

Brandwatch

The spirit of place

Nobody in the destination business spends as much on producing individual brochures as purveyors of specialised and long-haul travel services. Always on the *qui vive* for lessons and experiences to share with our subscribers, we asked our resident branding expert, Locum non-executive director **Tony Hodges, to turn explorer and wend his way through the mountains of paper these operators produce.**

First, some apologies. To the overburdened emissaries of Consignia who, back bowed under the strain, managed to deliver many hundredweight of brochures to my door. To the keepers of forests whose tasks have been intensified as a result of this branding investigation. And to the telephone representatives of the tour operators involved who, innocent of my true intentions, treated me – with but one exception – as the well-heeled prospect I wished to appear, when I requested samples of their wares.

Do the tour operators share any of my guilt? This I doubt, judging from the size and number of their brochures. No expense has been spared here. No shame is registered at the risk of duplication. No offer is made when you call, to provide a lower-cost CD-ROM as a 'starter pack'.

This we understand. When your business is so dependent on this shop window, when you have devoted so much to the cause of making potential customers drool, guilt rarely figures on the landscape. One might as well ask Greg Dyke to feel guilty about his programme trailers. Or Alastair Campbell about his press briefings.

There is much to learn from the tour operators' efforts. Technically, the standard is invariably professional. After a while, the reader cries out for relief from the copywriter's cliché but, apart from hiring some better storytellers at great expense (think a Bill Bryson or Jan Morris), what can they do to re-invent the language of travel? Try wit, perhaps. Art direction, too, is uniformly well practised. Most

destinations could learn from the publishing tricks taken by these operators to deliver us into temptation.

Which is why, presumably, *The Sunday Times* has taken up its ombudsman role to check the operators' performance versus claims, in its excellent series 'Behind the Brochure'. This matters to this observer, too, since strong brands can only remain strong if their bonds with customers are forged in trust. However, since Mr Murdoch's team are covering that aspect of brand delivery so well, we can interest ourselves in the question to which this series of *critiques* is devoted: namely, how well do these marketing tools *brand* the products and services projected?

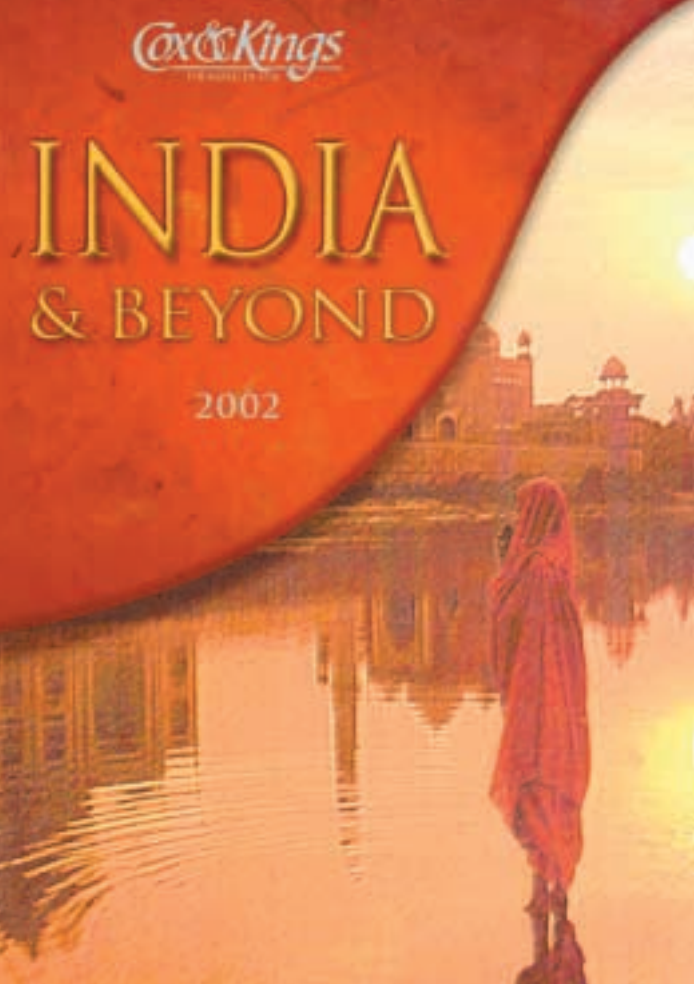
There is a school of thought which promulgates the idea that strong brands can be identified by a sense of place. Not merely geographic place, you understand, but place in the mind. So Umbro's place is on the pitch but Nike's place is in the 'zone'. BA's place is so obviously Britain that you wonder why Mr Ayling ever played Serota with his tailfins, whereas BP knew it had to occupy a greener place in the mind and may well have succeeded.

Destination brands know this truth of place instinctively. There is little choice. But what of the brands that serve the destinations? Do they recognise their own sense of place? Their brochures hint at the truth but, in the end, betray the operators' Icarus tendency: to spread their wings and, ever seeking growth, to venture beyond their heartland.

The intrepid explorers

Consider the old school. In the cultural quarter, Cox & Kings. In the big game reserve, Abercrombie & Kent. Joined by ampersand and Empire, if not by continent.

My first contact with Cox & Kings was not promising. The telephone representative was uniquely tough in her insistence that I could only have two of their eight brochures (although I could



Traveller's award for World's Best Tour Operator, ITC won it in 2001. Come on, Mr Kent, correct that impression.) The copy for ITC's brochures is shamelessly excessive. Venice seems like 'a preposterous stage set'. The Far East are 'words that set our pulse racing' (the regal pulse, presumably). Bangkok is 'a sizzling city in more ways than one'. Unforgettable Tuscany: 'like the remembrance of your first love, a smile will play around your lips as you recall the memory'. Alice, where is that sick bag?

No doubt where the style is born. Drew Foster writes 'with great personal pride', of 'the company I founded', but, 'I am not complacent', rather 'it is with huge excitement ... that we look forward to assisting you' and he urges us to 'refer to our fabulous website'.

Mr Foster has reason to be proud of his business. He has doubled his company's size in five years. He has less reason to be proud of his design team. Every one of his eight hefty brochures is clad in silver. Silver runs through them so consistently that such maps as they include are virtually illegible. This is the same hand that writes of Florence's 'film star looks' and the Caribbean offer as 'Suite Success'. Not so much ITC as OTT but at least it knows what it stands for and where it comes from. Even when it is travelling further afield, ITC is part of the Caribbean: flash but happy. ITC is taking the Caribbean experience around the world so that wherever it is, it will always be Glitter Bay.

The ITC call centre worked well but for sheer, well-worked experience, you have to go a long way to beat Kuoni. Confused by the number of brochure options, I was patted on the head by the kindly voice at the other end and advised to sit down with Kuoni's World Class and Worldwide brochures, 'with a nice cup of tea', and make my choices at my leisure. (She clearly assumed that I had copious hours of leisure time at my disposal since these two brochures alone run to over 640 pages.)

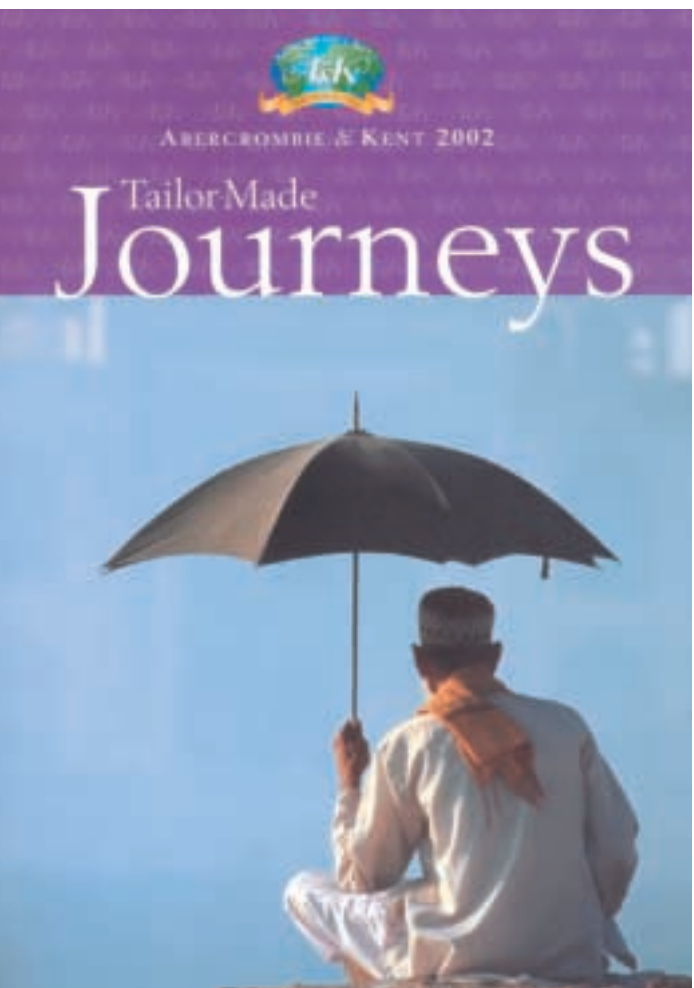
The Worldwide brochure shows Kuoni's strength and its Achilles heel. It covers every notable destination, every traveller type, every hotel choice worth consideration. It reminds you why Kuoni has been voted Britain's best long-haul tour operator 19 years in a row by UK travel agents. Yet it also reminds you that once, before the travel boom of the '80s, Kuoni had *cachet*, whereas now it has scale, volume, coverage.

Hence, we assume, the World Class offer. To call this a brochure is to call a Ralph Lauren outlet a shop. It arrives in a cream box with minimal black type and logo. You open it to find this coffee table decoration protected by soft black tissue paper. Unwrapped, this must be a limited edition. Cream and black themes are maintained but only to hold a gilt frame, within which sits a gilt-on-black image (etched? drawn?) of an old boat, at tropical mooring. The World Class promise is defined. 'Luxury Holidays to Faraway Places'. And here the word 'luxury' is pronounced, correctly if quietly.

The copy positions Kuoni's World Class offer perfectly. This is a 'collection of luxury holidays for the discerning traveller'. This is for you 'if you're looking for a luxury holiday and are used to being treated like an individual, not one of the crowd'. I was almost surprised to see prices printed throughout. Surely these are holidays where if you need to ask the price, you cannot afford them.

Clever old Kuoni. World Class shows the brand getting its retaliation in first, staying ahead of those upstart specialists. Doubtless the next brand development will be the Platinum Collection, brochure delivered by bullion van. Beat that, Drew Foster.

Since Kuoni travels 'to the ends of the earth ... to bring you the world' you might be tempted to shy away from this brand's sense of



place. It is abundantly clear, however. Kuoni's heart lies behind locked doors, in a numbered account, somewhere in Switzerland.

The rolling stone

Every now and then, in most markets, there comes along someone who refuses to obey the rules. On this journal, we go out of our way to cover their exploits because we learn more from those who set the agenda than from those who follow. People like Tom Bloxham and Olga Polizzi, Tim Smit and Nick Van Gruisen, the last two of which both feature in this issue.

At first sight, Van Gruisen's firm - Worldwide Journeys & Expeditions - seems to represent similar values to both Intrepid Explorers and Sun Loungers. Similar ergonomic skills, similar design professionalism. The copy gushes less than many and the maps work better than others. Yet that is not where the difference lies.

The first clue is that there are more people involved in this brochure: employees, locals, tourists.

The second clue is that the promise of 'tailor-made' service is applied to all the holidays it offers, not primarily to a sub-set publicised separately. This is a more telling appeal to the individual traveller, albeit more subtle, than even Kuoni's World Class pitch.

The real clue to Van Gruisen's brand is even simpler, however. Worldwide Journeys & Expeditions, unlike all these other serious commercial operators in so-called specialist tourism, produces only one brochure to cover the world. So the reader is offered, in one place, 'A World of Discovery'. There is no assumption made that the tourist-to-be is Africa Man, or India Man, or Necker Island Woman for that matter. No implicit or explicit separation is made between explorer and lounge. This brand reflects the anomalous truth that as markets segment and consumers face more choice, success comes to those who avoid creating little boxes. The parent who has been forced Caribbean cooking on countless family holidays suddenly finds herself free to explore Thailand. The sportsman tired of trekking up mountains enjoys scuba diving as a change. The hedonist discovers there is comfort beyond opulence in the midst of a game reserve.

Show the individual traveller one brochure that covers a world of options with authority and the rules of market segmentation are suddenly and simply rewritten. Certainly there will always be room for tightly defined specialities such as religious tourism and escorted wildlife tours, but the new mainstream of tailor-made tourism does not require the *en bloc* segmentation that most operators spend fortunes perpetuating. The market has, in one sense, fragmented too far for regional segmentation to survive: as far as individual journeys, individual choices, and 'you can have any tour you like as long as it's tailor-made'.

It is less easy to define the place behind this brand. It has roots in Africa and Nepal but its hedonism speaks of the Indian Ocean and South America. You get the impression that this brand is to be found where others are not, even though everyone offers broadly the same destination. This brand, like its founder, will keep moving, rolling on down the road. This brand is off the beaten track.

Now, with whom do you want to take your hols? Or, where do you want to go? The world is heaving with choices, let alone brochures. Which is your brand?

