

ATG - A LITTLE HISTORY



In 1976 Christopher Whinney walked, following the route of the ancient Via Francigena, from London to Rome, to write a commissioned book.

He enjoyed the experience so much, that in 1979 he founded a company to introduce a new, or rather to reintroduce the oldest, concept in travel – making journeys on foot.... Concerned about entering an industry that, at the time, had a reputation for ‘destroying its own resource – the environment’, he established the business on principles of conservation and sustainable development, and reactive product development based on client feedback – principles that still define ATG Oxford.

Anticipating that the idea of holidays comprising journeys on foot might be slow to ‘catch-on’, Christopher started the business by opening an outdoor equipment shop, and operated the travel business from the back of the shop. That shop, together with a second one that opened later, supported the Company for its first seven years.



PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

Impact

- **Walking!** ATG itineraries are journeys on foot – the most environmentally friendly way to travel.

- Apart from being environmental ‘best practice’ – Walking is also the best way to see a country! And...

- Walking is the best and healthiest form of exercise – so people return home revitalised and refreshed.

- **Fact:** The total distance walked by all ATG clients each year is more than once round the world...

ATG not only walks, but maintains and restores the routes it uses, whether ancient paths, tracks or ways across open country...

- Routes of ATG itineraries total over 2000 miles of paths – which ATG Route Managers and Leaders keep clear of undergrowth and litter every year:

- ATG keeps the paths it uses maintained but also prioritizes restoration of ancient buildings along the routes creating ‘Corridors of Conservation’.

- **Fact:** In 1999 ATG set up the ATG Trust to support worthwhile conservation projects along our walking routes, directly benefiting the local communities. See ‘ATG Trust News’, pp 14-15.

ATG reduces environmental and social impact to a minimum by keeping groups small (max 16) and carefully managed volumes on each route ...

- The relatively low number of rooms required each night gives ATG access to thousands of small family-run ‘boutique’ hotels with quality service, character and charm.

- The need for low impact, together with a very high percentage of clients returning year after year has led to an expansion in the number of routes researched and areas offered – currently over 100.

- **Fact:** These constraints ruled out mass-tourism economies of scale, with large groups and high volumes.

- **Fact:** ATG was destined to become a ‘niche’ business specialising in exclusive, high-quality, high-value holidays.

ATG contributes to conservation by prioritising choice of hotels and restaurants in existing old, historic and traditional buildings.

- By choosing hotels in old and existing buildings ATG contributes to the regeneration of inner cities, towns and villages and preservation of their historic and traditional character.

- **Fact:** The majority of hotels offered by ATG are in fine period buildings, with unique character and charm, ideally situated for travellers on foot, close to historic centres or areas of outstanding beauty and interest.

- **Fact:** This steers ATG away from the large modern mass-tourism bus/resort hotels – impersonal and cheap, and usually situated in zones far from centres of interest to travellers.

ATG contributes to local economies by using locally owned and run hotels and restaurants – so retaining wealth created within the community.

- Creation of employment and prosperity at community level – enables those with small hotels and restaurants to continually up-grade and compete on quality and service... against the cheap, high-volume, mass-tourism operations.

- The ATG experience of walking – perhaps to an area of outstanding beauty or picturesque medieval village, finding your luggage awaiting you in your room, and staying overnight, before walking on... maximises contributions to local economies.

- **Fact:** The ATG way of travelling counter-acts the widespread practice of bussing-in/out to cheap mass-tourism hotels – leaving areas and communities visited impoverished.

ATG supports the local economy through ‘green procurement’, purchasing locally produced organic foods, and traditional crafts.

- This surely is ‘win-win’ – fresh, local, organically produced food bursting with goodness and flavour. Not as cheap as imported processed and packaged products, but what about Quality and Value? ‘ATG never compromises on quality to sell on price!’

- ATG provides a ‘Green Shopping Guide’ that identifies sources of local food and wines, and also locally crafted traditional artefacts, possibly unique as souvenirs, to support local traditions and employment – to and compete with imported goods.

- **Fact:** Contributing to the local economy promotes a community’s ‘sustainability’... There is no pleasure in visiting depressed and impoverished areas – (or those totally exploited and degraded by mass-tourism!).

‘Giving something back’: Conservation and Sustainable Development projects in areas visited create long-term benefits and prosperity out of all proportion to the initial investment.

- ‘Giving something back’ to the areas visited is quintessential to the ATG approach to travel: a partnership between visitors and local communities

- Identifying the Heritage of an area, whether wild and beautiful country, wildlife, a traditional way of life, or outstanding architecture or art, and participating with the local people in conserving these, creates a source of long-term potential prosperity.

- **Fact:** ATG Trust Sustainable Development projects include conservation, restoration, training local people to develop conservation and tourism skills, so deriving prosperity from their heritage and traditions, and also the development of alternative local income sources to prevent degradation caused by over-grazing ... see pp 14-15 for ATG Trust projects.

Client Feedback

‘Business is providing what people want at a price they are prepared to pay’. How do you know if the product is what they want or if the ‘price is right’? You ask!

ATG owes an immeasurable debt of gratitude to its clients for their excellent feedback. This has fashioned the itineraries and set the standards for ATG trips – less a relationship of ‘vendor’ and ‘consumer’ than a mutually beneficial partnership.

Some ATG Firsts

1979 • First travel company founded on principles of conservation and sustainable development.

1988 • First travel company to win a National Training Award.

1991 • First company to achieve ‘Investors in People’ accreditation.

1994 • WWF recognition of ATG environmental training.

2000 • First (possibly still the only) travel company to establish a Trust (Ad Terrae Gloriam) – run by ATG clients, with ATG organising the fundraising, for the development of sustainable development projects in areas visited.

2003 • First travel company to win both the top awards for best environmental practice (USA – National Geographic & Conservation International ‘World Legacy Award’ (Heritage award) and UK ‘Tourism for Tomorrow’ (Business award)).

2006 • First travel company with an accredited Environmental Management System (EMS) – ISO 14001.

2011 • One of only three companies in the UK to have maintained ‘Investors in People’ accreditation for 20 years.

Post Script

In the past 33 years, what has ATG – a pioneering venture – really achieved?

- Journeys on foot have become a niche travel product.

- Hundreds of miles of original ATG routes, still used by ATG and maintained by ATG Route Managers, have been marked and are regularly used by local people and visitors.

- ATG ‘opened up’ various ‘new’ areas for successful tourism; pioneered environmental ‘best practice’ in tourism; became a recognised ‘brand’; won a few (worthwhile) awards; and participated in Sustainable Development projects in various countries.

The real achievement

- The real achievements, however, have come from ATG clients – not just, between them, walking several million miles, but in supporting ATG and its ‘principles in action’ – often returning year after year through decades of their lives, telling their friends about experiences, fashioning the trips and setting standards through their feedback, and with their generosity contributing to the ATG Trust, so leaving areas visited better than they found it...

- Without clients there would have been no ‘pioneering venture’: ATG clients are ATG – and the achievement is theirs!



MD Christopher Whinney in 1976 on arrival in Piazza Navona, Rome – after walking from London