing white socks and shoes, long white shorts, a white sleeveless shirt, matching floppy sun hat, and carried a rucksack. She was a woman to follow. At the fountain she threw her coin in with a promise to return and I didn't doubt that she would.

Elsie wasn't the only octogenarian to wear shorts. Marge's were more of the divided skirt variety, white and hovering on the knee, with matching blouse, baseball cap, socks and tennis shoes.

These two ladies were on the evening hike, organised to follow our day in Rome, by Marge's lovely daughter. It had obviously been noted that the official female guides around the eternal city had held little flags aloft to advertise their position to their particular group of tourists. They invariably walked seductively, with one hand on hip, and Marge's daughter led our expedition in a similar manner, holding aloft a white hankie. Unfortunately, she didn't know the way to the medieval village perched on the hillside overlooking the town, which was our destination. As Marge explained, their little group had spent most of their evenings getting lost and trying to find their way back to the hotel.

A handsome young man left the van he was loading and spent about ten minutes trying to understand as our guide attempted to mime the cable car we were trying to find, to get us to our medieval vil-lage. He smiled kindly and waved us on our way. He was totally bemused and unable to help us, but it didn't matter because our guide had fallen hopelessly in love.

We were all tired and hot after Rome and Marge had to have frequent rests by the roadside, but give in - never! We found our village and Marge took a group photo as we lounged with a drink, enjoying the cool, softly scented night air and the spectacular view of the town below. "She won't remember who you all are next week" laughed our guide as her mom crouched over her camera.

Ethel was another happy snapper. She was plump, tiny, and had 16 great-grandchildren. She observed how the stylish people of Italy sat outside hotels, sipping their after-dinner coffee, greeting everyone with a regal smile or 'Bonjorno'. One evening I arrived back to be greeted by Ethel and her pal Sadie, who had dragged a couple of the hotel lounge chairs outside and, after snapping me as I turned the corner, hailed me with a loud, very Black Country, 'bonjorno' of her own. On that occasion Ethel was wearing a floral print dress with shoestring shoulder straps over a canary yellow T-shirt. It has to be said that the effect wasn't one of sophisticated elegance, but it was definitely one of lovable warmth.

They blended in with the locals those Black Country ladies and they were loved. I think the open, honest way they smiled and their ability to laugh at themselves gave them a common language. The Italians liked us because of them - they smiled back.

It was these remarkable grannies who commiserated when my feet swelled even more grotesquely on the return journey, demonstrating even more ankle exercises. They were also first in the queue for the full English breakfast at 6am on the ferry as we steamed back towards those white cliffs. There was Lizzie, 76 years old and immaculately made up and coiffured, smoking her first cigarette of the day; her splendidly spindly ankles elegantly entwined above her high-heeled shoes.

I was so proud. The glories of Rome, breathtaking beauty of Florence, the elegance and sophistication of Italy had held us all spellbound. The atmosphere, the history, the sensitivity of the Italian people had fed our souls, but how we relaxed into the welcoming arms of the lush, green rolling beauty of the English countryside.

The coach became quiet. Was it peace or just exhaustion? I don't know. The holiday was done, mission accomplished. The ladies smiled in quiet contentment. The holdalls were now full of duty-free bargains and the flasks and cool boxes were packed away. No one had mentioned the lack of air conditioning on the coach when we'd sweltered our way to Rome and Florence, nor the poor hotel food. Instead we'd laughed at Phil's jokes, looked at the fields of sunflowers and talked. Had we ever stopped talking? We certainly didn't take much note of what we were eating; besides, we'd taken enough food with us to feed an army.

A triumphant looking Tim won the final game of bingo and we all applauded wildly. Telephone numbers were exchanged. "She won't ring" said Marge's daughter, with a knowing wink. Marge laughed with good humour, after all, she had taken a photograph of her daughter in their hotel suite, caught totally unawares, using the bidet.

Lizzie did ring me a couple of months later. Did I want to join them on a boating holiday on the Rhine? Too much for me I'm afraid. While Marge was winging her way to Florida with her daughter and grandchildren, three days after our return, I was still waiting for my feet to go down and catching up on some sleep. But it was a wonderful holiday, I enjoyed every minute.

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