



The tour leader

Peter Crofts has organised and led 105 CTC touring holidays over almost 50 years. He spoke to Dan Joyce about his touring life

If you needed proof that cycle touring is good for you, Peter Crofts is it. Now 71, five decades of leading tours have left him tanned, fit and unflappable. He's someone who keeps his head when all about him are losing theirs.

'I'll always remember the manager at Srinagar airport running down the concourse with people chasing after him waving passports,' he says. 'All the flights had been cancelled. The airport building was a seething mass of people all trying to get out of Kashmir. It was 1989 and the plane of President Zahir of Pakistan had crashed. The Kashmiris blamed the Americans and went on strike everywhere. There were no planes.'

There had been, however, angry crowds on the way into Srinagar. Some burnt an effigy of President Bush senior. Others picked up rocks. 'We tore off before they turned their attention onto us.' On arrival at the airport, Peter tracked down the fleeing manager who promised to see what he could do.

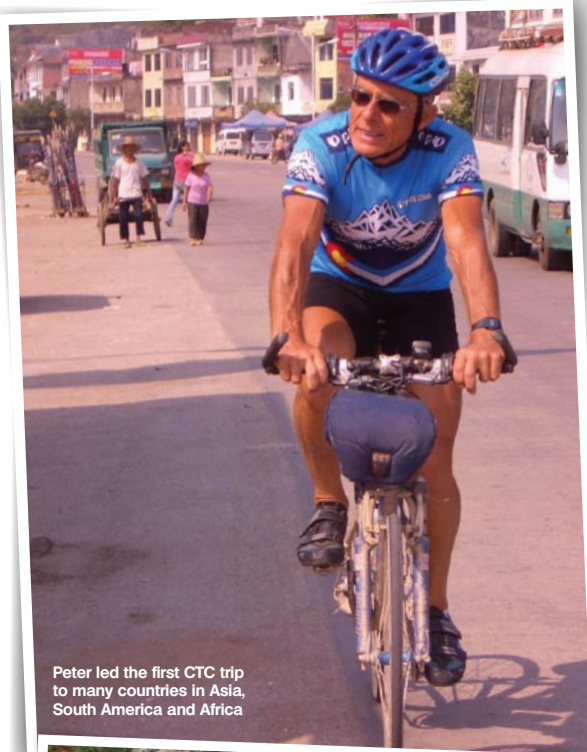
'Next morning he waved us forward. That almost produced a riot because we were being given preferential treatment. But he said: "These are our tourists. They are our bread and butter. We must look after them." So he got us on an aircraft and we got out of Kashmir. Unfortunately, that wasn't the end of the problem...'

He got his 16 guests home, of course – via a complementary stay at a five-star hotel in Dubai. 'You can't panic in these situations, when you've got people depending on you. You've got to work through it and do the best that you can do.'

This kind of calm capability is born of experience. At 16 Peter was leading cycle tours for his local youth club. At 19 he was a member of CTC's Croydon Section and began leading European tours. That brought him to the attention of CTC's Geoff Stumm who invited him to join the CTC HQ Leaders' panel in 1961. CTC tours were first fitted in around cycle racing during his holidays as a schoolteacher but became more regular when he retired from racing.

'It's a lot of hard work setting up the tours. The reward is getting to ride in beautiful locations throughout the world with CTC members from all walks of life.

'It's hard to pick a favourite moment. One of my biggest regrets



Peter led the first CTC trip to many countries in Asia, South America and Africa



has been not writing all these things down. But one that sticks in my mind was a trip to Madagascar, where we visited an extinct volcano. Twenty or thirty young kids surrounded us, all with straw in their hands, weaving it into hats. They followed us to the crater, where one or two of us went swimming. All the kids were gathered round and one aged four or five started singing. Gradually all the others joined in. It was fantastic. It was in four-part harmony! It was really magic, a tearful occasion. They sang several songs for us.' It turned out that they'd learnt them in church, down in the village.

Peter has toured all over the world, leading the first CTC trip to many places – Japan, Madagascar, the Philippines, China, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Natal, Chile, Bhutan, Mexico, Kashmir, and Tibet are just some. His favourite regions have been the Himalayas (ten tours) and the South American Andes (nine tours). It's no surprise to find that he's also a member of the 300,000 Miles Club, having clocked up 560,000 miles, nor that he was awarded the CTC Certificate of Merit.

What is a surprise is his racing *palmares*. He has held five RRA place-to-place records and two national time trial tandem records, the second taking the 25-mile record under 50 minutes in 1980. He was

also 11th in the Best All-Rounder Competition in 1967. In 1992, aged 55, he made a comeback, eclipsing his previous times and becoming the National Veterans' Time Trials Champion in 1993. That comeback was spurred by a tour he led in Ecuador; one of the guests wanted to have a go at racing with him on his tandem.

In 2010 he doesn't show any signs of stopping. This February he will be leading a tour in South Africa taking in the 108km Argus Pick 'n' Pay mass ride. 'That's one of the reasons the tour is going then – I've always wanted to ride it.'

For more information about CTC Cycling Holidays, visit www.cyclingholidays.org or call 0845 045 1121 to request a brochure.