

Travel in Europe

Bus tours are hectic, but have advantages

By DENNIS SMITH
News Editor

Question: What has 42 heads and four wheels, crosses one or more borders per day, and stops for coffee in Liechtenstein?

Answer: A European bus tour.

A variety of itineraries are offered by numerous companies in this field. Excursions of four or five days are available, as are longer treks, such as a 35-day, 12-country bus tour which takes travellers from London to Amsterdam to Athens, and points in between.

Bus (motorcoach) trips through Europe are a good option for first-timers and solo

travellers seeking company, plus those who want to minimize fuss and maximize sightseeing.

But many of the sights are seen from inside the bus, only. If you do go, take plenty of patience and Gravol (for motion sickness) with you.

Remember also, that you'll be part of a large group, and that your food, drink, entertainment and destinations are frequently typical tourist fare.

DIVIDE TIME

A good strategy is to spend part of the European vacation on a bus trip, and the

remainder on your own. I chose this compromise, taking an 11-day tour, out of four weeks overall.

The bus trip covered eight countries altogether, and passed through seven of them (including Liechtenstein) in a two-day stretch.

Such tours usually start and finish in London, but there is some flexibility. I was able to join in Brussels and leave it in Paris, for a slight fare reduction. Tours which cross continental Europe by bus, and return by air to London, are also available.

We took a circular route through coun-

tryside in Belgium and France; mountainous regions in Austria and Switzerland, and the seaside in Italy.

Free days were spent at our stops near Innsbruck, Austria; Lucerne, Switzerland; Venice and Paris. Except for the latter our hotels were located well outside these cities.

But that's part of the bus tour compromise. Outlying hotels are cheaper, and settings are often excellent (our accommodation in an Austrian mountain valley was tremendous). However, there were usually long rides into town for sightseeing or entertainment.

BUFFET BREAKFASTS

Hotels, particularly those in the Alps, were good, while meals were adequate but generally not unique. Most memorable were a couple of buffet breakfasts provided where a variety of breads, meats and cheeses included.

It was a pleasant surprise to find others besides Canadians, Americans and Britons on our tour. Those I met included a Bombay man who owned a ballpoint pen factory, and my roommate for the tour, a New Zealand farmer.

Most on our trip ranged in age from 35 to 60, although people of virtually all ages, including children, were permitted. Young adults who prefer travelling with their peers, should join tours for 18 to 35-year-olds.

Special sightseeing and entertainment on tour was plentiful, but some of it was at extra cost. Evening trips in Venice and Paris (for the "Can-can" variety show) were very worthwhile. Being part of an organized group was definitely an advantage in both cases.

There's no need to get carried away with excursions, however. Spontaneous events, like a visit to a pastry shop, or spirited game of billiards in the hotel are frequently more memorable than the organized ones.

My roommate had a memorable experience early on, when our group stopped at a coffee shop in the French countryside. There was a shortage of room there, and we quickly reboarded the bus and continued onward.

It was several minutes before we realized the New Zealander was missing, and turned the bus around. It was an experience, although embarrassing, that he'll remember well.

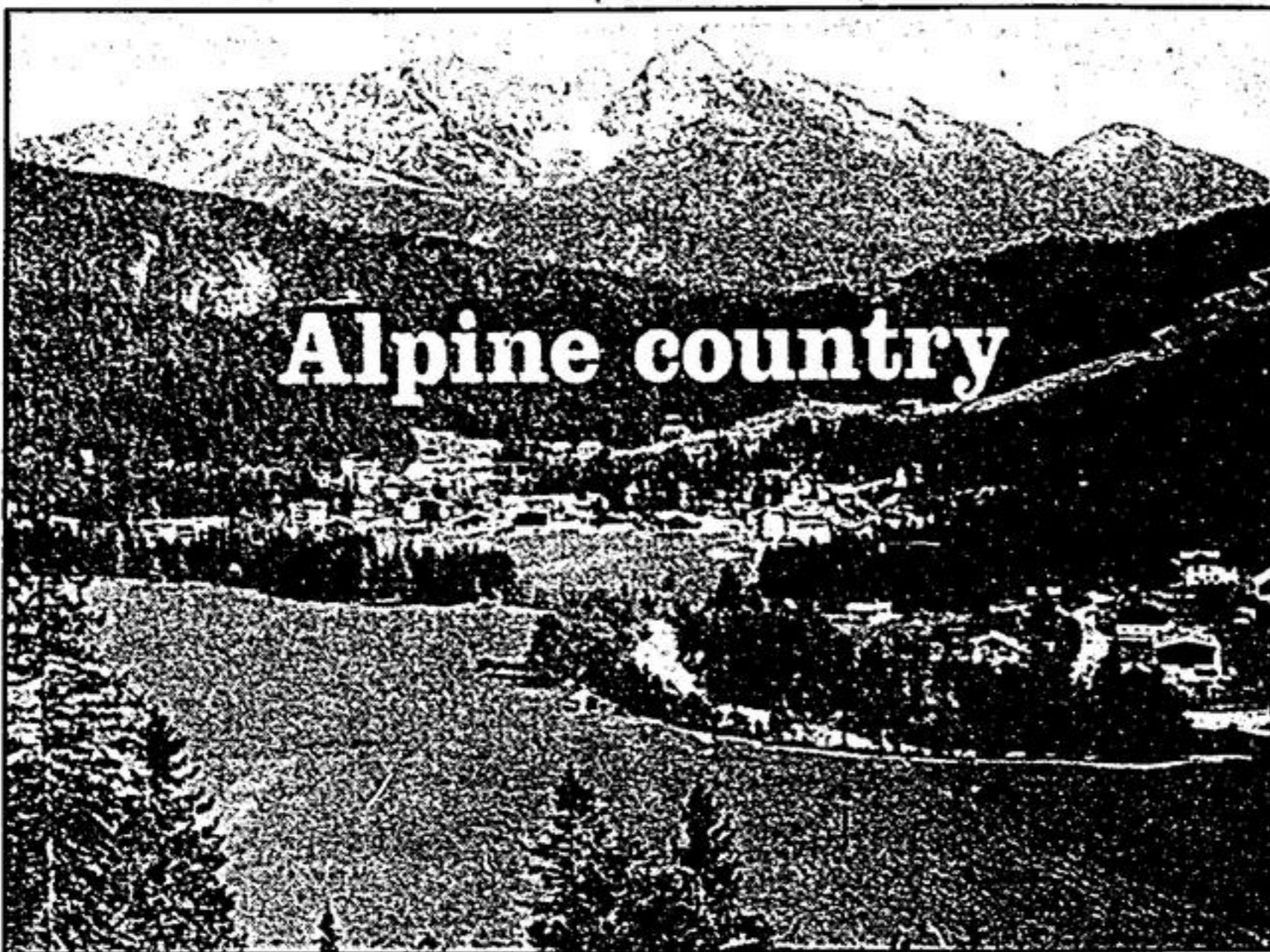
Our tour, part of the March to November series offered, cost \$425 Canadian (1983 rate) for 11 days, with slight increases for high season tours, and reductions for joining and leaving on continental Europe. For solo travellers, a guaranteed room share is available.

Winter tours are also available, through firms like Contiki, which caters to those aged 18-35.

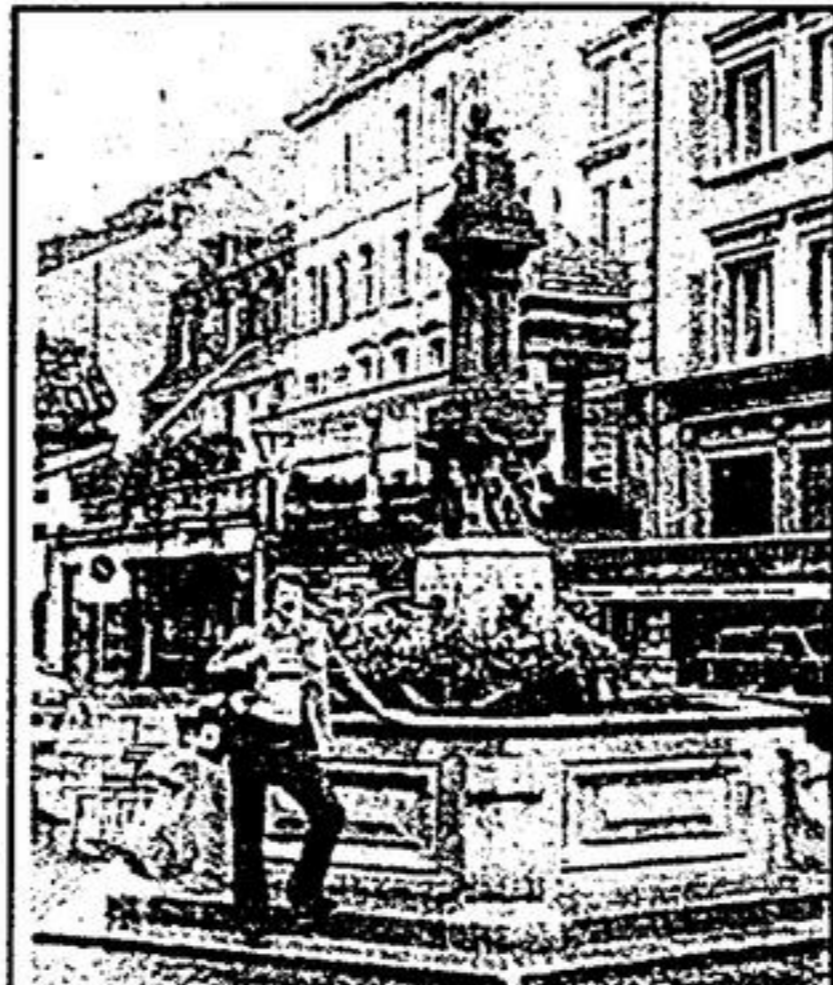
Trips included are regular bus-hotel packages (1983 prices were from \$1,210 for 20 days and from \$1,676 for 30 days), or nine to 21-day ski tours in the Austrian Alps.

Bus tours through the British Isles, eastern European countries (including the Soviet Union), and the Middle East, are also available.

Many such trips can be packaged with trans-Atlantic flights, and discount rates are available at hotels before or after the bus tour.



Alpine country



Bus trips do have their good points. At left is a valley in the Austrian Alps, near Innsbruck, where tour members stayed for two nights. Above, the writer, Dennis Smith relaxes by a monument in Lucerne, Switzerland.

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