

Frequently copied: never equalled

Q: Many ATG routes, trip and programme names seem to be copied by other companies. Is there nothing you can do?

Walking Routes

A: Not much. It is probably the destiny of every pioneer! ATG – the Company that pioneered the genre of walking holidays along continuous routes in Europe, has since 1979 introduced tourism on foot in many areas and created the walking routes. What today appear to be ‘the obvious routes’ were, originally, not at all obvious. The routes were established by a long process of elimination – walking hundreds of miles to find the best way.... Of the areas researched, only one in ten produced a route that ‘made it’ into ATG programmes.



The ATG Trust’s Sustainable Development projects are responsible for the restoration of some important historic paths, together with bridges and structures along the way. The cost of this research and development during the past 34 years has been a seven figure sum. The benefit to ATG is that the Company has over 2,000 miles of fully researched European walking routes, many of them still unmarked.

The benefit to competitors has been that they can, and frequently do, copy ATG routes and itineraries. Local tourism administrators have also ‘happened upon’ Footloose

Route Booklets, marked the routes with paint splodges, and published walking Guides.

Q: Can’t you protect ATG from those who steal what must be your intellectual property?

A: Possibly – but what is copied or ‘stolen’ is only superficial or peripheral. The substance – or ‘value’ – remains with ATG. Having spent weeks walking all over the area to find a walking route for a trip, then completing extensive research notes and an Environmental Audit, ATG’s knowledge and understanding of each area is comprehensive. Local people often exclaim: ‘You know the area far better than we do’ – and, of course, we do – that’s our job. No other organisation can provide clients with better background information or a greater understanding of the area.

ATG Footloose Route Books provide ‘the best walking notes in the business’ – Gill Charlton, the *Daily Telegraph*.

Possibly it is a case of ‘Frequently copied, but never equalled’?

People & Value

Q: ATG claims it offers the best each area has to offer. How do we know it is the best?

A: Because we spend weeks looking for ‘the best’ until we are sure that we have found it – whether area, route or hotels. For example, clients regularly tell us they have ‘had the best meal of their lives’ in ATG recommended local restaurants that do not seem to feature in guide books. How does ATG find these places? By eating a lot of substandard meals – until we find somewhere that we know will delight our clients, and then by checking clients’ Quality

Questionnaires to ensure that the standard remains ‘excellent’.

Q: We have taken 23 trips. How does ATG make sure that each trip is as good as the last?

A: Trip preparation: ATG Leaders, Tour Managers and Route Managers will have been in the area preparing your trip well in advance of your arrival. They will have checked the route, hotels etc. and carefully reviewed and planned every moment of every day. On escorted trips they will also have checked restaurants, ordered menus and wines, as well as confirming pick-up/drop-off spots for those who want shorter walks, and agreeing picnic locations. If they look confident and organised – that’s because they are, and as a result you get higher quality, better value trips.



Frequently copied: never equalled...

Q: We are ashamed to say we took a trip with one of your competitors. On-line it looked just like an ATG trip, but, admittedly, cheaper. It was terrible! It said that we walk to Siena. We did, from the bus park! And the ‘night in Orvieto’ was in an industrial area three miles from the centre, close to the autostrada entrance, an all-night filling station on the main Rome-Florence rail track. We felt this was ‘passing off’. Can nothing be done?

A: There is a lot of it around! Never mind the Quality – look at the price! ATG, which ‘never compromises on Quality to sell on price’, is an easy target.



Marketing

Q: I have noticed that almost every ATG company name, programme and trip names appear on other travel companies’ websites. Is this damaging ATG?

A: It’s difficult to know. Certainly plagiarism is endemic within the travel industry – with seemingly the same products being sold in different wrappers at ‘competitive’ prices. We are told, however, that a purpose of overt plagiarism is to ‘undermine the (ATG) brand’, and that marketing departments only want their products to be associated (or confused) with whatever is intrinsically superior and most desirable – so perhaps ‘imitation is the sincerest form of flattery’.

‘Frequently copied never equalled’ – QED

Q: We have travelled with over 40 different ATG Tour Consultants – every one excellent. How do you do it?

A: Training! The training ‘works’ for new Leaders and Managers who achieve over 90% ‘Excellent’ assessments from clients on their first trips. ATG’s Quality system, based on client feedback, ensures that on-going training promotes continual improvement.

A competitor recently pronounced on their website that 80% of their customers had assessed the performance of their leaders as ‘satisfactory’. Presumably 20% had found them to be ‘unsatisfactory’.

In ATG training the first morning session focuses on why ‘satisfactory’

is not acceptable. The afternoon session looks at the ‘practical delivery of Excellence’. By 3.30 they know ‘how to achieve Excellence’. The following four days focus on how to always deliver excellence – under all conditions. And at the final weekend conference attended by all Tour Consultants, old and new, training needs that have been highlighted by clients over the previous season are addressed.

Other companies have tried to copy ATG training. One even copied verbatim from the ATG application form what they (wrongly) believed were clever isometric questions! The ATG ‘root and branch’ approach does not suit every organisation’s ethos or budget.

ATG was the first travel company to win national awards for its training. In 2011 it was one of only three companies in the UK to have held ‘Investors in People’ accreditation for 20 years.

Q: Why doesn’t ATG publicise itself more?



PS ‘Frequently copied...’ may have a ‘plus side’: ATG was founded in 1979 on principles of conservation and sustainable development, for no

other reason than because Christopher Whinney (above), the Company’s founder, believed it was ‘the right thing to do’. At the time this was considered eccentric!

ATG continued its pioneering pursuit of environmental best practice. Environmental training, environmental audits of areas researched, Conservation and Sustainable Development projects, published articles, speaking at conferences....

ATG became the first travel company in the world to found an environment Trust to fund conservation and Sustainable Development projects in the areas it visited; the first to win both of the world’s top tourism environmental awards (USA: ‘World Legacy Award’ presented by National Geographic and Conservation International – and UK ‘Tourism for Tomorrow Award’); and the first to get ISO 14001 accreditation.

Over 20 years ago ATG made a conscious decision to remain a small, Quality company, rather than ‘go for volume’. It was realised that the multinational corporations would eventually ‘move-in’ and compete on price and ridicule ATG’s low volume, but ATG was convinced that consistently providing highest Quality and personal service was incompatible with volume measured in tens-of-thousands. ATG opted for Quality and has never regretted it.



Then, with media focus on ‘global warming’ the environment became an ‘issue’ – and ATG was seen to have achieved a marketing advantage! ATG-style environmental text started to appear in travel brochures and websites.

Where there is an ‘issue’ there is a PR opportunity. Suddenly everyone wanted an environmental award – and demand exceeded supply. So there was a PR opportunity for suppliers of awards as well as applicants. Soon there were enough awards to satisfy demand.

Christopher Whinney was by this time a judge on the panel of one of the two original ‘top’ Awards (requiring on-site verification of claims made) that ATG had won. He found that whilst many of the ‘high profile’ applications contained more ‘spin’ than substance, focus on the environment had inspired and brought to light some very exciting, often ‘low profile’, projects and organisations.

ATG is proud to be ‘on the same list’ as many of these World Class winners.