

SHELL SHOCKED

European Tour Guides – Masters of Trivia

By Art Stevens

Who are the world's greatest experts on trivia? European tour guides, that's who. They tell you what you don't need to know, don't want to know and will forget thirty seconds after listening to trivia that makes watching laundry spinning euphoric.

Instead of just saying this is the very spot that Columbus planted his final step on European soil before he made his way to the new world, tour guides will tell you what he wore, what he ate before he left, exactly how sober he was, what he entered into his diary, the awful things he told his first mate about Queen Izabella, how he lost his bet with Magellan on who would find America first, how he cut himself shaving that morning, what type of razor blade he used, how he dealt with his chronic sea sickness, what chemicals he used to stop the itching between his toes, what he said to his loved one before he left Spain and what book he was reading on his Kindle before he bid farewell to Spain.

Whew.

As you're overdosing on Columbus's final day in Spain you're probably thinking of that famous movie line – "You had me at 'hello'."

My wife and I just returned from France where we toured small towns and villages in Normandy. We were on a river cruise and were provided with a local tour guide to lead us through each town. Yes, we viewed the interiors of a number of cathedrals all of which are now a distant blur having become totally indistinguishable with the passage of just a few weeks. All that presently comes to mind are the beautiful stained glass windows in each cathedral. But the history and architecture of each cathedral, as narrated by the tour guides, have now been consigned to my subconscious and may one day become available to me during a future hypnotic trance.

Here's what a prissy and self-centered tour guide told us about how the "flying buttress" form of architecture was used to build the church in Honfleur, France.

"Although fully fledged flying buttresses only developed in the Gothic period, their precursors can be found in Byzantine architecture and in some Romanesque buildings where quadrant arches were used to carry the lateral thrust of the stone vault over the aisles."

Get the drift of my meaning yet? The tour guide was kvelling with pride on the knowledge she had which we didn't need to know. She continued to lay it on.

“However these arches were hidden under the gallery roof and only transmitted the forces to the massive outer walls. By the 1160s, architects in the Île-de-France were employing similar systems but with longer and finer arches running from the outer surface of the clerestory wall, over the roof of the side aisles (and hence visible from the outside) to meet a heavy vertical buttress rising above the level of the outer wall.”

This is when my mind began to wander and I tuned out completely. It would have been at this point that had I been captured by the enemy I would have told them anything they wanted to hear, including the due date of Kate Winslet’s baby.

To keep myself sane I began to think about the new NFL season, Peyton Manning’s seven –touchdown game, Lindsay Lohan’s new movie, Miguel Cabrera’s batting average, the new white line that was going to be painted on my street and if my computer would turn on when I got home. But the tour guide was relentless. My tour group had become transfixed and spittle was emerging from the side of everyone’s mouth. She went on and on about the most trivial things and spouted facts that could cause an instant plague of attention deficit disorder.

“The apse of the Basilica of St Remi in Reims is thought to be among the earliest examples still surviving in its original form dating from around 1170. Later architects progressively refined these designs and slimmed down the flyers until typically they were constructed from no more than one thickness of voussoir with a capping stone above it.”

My brain was overdosing on trivia. I needed air. Flying buttresses were swirling around my cerebellum. I left the cathedral and breathed in the fresh Normandy air outside. I began to come to my senses. The rest of the tour group remained inside and was in the process of learning about how flying buttresses often were embellished with crockets on the flyers and figural sculpture in niches or aedicules set into the buttresses.

Then the tour guide emerged followed by the tour group. Each tourist was glassy eyed. I believe the group had now been thoroughly hypnotized by the tour guide and was ready to follow her to the next cathedral. Not me. I hit my head against the cathedral wall once to get rid of the flying buttresses cobweb, got the crockets and aedicules out of my brain, and headed back to the boat.