

A SLIGHT DIVERSION

Another grey Edinburgh day in October. Another wagon-load of tourists to pick up and trundle round the town.

Domnhall the driver from the tour-bus operator “Guid Guides” blew his nose, inserted the tape in the player, got another pile of leaflets from the locker. Pre-flight checks done, he pressed the button that opened the door. He had watched them gathering outside, dressed as if for the Arctic – three Japanese, at least five North Americans, two Iberians and – couldn’t quite put his finger on the earnest-looking elderly couple at the back of the queue: probably middle England.

“Welcome to Guid Guides’ tour of Auld Reekie, my friends!” he bawled, as they came aboard. He tore their tickets in half with the utmost vigour. “My name is Donald, and I am your guid guide for the morning. Please take your seats, upstairs or downstairs, it’s all the same to me. Cold inside, but you’ll have me for company! Even colder upstairs, but a grand view.”

Domnhall noticed with some annoyance that they all went upstairs, even the elderly couple. He shrugged and settled down into his seat. Might as well get on with it:

all he had to do was drive the bus and take the tips at the end of the one-hour tour. They didn't have to like him, after all; and he didn't have to like them, neither.

His pals in the pub thought it was money for old rope. Not so, said our Domnhall. First of all, he had to negotiate the traffic in the centre of town, and it took a man with nerves of steel to do that. Then he had to make sure that the tape didn't get ahead of him – no use the tourists listening to some nonsense about the High Street when the bus was still jammed in a queue up Johnstone Terrace; in that event, he had to stop the tape until he reached the right spot, then re-start it again; all without the punters noticing the gap. And then he had to listen to all the stupid questions they threw at him, and smile kindly, even answer if they looked threatening. There should aye be a welcome in the Highlands.

Domnhall set both the bus and the tape in motion. “Welcome, ladies and gentlemen,” came the well-known cultured South Edinburgh voice from the loudspeakers, “to the Guid Guides Tour of historic Edinburgh. Athens of the North to some. Auld Reekie to others. A bustling, self-confident capital. Today, you'll be taken on a tour of our city's fairest sights. You'll see the very places where history was enacted. We hope you will enjoy your experience. We'll begin our tour this

morning by driving down the Mound, so-called because...” It was all auto-pilot stuff, as Domnhall turned left at the foot of the Mound and headed at a stately speed down Princes Street, the tourists all lurching to port to snap at the Castle. When they came up to Frederick Street, Domnhall prepared to turn right, heading for George Street and the New Town.

Suddenly, there was crackle in the tape, a hiss; followed by a pause. Then:

“Today there will be a slight diversion. Instead of taking our usual route up Frederick Street and into the New Town, we will continue down Princes Street and into Shandwick Place, heading for the west of the city.”

Taken by surprise, Domnhall, swerved the bus, first right into the outside lane, then back into the bus-lane, to proceed straight ahead. Cars sounded their horns, the LRT bus-drivers tapped their heads in disdain, taxi-drivers swore, and a policeman pondered. Follow the tape, Domnhall, he muttered, just follow the tape. Some eejit at head-office must have changed the route – they’d done this before, never warned him. Domnhall cursed under his breath and paid closer attention to the tape, waiting for the next set of directions. Perhaps there were some road-works beyond George Street that they were trying to avoid? Who knows? No time to question it, just follow the tape, Domnhall.

After they had negotiated the one-way system at Haymarket, one of the Japanese chaps tiptoed up behind Domnhall and almost gave him a heart-attack by tapping him on the shoulder.

“Please,” he asked, looking very puzzled, “where we now?” And he obscured Domnhall’s line of sight by unfolding a vast map of Edinburgh.

“Don’t you worry, pal,” said Domnhall, driving blind. He pointed out the window at Donaldson’s School. “That’ll be Holyrood House over yonder.”

“Ah!” nodded the Japanese man, confused, “Hollywood!” He shook his head and headed back to his companions who admired the Deaf School in all its glory, perhaps the first tourists to do so in twenty years.

“At the next junction, we will turn left and go past Murrayfield Stadium, home of the...” Domnhall obediently turned left and into the austere backstreets of Roseburn. He was directed towards Saughton Park, Saughton Road, past Saughton Prison (Domnhall’s alma mater) and into the wind-raked boulevard which leads inexorably towards the gulag of car-showrooms at Sighthill. Domnhall was a little surprised to discover that his passengers were not complaining; it should have been obvious to anyone that they had long ago left the picturesque parts of town. But, being of a

philosophical bent, he told himself that there was no accounting for taste.

“Ladies and gentleman, you will see below you the City By-Pass, which we will now join. The By-Pass is one of the busiest roads in the Central Belt. Built in...”

Down the by-pass they careered, Domnhall sweating, fighting furiously to keep the bus from being swept off towards the M8: one false move now, and it would be Livingston, Harthill, Bathgate and over the edge of the world. Domnhall kept his nerve. “Go west, young man”, had never been a maxim that attracted him. Once, in his mis-spent youth, long hair to his shoulders, rosy spectacles, he had been as far East as the borders of Afghanistan, with his pal Billy. These days, he flew South with Audrey for a week on Majorca. But never West: Rangers supporters round every corner.

North it was. The bus edged past the Maybury Casino and crawled over the hill to the Barnton Roundabout, where the tape announced they would now detour to view the world-famous Forth Bridges. Domnhall glanced nervously at the fuel-gauge. At least the boy had filled it up last night, so plenty of fuel for a while. Still no riots upstairs. Indeed, when the bus reached the Bridge, Domnhall could even hear exclamations of approval.

Domnhall began to wonder about the sanity of head-office when the tape directed him through the Kingdom of Fife and ever northwards to Dundee. The proprietor, Mr McLean was noted for his conservatism when it came to planning the routes – even now, he refused to admit to one-way streets, which made Domnhall’s life difficult: it was obvious that Mr McLean had not been involved in this slight diversion. Perhaps young Duncan, good-for-nothing heir to the Guid Guides empire? Young Duncan was not beyond arsing about with the equipment.

But the first thing Domnhall had learned as a rookie tour-bus driver was “follow the tape”. Don’t think, don’t get above yourself, just do what the tape tells you to do, and do it at the right time. So Domnhall wasn’t about to question what the tape told him. And, in truth, it was a bit of a busman’s holiday this one, because the tape was reeling off the entire history of Scotland as they passed Kinross and Auchtermuchty: having a minor interest in Scottish history, Domnhall was rather enjoying himself. It was slow going, though: always was when you travelled up the map, much faster coming back down. Something to do with Gravity, although Domnhall had never been sure quite how it worked.

At Dundee, he was pleased to discover that they were not taking the Forfar route to Aberdeen, because he had

quite a fancy for the coast road through Montrose and Arbroath, where he and Audrey had spent their honeymoon twenty-odd years back. He ventured the old suppertime soup joke – “Guid evening, Mr Campbell. Can Jessie come oot walking wi’ me?” – “Na, son, she’s still at Arbroath”: but it found no resonance with the Americans. In recompense, the North Sea crashed onto the rocks at Johnshaven in a most diverting manner, causing all the passengers to come down from the upper deck.

When the bus crested the hill above Aberdeen, darkness was falling. Inexplicably, the Spaniards belted out all the verses of the “Northern Lights”, to roars of approval from the rest of the passengers as they careered down the hill to the Bridge of Dee. The tape directed Domnhall to the docks where, in the nick of time, they drove on board the ferry for Shetland.

It was a choppy crossing, but the elderly couple in particular seemed to feel they were getting their money’s worth. Domnhall had discovered overnight, as he fraternised in the bar (the Americans were paying), that they came from Sussex and had no understanding of the modern world. When, after some malicious encouragement from Domnhall, the old gentleman had ill-advisedly approached a group of very large and

drunken north-eastern oilmen to ascertain the meaning of “sheep-shaggers”, a profound silence had fallen over the entire ship. But the incident had passed off educationally and without bloodshed, leaving the Sussex man slightly confused and in earnest debate with his wife.

On the following day, they transferred at Lerwick to the North Atlantic ferry which took them to the Faroes and thence to Iceland. Apart from two silent Danes with vast rucksacks who left the ship at Torshavn, Domnhall’s bus-load were the only passengers. Deprived of any prompting from his tapes, Domnhall could only give selective insights into the history of the Faroe Islands to the inquisitive Spaniards. No, he explained, there were no football teams this far north. No, señor, you are wrong to suppose that Scotland has ever played the Faroe Islands at football; you must be thinking of Egypt. The Japanese were snapping away – group photos here, group photos there, all against the heaving grey mass of the North Atlantic seas. As for the Americans, they were astonished to find that England was quite so big.

On arrival at Seydisfjörður on the east coast of Iceland, Domnhall had a long drive to reach the capital city: during this rather spectacular tour over roads apparently paved entirely in lumps of lava, the tape

apologised that “We will not have the time to explore Reykjavik, but perhaps you can return to explore this fine city at your leisure. For now, your driver will take you aboard the ship for Greenland...”

Domnhall followed his instructions to the letter, making a note of all the overtime he could claim, and overnight expenses to boot, when he got back.

For reasons obscure which are now the subject of a Danish Government Inquiry, the captain of the ship from Iceland missed landfall completely at Disko Bay, and his ship ended up locked in pack-ice somewhere to the north and east of Baffin Island. As Domnhall and his passengers admired the shifting spires and crackling castles of ice which reared up all around them, there was another pop and hiss on the tape. Then a brief pause; and then Domnhall heard familiar words: “... and on the left, towering above us, you will see the magnificent monument to Sir Walter Scott, erected in 1846. When you disembark, you may, if you wish, ascend the Monument, or take afternoon-tea in Jenner’s.”

On a normal day, Domnhall would hear these words as he cruised down the home straight, only 60 seconds until he once again dropped off his bus-load of tourists outside the Art Gallery. He would be looking forward

to his next cup of tea from his Thermos, the match-reports and racing tips. On a normal day, at the end of a normal trip.

For now, in the grip of the ice drifting slowly northwards towards Ultima Thule, he missed Audrey almost as much as the sandwiches he had left back in Edinburgh. “A slight diversion, Mr McLean?” he snorted. “Aye, that’ll be right!”

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