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War stories

By Catherine Nixey

A young travel company is offering holidays to sites of recent conflict, with journalists and diplomats as guides



Witnessed: the city of Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the old bridge of which was almost completely destroyed in the war

I suspect that Kate Adie is not fond of the word “schoolmarmish” – a word one newspaper used to describe her when she was reporting for the BBC. But as she turns, with her pearls and her perfect vowels, to address the coach party, it is precisely the word that comes to mind. She kneels on her seat; the group sits to attention. There is, almost needless to say, no talking at the back. Ms Adie, one senses, is not the sort to tolerate misbehaviour.

Not that you would want to talk over this. Adie’s appearance may have the whiff of home-counties headmistress to it but her words definitely do not. “This is Sniper Alley,” she says, before adding, with the kind of casualness that indicates quite the reverse, that here was where her vehicle “took a spray of bullets. One went through.

I got bullet fragments in my foot.” Ms Adie sits back. The class digests. School trips were never like this.

For those who are not familiar with her career, Adie was, for more than a decade, probably the BBC’s best-known news correspondent, reporting on the Rwandan genocide, the Gulf war and, most famously, the siege of Sarajevo. She was also one of its hardest. The foot wound is just one of three bullet wounds she has sustained. According to the BBC, British squaddies used to joke that “when Kate Adie arrived on the scene ... they knew they were in trouble”.

Those that are familiar with her work may wonder why she is now accompanying a holiday tour of Bosnia. Adie turns to the right. “We used to try and broadcast from the top of that building ...”

Actually, the presence of Adie is one of the least unusual aspects of this holiday, run by the company Political Tours. Though the word “holiday”, with its larky connotations, feels inappropriate here. Because this trip visits a man who had 23 members of his family killed; drops in on a war crimes court; visits Mostar and Tito’s former nuclear bunker; and speaks to survivors of the Srebrenica massacre. As Nicholas Wood, Political Tours’ director puts it, the company’s “alternative strapline is, ‘We don’t do beaches’”.

Indeed they don’t. Other tours include North Korea (“what next for the world’s most isolated state?”), Turkey and the Kurds (“settlement or escalating conflict?”), Kosovo (“Europe’s youngest state”) and Northern Ireland (“amid a resurgence of renegade paramilitaries”). The closest they get to sand is Libya (“Can Libya disarm and secure a peaceful future?”).



A former Balkans correspondent for the New York Times, Wood is wearing a perfect foreign correspondent outfit: brown leather shoes, blue jacket, dun-coloured trousers, floppy brown fringe. He looks like the sort of man to say “how do you do?”; and, indeed, he does. He is also, he says, the sort of person who “can’t stand the idea of lying on a deckchair and just doing nothing”.

He started the company because “you have art history tours, music tours, history tours. It seemed to me blatantly obvious that people are interested in news and current affairs yet there was no serious political tour company.”

He aims with each holiday to give visitors something “like a news documentary ... interviews with real people, in real places, and we provide serious analytical commentary in between”, so they can see “the world as it is”. He is keen to emphasise that “we are not doing war tourism per se.”

Still, it’s fair to say we’re not in Sarajevo because the Bosnians and Serbs have spent the past 20 years in peaceful productivity. The war has gone but its ghosts have not. A perfectly renovated block of flats stands next to one pockmarked by shellfire. A perfectly seeded football pitch lies next to a pitch that during the siege was turned into a graveyard.

Adie arrives the morning after the rest of the group. In the hotel, she gives us a talk on what Sarajevo was like during the siege. As she speaks, I watch my fellow tourists. Before coming, I had expected Adie would be the main attraction. As soon as I meet the group I realise that I have somewhat underestimated its high-mindedness.

There are five guides in total: Adie, Wood, two local journalists and Louis Sell, a former American diplomat who, quite literally, wrote the book on Bosnia (*Slobodan Milosevic and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*) and helped draft the peace agreement that ended the war here. During the week-long tour, there are also talks and conversations with more than 20 guest speakers, including a war crimes judge, a Serbian human rights advocate and a local political analyst.

The holidaymakers are an equally impressive bunch. They include, inter alia, a dapper octogenarian who came here in 1950 as part of the Marshall Plan’s European staff. Phrases such as “self-management workers’ councils” and “hefty external debt” are not uncommon at the dinner table.

Adie, however, talks more simply about life during the siege; about the food (insufficient); the toilets (unspeakable); and the beer (unending). The group, who I sense may feel more at home with discussions on external debt than lively descriptions of toilets, listen quietly.

Talk over, we set out to see “the world as it is”. As we go, I can’t help wondering why Adie is accompanying us. Her reporting from here was important, essential even, but isn’t this a little *infra dig*? “Certainly not,” she booms, suddenly headmistressy. It is, she says, no different to lecturing at a book festival; she is “hugely encouraged to find people curious to look beyond the brief news clips”. She is also, she emphasises, not the main event here but solely a bit part.

I am not sure, though, how much the Adie temperament lends itself to supporting

roles. One day we find ourselves in the old library of Sarajevo. A beautiful building, it was destroyed in the early days of the war. Adie witnessed this. At one point she and I find ourselves at the edge of the group.

“There were bits of parchment floating over the river,” she says. “It was terrible. The fire brigade’s hoses all had holes in. They’d been shot at.” I look, imagining. Moments later I turn back to say something but Adie has gone and moved to the centre of the group. “Their hoses,” I hear her saying, “had all got holes in them ...”



The Political Tours group, including Kate Adie standing centre back, listen to residents in the Bosnian village of Ahmici

On the second day, as a slow rain falls, we head to a small village near Sarajevo.

There, among soft green hills and gentle mists, we sit in Hajrudin Pezer’s house. In his garden plum trees grow. His wife takes tiny cups from lace-covered shelves to make us coffee while he explains what happened here in the war.

“My father stayed in the house with my mother,” he says. “He said, ‘Who’s going to kill me? I haven’t done anything.’ The next day criminals came and killed him. I still haven’t found his body.” His wife smiles and offers me some sugar.

I ask Pezer, as I ask everyone we speak to – the woman who lost her son, the wartime smuggler – whether they mind us asking about the war. The answer is always no. “I don’t see people who come here as vultures,” says the smuggler. “This is Bosnia.”

I’m not so sure that we are not vultures, but, then, I am also not sure that the beady eye of the vulture is any worse than the blind eye of the tourist. Travel may broaden the mind, but so homogenised is the international tourist experience, so perfectly do the high-end hotels and galleries replicate one another, that often all I learn is that I can be as bored in a museum in Istanbul as I can in London. This, however, is different. But is it right?

And then, on my final day, we go to the war crimes section of the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina. There, Phillip Weiner, an American judge, spends almost an hour explaining what is happening to the court here as the international presence – and interest – in the area wanes. He is clearly a busy man. Why did he bother with us?

“If it’s not on the front page of the newspaper, people don’t see it,” he says. “People

don't see what's going on. People should know." I ask what difference telling us, a group of 10, can make. He is adamant.

"Ten people are going to tell 10 more people," he says. And they can "go to their leaders and ensure that it continues. Otherwise, if you don't maintain a stable system, there's going to be another war."

So perhaps this is war tourism; but perhaps it is anti-war tourism, too.

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Catherine Nixey was a guest of Political Tours (www.politicaltours.com) and Netflights (www.netflights.com). The eight-night Bosnia tour cost £2,400 per person; it will be repeated in April 2013. Political Tours' next trips are to Greece (focusing on the financial crisis), North Korea and Turkey. Netflights arranges flights anywhere in the world; a return from London to Sarajevo on Lufthansa costs from £174

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