

Canned or live?

A coach tour with a live guide was once the staple of Scotland's tourism industry. Now the open-top buses that ply the streets of Glasgow and Edinburgh use recorded commentaries, controlled by the driver. So will technology spell the end of the live guide? James Carter picked up a microphone, and put some questions to Viola Lier and Alex Pringle.



Viola Lier is a tourist guide and training manager for the Scottish Tourist Guides Association

JC: Alex, how did you first get into using pre-recorded commentary on your buses?

AP: Six or seven years ago our whole market for tours in Glasgow changed. Before then people coming here would have some knowledge of English, and they came for the city's culture; now they come because they can fly here for £1. A huge proportion of them don't speak English, and they don't want the sort of tours we used to do, looking at architecture and design: they just want an impression of what you can do here, a familiarisation tour really.

So now we use a pre-recorded commentary in eight languages, stored on a hard drive. The commentary's divided into very short units, all displayed on a screen so the driver can play one after the other, or skip through them. If he's stuck in traffic, there's an additional menu of 'fillers' – guides work in the same way, with material in reserve for when they need it.

JC: What do you see as the particular advantages of the two media?

VL: The human touch, that comes with passion and enthusiasm; flexibility, of reacting to circumstances, and the chance to have a tailored approach, where a guide can really add meaning for a particular client.

AP: Technology means we can meet a demand from people who don't speak English – we couldn't viably run a live tour in all those languages. Pre-recording also gives you a consistency in the quality of the tour, and we can cater for very few people – often live tours get cancelled because there aren't enough customers.

JC: How do the two approaches stand up to different circumstances, for example a 45-minute city tour compared with a week-long trip round the Highlands?

Finding a good bus driver can be as important as finding a good musician.
Reba McEntire, country singer

VL: It really comes down to using the right tool for the job. For the week-long tour, you need a live guide to tailor the experience to visitors' needs, and guide them to discover the place for themselves. It's a real interpreter's job, linking places and topics to themes and being flexible to the circumstances around you.

AP: As a coach operator, I'm looking at it from a driver's point of view, and what's the best use of the driver's time. If you have long tour with a recorded commentary, all the customer care side is left to the driver, and the driver's got enough to do. When you get to a hotel at night he's got to unload all the luggage and get the bus cleaned – how's he going to look after the customers as well?

From my point of view, a recording on a longer tour is a waste of money – it's not going to give you a quality experience. There are technical problems too: if the system breaks down in the

Highlands you're stuck: it's not like our situation here where we're within a couple of miles of the garage.

JC: **What do you see as the future in this field? Will live guiding become just a niche product for the luxury market?**

VL: I think live guides will use technology. At the moment we might have pictures of Kings or Queens; in future we might have really high tech things – maybe holograms of them that can speak for a while and then the guide can come in again. I think there's also a role for guides to do the recording work: I'd rather do that than have linguists reading commentaries.

AP: I agree that there'll always be a role for live guides. We have a tremendous demand for English-speaking guides – from Americans and Australians, and from the 'dinkies': they want a live guide, and they'll wait for a bus that has one.

JC: **So technology is here to stay...**

AP: But so is the live guide!

VL: I think new developments in tourism will also support the market for live guides: people coming off big cruise ships want to continue the incredibly high standards of service they've had on board, and live guides can provide that.

AP: It's all about the product the customer wants – it's got to be customer led.

Alex Pringle, Tourism and Training Manager at City Guides in Glasgow runs a fleet of buses in the city. His collection of model buses reflects a long career in running coach tours.

