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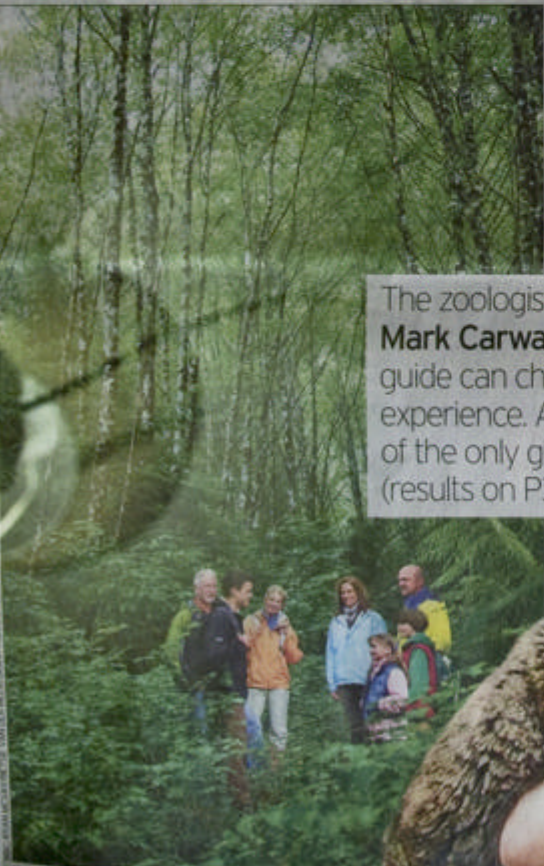
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T **travel**



FOLLOW MY LEAD...

The zoologist and TV presenter **Mark Carwardine** says a good guide can change your travel experience. As one of the judges of the only global guide awards (results on P3), he should know



To be a really good tour guide, says Mark Carwardine (right), you have to be a natural-born leader, motivator, diplomat, cheerleader and nanny



Do you know the best way to annoy a tour guide? Just say one thing they have heard a million times before: "Ooh, you're so lucky, you're always on holiday."

I'm not denying that tour guiding is a wonderful way to earn a living. Just imagine the satisfaction in spending every day with people who really are on holiday – inevitably the happiest two weeks of their entire year – and introducing them to your favourite national parks, historic buildings or watering holes – or whatever else happens to be your speciality.

But be under no illusion – to the point, an outstandingly good tour guide is undeniably, unimaginably hard work.

It does, of course, depend on what you mean by "tour guide". In its simplest form, there is a good living to be made in Bali, on the bench near the famous temple of Tanah Lot, from merely pointing at animals. First find your animal, and then point at it. If you set yourself up properly you can even make a living from pointing at the person who is pointing at the animal.

Although this is the simplest form of guiding, I discovered that it was a long-established and thriving business.



At the back of the beach there was a very low, wide cave inside which, in a small cranny in the wall, a couple of yellow snakes had set up home. Outside the cave was a man who sat on a box and collected the money, and pointed at the man in the cave. Once you had paid your money you crept into the cave, and the man in the cave pointed at the snakes.

In the same vein, last summer I went on a boat trip to see some seals in Cornwall. The trip lasted for two hours and five minutes. I know it lasted for exactly two hours and five minutes because it took one hour to get to "Seal Rock" and one hour to get back. The five minutes in between was spent with the seals. The boat's naturalist didn't utter a single word on the way out or on the way back, and the sum total of his educational commentary was: "There they are" and (five minutes later) "Everyone ready to go back?" That's tour guiding at its magnificent worst.

At the other extreme, I have the great pleasure of being one of the judges of the annual *Wonderlust* Paul Morrison Guide Awards, which are designed specifically to celebrate the achievements of the world's best guides and tour leaders. Recently, we spent a happy day judging the cream of the crop – and the winners were announced and rewarded for their magnificent efforts at the Royal Geographic Society earlier in the week. Amazingly, this is the only global award recognising the cosmopolitan guides and tour leaders.

So what is actually required of a hard-working, superhuman, prize-winning tour guide?

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FOLLOW MY LEAD...

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Well, it almost goes without saying that the very best have to be experts in their chosen fields. Wildlife tours, for example, demand guides with more than a passing knowledge of animals. It's not good enough just being able to tell a Grant's gazelle from a Thompson's gazelle – they need to be able to identify footprints and droppings, too, and have to be able to talk about the behaviour of the animals and how they fit into the world around them.

But even knowledge isn't good enough for the best of the best. They also have to be natural-born leaders, motivators, diplomats, cheerleaders, no-nies, Samaritans, first-aiders and all things to all men and women.

The best are first up in the morning, last to bed at night, and have more energy in between than a cheetah on acid.

And they need the patience of Job.

This is probably going to sound terrible, but there's a well-known saying in the tourism business that's very relevant here: "Tourists are ordinary, well-meaning folk who have left their troubles – and their brains – back home." But I can say this with a clear conscience, because I'm just as bad as the next person in switching off when I'm on holiday.

The reason we all go on guided tours is precisely because we want to be guided. And by that I don't mean simply told facts and figures about a Renaissance painting in northern Italy, or the life history of a blue whale in Mexico. We want to be told where to stand, which direction to look and what to make of it all. The more we are led, the more we switch off, and the more we need to be led.

I remember running a whale-watching tour to the Western Cape, in South Africa, many years ago.

I picked everyone up at the airport and they were so excited we decided to go straight to the top of Table Mountain. We arranged to meet at the bottom of the cable-car at 4pm.

One particular lady was missing. Two hours later she still hadn't turned up, so I called the police. A considerable manhunt ensued until, quite suddenly, she appeared as if nothing had happened. Four hours late. Instead of putting her watch two hours forward on arrival in South Africa, she had put it two hours back.

Most tour guides are unbelievably patient with little frustrations and setbacks like this. But they can't resist telling one another some of their best stories and some of the funniest questions they have been asked. It helps to keep them sane.

Here are a few of the daftest questions revealed by fellow guides working on Antarctic wildlife cruises:

"When do the penguins fly north?"

"Can you wake me up half an hour before we see whales?"

"Do you get female sperm whales?"

"Do the Zodiacs [small, rigid-hulled inflatable boats] have rest rooms?"

And my all-time personal



favourite: "Is there water all the way round this island?"

I think the toughest thing about guiding is questions. They are endless. That's not a problem in itself – in fact, it's perfectly reasonable since most people are keen to learn and want to know what's going on. But to be able to answer the sheer variety and volume of questions you get asked on a typical tour demands a brain the size of a planet.

I once led another whale-watching tour in South Africa with my friend the wildlife presenter Michaela Strachan. She had never guided a tour of land, incidentally, swore never to do it again – "It's sooooo much harder than television presenting," she confided to me afterwards.

But without telling anyone, and just out of interest, she kept a note of all the questions we were asked in a single, arbitrary hour. There were 36, ranging from "What's that little bird perched on the bush?" (we didn't know) and "Is it true that southern right whales have the biggest testicles in the world?" (yes) to "How long was Nelson Mandela in prison?" (we guessed it was 27 years) to "What shoes should we

Endangered species:
Mark Carwardine and
Stephen Fry in the
Amazon in Brazil for
the BBC Two series
'Last Chance to See'

wear for the boat trip this afternoon?" (non-slip waterproof).

I'm not sure if it works exactly like this, but if we were asked 36 questions an hour, and we were with everyone for 14 hours a day for a total of 14 days, then we were asked no fewer than 7,056 questions during the trip. Sometimes, it feels like being pecked to death by pigeons – but the best guides rise above the temptation to run away and hide, smile and answer politely (and accurately).

Some guides inevitably develop stock answers. The best I ever heard was on a boat trip in the Everglades, in Florida. The boat passed under a snake draped over a branch and someone asked the on-board naturalist if he ever had problems with snakes falling into the boat. His answer? "Nope. No problem. Snakes in the boat, people in the water. People in the water, alligators in the water. Alligators in the water, people back in the boat. No problem at all."

I've only once been lost for words while guiding. I was leading a trip in Monterey Bay, California, to see killer whales. They gather in the bay every spring to hunt grey whale calves as they travel north with their mothers. It was all explained very

clearly in the brochure. But one particular couple – who happened to be vegan – were absolutely horrified to discover that killer whales kill things (I wanted to point out that the clue was in the name, but managed to bite my tongue just in time). They insisted on coming out on the boat every day, but whenever we saw "those beastly killer whales" they stood at the back, with their arms folded, looking terribly cross and refusing to watch.

More recently, I have been on a round-the-world tour with Stephen Fry, searching for endangered animals for the BBC Two series *Last Chance to See*. In essence, he was the tourist and I was the guide. His role was to point in trees and say "Gosh, what's that?" a lot, and mine was to make sure he knew where to look and what he was looking at. In practice, of course, Stephen (being Stephen Fry) knew at least as much as I did and asked some of the most challenging questions about wildlife and conservation I have ever been asked by anyone.

I suppose what I am trying to say is that I have witnessed guiding from the other side, as it were, and so I am the biggest possible fan of the world's best guides.

I can't even begin to tell you how much I admire them. They can make or break your trip. They can inspire you to climb one more hill, get excited about the intricacies of the ocean food chain or ignite a lifelong passion in astronomy. I am not exaggerating when I say they can change your life.

And they are most definitely not on holiday.

✦ Mark Carwardine, a BBC zoologist, guides whale-watching trips in Baja California, Mexico. See www.markcarwardine.com

✦ Mark's visit to Baja California in Mexico with Stephen Fry in *Last Chance to See*, tomorrow at 8pm on BBC Two

GALLERY

Twenty of the most stupid questions asked by tourists

telegraph.co.uk/travel