

Why risk comes with the territory

ON JULY 9 Edward Welsh told the story of Dennis Regensburg, whose Encounter Overland adventure holiday in Pakistan ended in his death in the river Swat. Was this sort of accident a one-off or have other treks proved to be more adventurous than their organisers planned for, Welsh asked.

We were surprised by how many of you — although sympathetic about the specific case — expressed impatience with the idea that holidays which promise adventure should also guarantee safety.

"Your article made me quite mad," says Mrs K J Payling of Barnsley. "If you want a holiday to places in countries which are still developing, you have to realise that 'safeness' doesn't exist."

"The Oxford Dictionary defines 'adventure' as 'risk, danger: daring enterprise, unexpected incident... hazardous activity'," writes J E Carey of the Cranfield Institute of Technology, Beds. Mr Carey goes on to describe his own incident-free trip to Peru with Encounter Overland and points out that every participant knew they were on a trip where "hours may pass between hamlets, let alone towns with police or medical facilities. Our Bedford truck was well maintained and the driver very experienced, but we were all aware that if anything had gone wrong — the road giving way, a rock falling on the truck, one of the participants succumbing to acute altitude sickness — we would have been helpless. But we were there for adventure. Companies such as Encounter Overland reduce the risk of travelling in less developed countries. It is naive to expect them to eradicate it altogether. It would have been far more tragic if Dennis Regensburg had died in a crash on the way to the airport than while enjoying the trip he'd been planning for 10 years."

David Jones, of Wotton-under-Edge, Glos, is another Encounter Overland customer and has nothing but praise for the company's organisational skills and the standard of equipment. But he believes that the safety of an adventure holiday has less to do with the standards of the

Taking a holiday in an out-of-the-way place brings with it potential hazards, argue readers responding to our article on the death of a traveller while in Pakistan

travel company than with those of the host country. "It is without prejudice that I state that countries such as India do have a lesser respect for life than, say, western Europe. Safety, and especially road safety, is a low priority. This can be seen by the gross overloading of the buses with people. Also, there is a limit to the amount a country like Pakistan can afford to spend on its roads, health and hygiene services. It is important to realise that the essence of overlanding is to get away from the over-commercialised, popular tourist resorts and to experience different cultures at close hand."

But for every reader who thinks hazards are an essential element of adventure holidays, there seems to be another with a story of a risk they consider unacceptable.

Georgina A Sykes of Milton Keynes went on a Speedbird Safari in Tanzania and sent us a copy of the subsequent letter she sent to the tour operator. Ms Sykes starts off by citing the good hotels and resorts at which they stayed and finishes by describing the holiday as "tremendous". But one paragraph of her letter is less than enthusiastic on the matter of the safari vehicle. "The brakes failed on two occasions, a wheel fell off on two more, and the curtailed drive round Lake Manyara National Park at the end of the trip was positively terrifying with a wheel at an angle of 10 degrees threatening to fall off yet again. There was also the journey back up the cliff to the



Flashback: a tragic end to Dennis Regensburg's dream holiday

hotel with burnt-out brakes, when I really did think our number was up." Speedbird, in its reply to her, promised to take up the matter with the local operators and with the Tanzanian Tourist Office.

It seems one of the difficulties in assessing a holiday's safety is tour operators are often forced to subcontract vehicle hire to local companies. One answer to this, suggested by Ian Buist, Dennis Regensburg's close friend, is to "... insist that tour companies must specifically warrant brakes, steering and tyres, especially if they use local vehicles not serviced and provided by the manufacturers' accredited agents".

Paul E Murphy, of Dublin, argues that adventure holidays are "inher-

ently no riskier than regular resort-based package holidays". He says: "If Dennis Regensburg had met his death by drowning in a swimming pool in Ibiza, or in a crash on Spain's N340, I doubt it would have received a mention in your paper." But he goes on to describe an incident on a 1984 Encounter Overland holiday in Peru, where a boat, with no obvious life jackets on board, was travelling across Lake Titicaca. It was accidentally set on fire by an incompetent crew, the fire extinguisher didn't work, a group of screaming Peruvians were locked in a burning cabin and the captain of an accompanying boat refused to come anywhere near the flames. "It was a nasty and frightening experience," says Mur-

phy, who eventually was able to help douse the flames.

He emphasises that the blame lies with the local operator rather than with the tour company and says: "In my experience, the main UK-based adventure holiday companies (and I've travelled with most of them) are reputable firms which I would not hesitate in recommending to anyone interested in this type of travel. Adventure travel is no riskier than regular travel — it's just a different type of risk. My advice to anyone considering an adventure holiday would be to travel with an established company and to take the best accident/health insurance."

A number of your letters described journeys across the world's most desolate and deserted terrain using spartanly sprung vehicles, subsisting on a diet of mangoes, meaties and malaria pills, and enjoying every minute of it — at least in retrospect. Rowena Lusty of Kew, London, captures the essence of the pleas of those of you who have adventured to those who have yet to set foot beyond the safety of Benidorm or Biarritz: "On our six-month trip across Africa, we met a number of independent and organised groups travelling overland, and no one reported anything more than the usual sickness problems and mechanical vehicle failures. I think it would be a great shame if someone proposing to go on such a trip was dissuaded as a result of Welsh's article."

George Banks, of Bickley in Kent, makes an impassioned plea on behalf of Encounter Overland. Banks has taken a number of groups of London youngsters on expeditions with the company and is unstinting in his praise for its "concern for our safety and good health".

"Please let's not start a witch hunt over an unfortunate accident. Encounter Overland has been at the forefront of ensuring that expeditions are safe and that customers are made aware of environmental considerations. Many youngsters have said to me long after an Encounter Overland expedition that 'it changed my life', or, as one callow and unemployed youth from Southwark said, 'I thought the world owed me a living. But when I saw the poverty in the desert and saw how happy the people were, it made me feel very humble.'"