

JOURNEYS TO EUROPE, BRITAIN LONG TRADITION, BUT OFF-ICE ITINERARIES GROWING

WHAT TO DO

HITTING THE ROAD

Christmas is time Canadian hockey teams tour Europe

BY MIKE HAYAKAWA
Staff Writer

For these sporting tour groups, the sights and sounds used to be secondary.

Hockey teams often travel during Christmas and, while they usually travel for games, today they are combining their matches with learning about other country's cultures, tour operators say.

"The priorities that teams have when they go overseas have changed," said Gary McDonnell, a Stouffville resident who has organized overseas tours for teams since 1971 through his business, Sports Tours International.

McDonnell says the idea these days is to provide the teams with the most bang for the buck.

Besides the friendly competition, touring players want equal or more time in absorbing the sights, sounds and tastes of other places.

"Any touring that teams did back then was a side thing," he said.

The Vaughan Vipers ran a 17-day training camp including a 10-game tour of Italy, Austria and German just before this year's Provincial Junior A season.

Players used the time to bond. "A lot of kids tend to think everything revolves around what goes on in North America, since it's what they mostly see, read or hear about. They don't know there's another world out there," Vipers head coach Frank Carnevale said. "When we went to Europe, we played in arenas surrounded by mountains, that the kids have never seen before and they discovered there's a lot of heritage in these places."

The Stouffville Clippers bantam club would like to say the same when they head to the Czech Republic and Austria Dec. 27 for a series of exhibition games and to watch the World Junior Hockey Championships.

"Most of the players have never travelled (outside) North America," Clippers head coach Don Easter said. "For some, this trip represents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see other parts of



STAFF FILE PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

The Stouffville Clippers bantam teams leaves Dec. 27 for the Czech Republic and Austria, including seeing part of the World Junior Hockey Championships. The Stouffville District Secondary School rugby team is going to Wales and England in March. Travel for sports teams is up, and they want to to more than play.

the world and experience other cultures first-hand."

The Stouffville District Secondary School Spartans senior boys rugby team will tour England and Wales March 7 to 19.

For Spartans coach Jamie Hewitt, it is a chance for his team to learn from some of the best.

"The way rugby is played in England and Wales is like the way Canadians play hockey," he said. "When our teams go there, their coaches will run some of our practices. It will be a unique way for our kids to learn a different culture and to make new friends, along with doing some sightseeing to a lot of historic places."

Other teams, such as the Vaughan Panthers bantam A hockey club, hope their excursion to Northern Italy Dec. 27 to Jan. 6 will build character. Most players have played for head coach John King for the last six years.

"It's about teaching kids goal setting and making them a better person," King said. "The trip will be something they won't forget and they can share with their

families."

The biggest obstacle is cost. The price was \$3,000 per person for the Vipers to travel to Europe in the fall.

Having made 18 overseas trips with other Junior A clubs, Carnevale handled all arrangements, often using contacts he made during other trips.

Youth and high school teams, attempt to offset all or a good segment of their costs by fundraising.

The Vaughan Panthers trip that starts in Milan will cost \$3,000 per player, but most of that was fundraised, King said.

"Now, it's just a matter of waiting for our final schedule and in putting together gift packages that we will give in exchange with the other teams we face," King said.

To send his Spartans' rugby team, which will also include five junior players, Hewitt said it will cost close to \$70,000.

Working closely with co-coaches Rob Edmondson and Glenn Tarver and a committee of three parents, Hewitt said fundraising has been brisk. Players sold 600

poinsettias, along with school wrist bands. As well, they will conduct a Yuk Yuk Night Feb. 9 at the Markham Fairgrounds.

The Clippers bantams, who used McDonnell's company to book their trip, said their cost per player is close to \$3,000. The club received \$1,100 through interest accumulated from the remnants of a \$10,000 donation by Art Latham in 1972 to a Swiss-bound Stouffville bantam B hockey club.

The Express estimated the cost per player was close to \$3,500 per player. They did fundraising, including a golf tournament in the summer that raised close to \$24,000. As well, he said they hope to run a Texas Hold Em night.

"If we can pay for all of the kids it would be great," he said. "The costs are tough on the parents."

"But we're excited about our trip and we're looking forward to it."

In the end, what the teams hope to accomplish in making such excursions is to provide memories the players can reminisce about for years down.

Is your team thinking of an overseas excursion but is unfamiliar with what to do? Tour company veterans Gary McDonnell and Mike Moore suggest the safest route is to use a specialist.

John King, head coach of the Vaughan Panthers bantam A team that will visit Northern Italy from Dec. 27 to Jan. 6, said he elected to go with Moore's group since he used to sponsor some of the visiting European hockey teams Moore brought into Canada for exhibition tours. King went on the recommendation of a friend, who went on a tour Moore organized.

While McDonnell and Moore recommend planning should start at least one year in advance, they said any special travel companies should provide necessities including: return flights, tour guides, accommodations, meals and ground transportation to and from sites and games.

"We will meet with a team rep and we will walk them through the whole process and give a power point presentation," Moore said.

Moore said has a 10-member staff, from which one person will accompany a team and serve as a group leader. The staff members are former coaches who have taken their teams overseas.

In addition to handling all of the arrangements, Moore and McDonnell said their companies can offer suggestions to raise money to offset costs.

"When I coached, I did two fundraisers that made lots of money," McDonnell said. "I liked to do things that were over the top."

Regardless of how competitive a team is, tours can be arranged to fit their requirements in terms of the calibre of opponents they will face and to create an itinerary to meet their needs.

"Each team has different wants," Moore said. "Triple A teams want to play a lot of competitive hockey. But I've got a peewee C team that wants to play four or five exhibition games and do some skiing in the Swiss Alps, as well."

The current market is busy, primarily due to the strength of the Canadian dollar and the economy, Moore speculated.

For more information on overseas tours, Moore can be reached at mooresports.com or 905-513-6901. McDonnell can be reached at 905-640-4399.

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