

In the Spotlight: Duncan Smith

Continuing our profile of new members. Duncan joined at the end of last year.



When and why did you join the Guild?

2011. Like Birdie Bowers said at his interview to join Captain Scott's South Pole expedition, I want to learn from the way in which others conduct their work.

What are you working on at the moment? Any future plans?

A guidebook called "Only in Zurich", which is the eighth volume in my 'Only in' series of guides to the hidden corners of Europe. I'd like the opportunity to create a similar guide to Istanbul.

What's your earliest memory of travel?

As a schoolboy I took a sleeper train to Scotland to visit my great aunts in Aberdeenshire. I can still feel the blast of chill air as I opened the carriage window in the morning.

What's your most bizarre memory of travel?

My dear late father tapping on the bedroom door during a family trip to Paris to tell me there had been a murder. He had mistaken a workman's putty knife for the murder weapon!

Which is the place you haven't been to yet but would most like to visit?

The Tsangpo Gorge in Tibet, the steepest in the world, in the footsteps of the plant hunter Frank Kingdon Ward. For Buddhist pilgrims it is a portal to an earthly paradise: for Westerners it is Shangri-la.

Where would you never want to go again?

Across three continents I've never been anywhere that hasn't warranted a second look.

If you had one tip to share with other travel writers what would it be?

A useful truism is that people forget facts but remember stories.

If you could take a day trip back in time to any point in history, when and where would you visit?

A stroll along Straight Street in the Old City of Damascus in Biblical times. It was here that Saul was cured of his blindness to be reborn as Paul the Apostle.

How did you get involved in travel writing/travel photography?

My parents (both librarians) organised a family holiday to Morocco in the early 1970s. I've been recording my impressions of travel in words and pictures ever since.

Favourite museum or gallery?

The Roman family burial chamber in the suburb of Weiden, Cologne has an extraordinarily intimate atmosphere. It's a pleasure to see archaeological sites so well preserved, with their associated artefacts still in situ.

Most memorable hotel?

The Hotel Baron in Aleppo, Syria. Agatha Christie wrote part of "Murder on the Orient Express" in Room 302, and the bar serves a memorable Gin and Tonic.

Everyone gets it wrong sometimes, so what's the biggest travel blunder you've ever made?

In my excitement to visit Egypt's Valley of the Kings I forgot to take some important medication. As a result I fainted in Tutankhamun's tomb!

Which travel destination has taken you most by surprise and why?

The highlands of northern Ethiopia because I didn't expect the area to be so green.

A favourite travel book to pass the journey?

A Time of Gifts by Patrick Leigh Fermor is for me descriptive travel writing at its best. The author wears his erudition so lightly that it's difficult not to try to emulate him.

Tim Ware gets award

Last month Guild member Tim Ware won the inaugural Dutch Travel Writing award for the best article on a Dutch city (Amsterdam). He received his 'gong' from TV personality Carol Vorderman at the awards ceremony at the Institute of Directors in Pall Mall (*below*).

