



MARGIE FULLMER

SEASONED TRAVELER

by Jerry Soverinsky

I love guiding European bike trips. It's what I do for a living, and I wouldn't trade jobs with anyone. (Not entirely true — I'd consider eating chocolate or reading comic books if either were a paying job with a 401k.) While my friends describe my job as "an extended overseas spinning class," I'm quick to correct them. "First of all, there's no loud music when we ride. (Not entirely true — we once cycled past a Janis Joplin tribute in Amsterdam's Vondelpark.) And second of all, hey, what's that on ESPN?" I ask, grabbing the remote. My mind tends to wander.

My friend Karl put me back on track, pressing me to defend myself. "You travel the world, you meet people from all different cultures. I don't believe it, Jerry," he said, dismissing my insistence that the life of a bike tour director is not all fun and excitement. My other friend Jill nodded in agreement.

Here's a story I told them to illustrate my point.

In 1990, I led a bike tour of England in June, when pollen is abundant. I'm allergic to pollen and my eyes swell like bocce balls when I undergo an allergic reaction. The bed-and-breakfast where my group was staying was a few blocks from the University of London. I was twenty-three years old, just out of school and guiding one of my company's first European cycling groups. London was a mid-itinerary stop, a three-day sightseeing break that afforded me some coveted rest from the previous weeks' chaotic travel schedule. Including me and my co-leader, a group of twenty had cycled almost four hundred miles in the previous seven days. My company's support van was a late 1970s Volkswagen LT 35, and it had significantly more problems than my group tackling the mileage. Miraculously, it had made it through a grueling week in the Swiss Alps just weeks before and was resting comfortably now in one of the university's nearby parking lots. Which, by itself, had been no easy feat. After a late-evening arrival in London, I searched frantically for nearby parking facilities, and was sadly disappointed. Not so easy to find parking for a cargo van in downtown London. Finally, I found a lot next to the university's chemistry building, a mere three blocks from my hotel. After a gener-

ous payoff to the building's night watchman, I was permitted to park my company's van. It's amazing what twenty pounds can buy you in England. This was an ideal situation for me as my car was now less than a five-minute walk from my hotel. And, being the paranoid traveler that I was, it gave me the opportunity to quickly monitor its safety thirty-six times a day.

If you've never worked for a bike tour company, you should know that it is an exhausting line of work, and you tend to search for whatever personal time you can find to rest and replenish your energy. A ten-minute break reading a newspaper is an indulgent escape, and you cherish those exceptional moments.

On Monday morning, June 3, 1990 — I know because it says so on the police report — I awoke at 6:15 a.m., and after a perfunctory check of my company's van, I ventured to the chemistry building's student lounge to enjoy a cup of coffee. I settled onto a worn couch for what I hoped would be several minutes of quiet and relaxation. Because it was June, because I was in England, and because there was pollen, my allergies were activated and my eyes were swollen like bocce balls. So there I was in a ripped T-shirt, tattered sweatpants, money pouch, and shower sandals. I was unshaven and unshowered. My bocce-ball eyes were glazed over and I was clutching a paper cup of nearly undrinkable coffee, staring off into space — in short, I was an absolute mess — when two plain-clothes detectives sandwiched me on the couch.

"What have you got there?" the one on my left said, while digging an elbow into my thigh.

"Wha . . .," I managed to mutter, still somewhat dazed.

"What's this, this here?" said the one on my left, grabbing at my money belt, a staple of any competent bike tour guide.

The two introduced themselves as undercover detectives pursuing a university drug ring. I heard myself laughing. "Drugs! You've gotta be kidding. Everybody knows I'm a Scotch drinker!" My first mistake. British police are not known for light-hearted banter. Think Ann Robinson of the television show *Wakest Link*.

I evidently fit the profile of the students they were investigating so they quickly identified themselves while flashing police badges. It was all happening so fast. My eyes, still a glazed mess, didn't betray my confusion.

*“Allergy pills. They're allergy pills.” I responded. Scenes from *Midnight Express* crept into my mind.*

“I'm sorry. Can I see those badges again?” I challenged. Another mistake. These British police weren't fans of people aware of their rights.

I deduced that their answer was no when they pinned me to the ground, my face pressed to the grungy basement floor. Moments later, one of the detectives methodically — and I stress methodically — searched my “person.”

Next, one of the officers aggressively searched my money pouch, examining its contents with intensity and purpose. This

brings us to another important piece of advice from a seasoned bike tour director and guide: If you ever travel overseas, never — and I repeat never — take medication out of their prescription bottles. It's just stupid, stupid, stupid. Because, as the

detectives haphazardly threw the contents of my money belt — a wallet, notebook, highlighters, pens, army knife, binaca, Snickers bar, and liquid soap — on the ground they found a small bag of allergy pills that I had packed for myself days earlier. I hadn't wanted to carry the entire pill bottle so I had removed half a dozen white pills and placed them in a plastic bag, conserving space and thinking at the time what an efficient traveler I was. Once again, stupid, stupid, stupid.

“What are these?” said the one with

his knee in my back.

“What? I can't see what you're holding,” I stuttered, still pressed to the ground. Incidentally, there is a taste worse than British vending machine coffee: the University of London chemistry building's basement floor.

“These!” yelled the one whose hand was pressing my head to the ground. He turned my head slightly so I could see that he was holding my bag of allergy pills.

“Allergy pills. They're allergy pills,” I responded. Scenes from *Midnight Express* crept into my mind.

“Allergy pills!” mimicked the first. “We'll see about that.”

And so, on Monday morning, June 3, 1990, at 7:05 a.m., I was escorted by officers Richards and Barber to London's 17th district police station, just off the corner of Russell Square. The song “Yankee Doodle Dandy” (the Patti LaBelle version) began playing in my head as this nightmare continued to unfold.

As a newcomer to the bike touring industry, I had relied on advice from the

popular travel guides — *Let's Go*, *Frommer's*, *Fodor's* — for tips on traveling abroad. But nowhere, I mean absolutely nowhere, do they address your legal rights while being strip-searched in a British police station. So there I was, twenty-three years old — with a group of twenty or so travelers a few blocks away who were probably wondering what had happened to their tour leader — buck naked in a dingy office in London's 17th district police station. I remember thinking that the search at the student lounge thirty minutes earlier was methodical, but I now realized methodical was a relative term. I would now more properly refer to the first search as flirtatious. The search in the police station was methodical. *Surgically* methodical.

I was questioned by several officers whose names I can't remember. Much of the morning is still a blur, especially fourteen years later, but two things definitely stick out in my mind. It's crazy what you remember during times of crisis. First, Officer Barber had absolutely abominable breath (British vending machine coffee

meets a sulphur plant explosion), and I remember thinking it might be better to confess than subject myself to further interrogation. Second, the police clerk's desk had the most extensive collection of stamps — vintage World War II steel models for processing paperwork — that I had ever seen. There must have been over thirty, maybe thirty-five. Very impressive, and so well organized, too!

It took close to an hour for me to explain my situation, and then three detectives — that's officers Richards and Barber, joined by crime expert John Courtney (I never did get his title; they merely indicated he was a crime expert) escorted me to my hotel where I produced the original prescription bottle. Thankfully, only my co-leader was waiting for me at the hotel as my group had dispersed for a day of London sightseeing. After close inspection, John Courtney deduced that the pills in the bag and bottle were identical and that their markings indeed verified them to be of a prescriptive nature. I'm guessing the fact that I was a United States

citizen who had been in England for less than forty-eight hours, traveling with a group of twenty cyclists, helped him reach the conclusion that I was not involved in a long-term university drug ring, but they never offered me their reasoning.

“So now you see the life of a bike tour director is not all fun and games,” I told my friends as I turned on the television. Nick at Nite was starting. “Just remember England.”

“Please!” laughed Karl. “Look who you're talking to. I clean chickens for a living!”

“What about me?” asked Jill. “I answer fan mail at *The Ricki Lake Show!*”

“Call it even?” I asked as I turned up the volume.

“Not even close,” they replied. And we settled in to watch *Bewitched*. **AC**

Jerry Soverinski is the owner/operator of CBT Tours and has recently published the book Cycle Europe: 20 Tours, 12 Countries.