

# Comex 3 1969

From Edinburgh to Delhi and back by Bus

by Alastair Balfour with Jim Lindsay





# Comex 3 1969

How 25 young people took a bus from  
Edinburgh to Delhi - and back

By Alastair Balfour with Jim Lindsay



## **INTRODUCTION**

The origins of this book lie in the growing number of successful, enjoyable reunions organised by the Edinburgh contingent on the remarkable 1969 Comex 3 expedition. Uniquely, since 1990 the bulk of the 25-member-strong contingent has been kept in touch and motivated to attend reunion events through a superb website built by Don Clarke, and a database of the 19 members that we have been able to track down. It's fair to say that none of the other 19 Comex 3 contingents have achieved this level of reconnection.

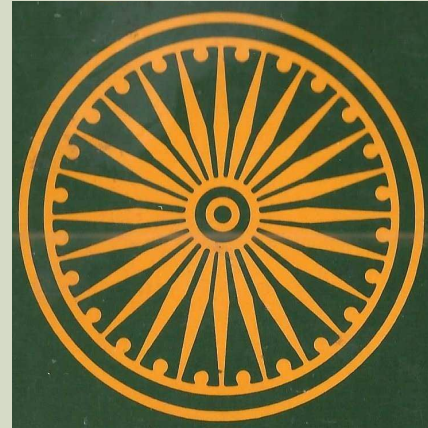
Reliving the incredible experiences that we encountered during our three months of travelling across exotic parts of the world now inaccessible to most people, has rekindled memories and nostalgia. As a result I've been motivated to produce this book as a record of a journey that shaped many of our lives.

Let me say at once that this would not have been possible without two special collections of material: Jim Lindsay's detailed personal diary, in which he managed to brilliantly capture those daily happenings, conflicts and dramas that make a story come to life, and the impressive assembly of photographs contributed by many of the Edinburgh crew and now published on Don's Comex 3 website – [www.comex3.com](http://www.comex3.com)

Gordon Bell's excellent letters home and my articles in The Scotsman and Evening News, together with those in the Edinburgh Weekly by Bob Dickson, were valuable sources. I've also drawn on progress reports in the Comex 3 magazine which I 'enjoyed' editing during the trip, and the summary account in 'Crying Drums', Col. Gregory's autobiography published in 1972.

Finally my thanks go to those kind folk who delved back into their memories and provided great material that I have gratefully incorporated here.

The Blurb-provided layout designs and graphic elements are copyright Blurb Inc. This book was created using the Blurb creative publishing service. The book author retains sole copyright to his or her contributions to this book.



Readers are asked to bear in mind that best endeavours have been used to research and create an as accurate as possible account of a complex undertaking now almost 50 years old. Some mistakes and mis-interpretations of events and the actions of individuals are inevitable, and no legal liability can be accepted for these.

You will also note that some people feature more than others within the narrative and photo selections: that is simply due to the reality that I have had to depend on relatively few sources of material, and that despite best efforts we have been unable to trace some of our crew.

I hope you enjoy travelling this incredible road again with the Edinburgh Comexers.

**Alastair Balfour** June 2018



**IN MEMORY**

This book is dedicated to the two contingent members who we know are sadly no longer with us: Brian John (below left, died in 2013) and David Spooner (died in 2015)

**CONTENTS**

|                                   | PAGES         |                   | PAGES        |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|-------------------|--------------|
| Preparation                       | 5-12          | <b>Delhi Days</b> | <b>97-99</b> |
| Delhi here we come                | 13-79         | Homeward Bound    | 100-127      |
| <b>On the Road</b>                | <b>20-21</b>  | Comex Cartoon     | 128-130      |
| Incredible India                  | 80-96         | The Reunions      | 131-137      |
| Greg's Obituary from The Scotsman | Pages 138-139 |                   |              |

**CREW**

Fay Sharpley  
 Gordon Bell  
 Don Clarke  
 Ricky Crees  
 Jim Moyes  
 Johan Delhi  
 Jim Lindsay  
 Dave Spooner  
 Don Winford  
 Alastair Smith  
 Alastair Balfour  
 Liz Burcher  
 Tony Farquhar

**ROLES**

Leader  
 Driver  
 Driver  
 Driver  
 Driver  
 Navigator  
 Navigator/diarist  
 Navigator  
 Navigator  
 Chief Mechanic ('Fudge')  
 Mechanic/Diarist ('Ali B')  
 Hostess  
 Radio Operator/Coach  
 Packer

**CREW**

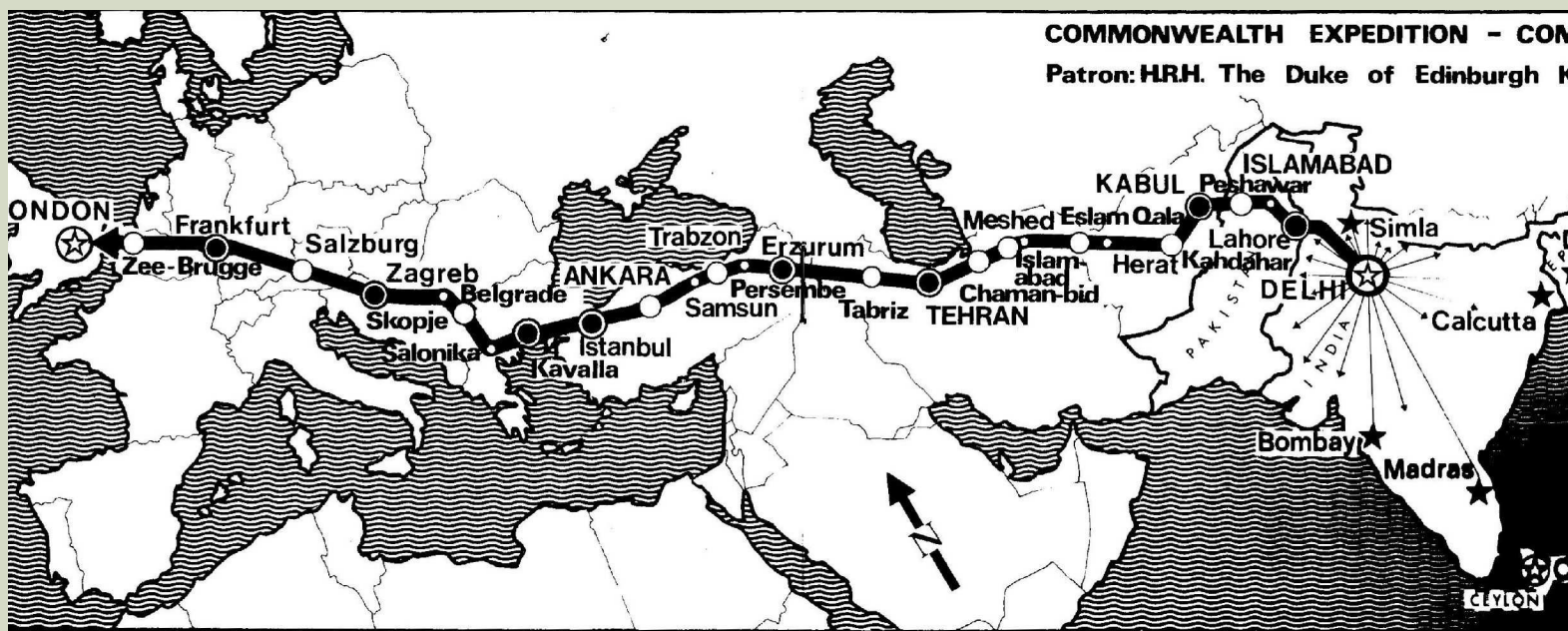
Hilary Harland  
 Eileen Henderson  
 Carol Howarth  
 Brian John  
 Pru Lambert  
 Iona McKenzie  
 Bill Mitchell  
 Ros Ross  
 Joanne Switalska  
 Kirsteen Thomson  
 Liz Yates

**ROLES**

Diarist  
 Cook  
 Cook  
 Piper  
 Cook  
 Banker  
 Postman/Water Supply  
 Cook  
 Hostess  
 First-Aider/Cook  
 Hostess

Bob Dickson (to Istanbul)  
 Sandra Tait (passenger home from Delhi)

**Edinburgh's Journey: 15,246 miles to Delhi and Back**



# PREPARATIONS

## The contingent comes together for the biggest adventure of their lives

In early May 1969 posters started appearing around Edinburgh University, inviting applications from students to join an expedition to India. They highlighted the promised cost of just £50 a head. Those who responded found themselves in front of a small recruiting panel comprising other older students who had taken part in a similar journey the previous year. It quickly became clear that this was no holiday trip. For instance, it involved driving buses on a 15,000-mile round trip across some of the most arduous 'roads' on the planet, through such exotic countries as Iran and Afghanistan. There was quite a lot of work involved. And risk: we found out that 14 students on a coach from Durham had been killed the previous year in an awful road accident in Yugoslavia. The whole Comex bandwagon was the brainchild of a former British Army colonel, Lionel Gregory, who once commended the Gurkhas in Malaysia. Col. Gregory (or 'Greg' as he became universally known by Comexers) had a long acquaintance with India and its institutions, and developed the concept of an overland expedition to link the youth of the Commonwealth during the 1960s once he had left the Army. The headline event was to be a Commonwealth Youth Festival that would be held alternatively in Delhi and London, attracting young people from as far afield as Singapore and Australia. The hope was that this would develop into a permanent home for the loose-knit Commonwealth fraternity, in the form of a Commonwealth College in Delhi.

Given the strength and prominence of the Commonwealth as a global force in those days, Greg received much official and semi-official backing from leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru, then Indian Prime Minister, and the Duke of Edinburgh.....although in its usual pusillanimous way the UK Government managed never to officially commit support and cash. Using his formidable network of contacts, combining these with his special blend of charm and persuasion, Greg pulled together Comex 1 over the summer of 1965.

A total of 200 people, drawn from the universities of Edinburgh, London, Oxford, Cardiff and Cambridge, travelled in five Duple coaches. The route took a southerly line via Syria, Jordan and Iraq to Delhi, then on to Bombay and Calcutta.

Sadly though, no sooner had these pioneers arrived in India than the fateful war with Pakistan broke out. Although the contingents were able to visit various Indian universities as planned, the return route was blocked. Typically resourceful, Greg arranged to sell the coaches to the Indian tourist organisation and chartered a flight home. And so, in safety, ended Comex 1.

Two years later Greg and Annie Murray, Greg's long-standing PA and also partner in life at Comex Secretariat (110 Old Brompton Road, London SW7) launched Comex 2, comprising 300 people in 11 coaches. This time there was a Glasgow contingent to join another from Edinburgh. They travelled the same route as Comex 3 would follow, made it successfully to Delhi and carried out a series of the cultural performances that had become the core offering of Comex.

They set out on the homeward journey on September 9, amid uncertainty over the route because of intransigence from the Afghan authorities in issuing visas which meant that only half of the expedition was likely to get them. There was a Plan B which would involve those contingents without visas heading south to the Pakistani province of Balochistan, via its capital Quetta, and then through the Great Sand Desert to Tehran. Straightaway the Edinburgh coach decided that would be its route, apparently keen on breaking away from Comex convoys and exploring new lands, and headed off.....just a couple of hours before news came through that the Afghani authorities had abruptly decided to waive border formalities for the entire expedition. Despite being chased by Greg and Annie Murray in their car, Edinburgh simply motored on ahead and made it to Tehran ahead of the rest of the expedition.

Alas, just four days from home, the Durham coach met with that terrible accident in Yugoslavia, the consequences of which consumed Greg's life for the next 12 months as he fought to free the imprisoned coach driver who was blamed quite unfairly by the Yugoslav authorities. Eventually he succeeded and the

driver, Philip Dobson, was released and returned to the UK after enduring a tortuous series of hearings and trials. Inevitably, this disaster cast a large cloud over the Comex mission. But, undaunted and supported by many of the Comex 2 contingent – including Durham survivors and parents of those who had been killed - Greg decided to push on and organise the biggest expedition yet.

### COMEX 3

As he wrote in his book: *"The only fitting memorial to them would be that Comex would never stop – however hard the going and however long the journey."* And as we know, Comex 3 grew into his biggest ever adventure – its 500-strong contingent being described in some quarters as the largest peacetime movement of people across the famed old Silk Roads of Asia.

In October 1968 Greg set out to get another show on the road. He attended a first meeting at Durham University where already enough recruits had come forward to more than fill one coach. Amongst others he came to Edinburgh University to meet a group being pulled together by some of the Comex 2 contingent. And so we started to form the group of 25 folk who took Cuddles to Delhi.

Alastair S: *"I was turned down initially, but was living in the same student house as Johan. Several of those originally recruited very quickly dropped out, and Johan asked if I was still interested. I had talked to Don about Comex, and he was now interested. As there were still vacancies, he was invited along to Fay's flat to meet some of the others, and was recruited after a few seconds' consideration."*

Tony: *"As the initial meeting held in Buccleuch Street came to an end Roz turned to Pru and said that she thought the Comex expedition "Overland to India" meant that we would be flying! Raising funds (and I don't think the Edinburgh contingent came anywhere near reaching the required target) involved selling burgers at Silverknowes and establishing a promotional marquee on Bruntsfield Links."*

Iona: *"I was in the SRC selling my books at the end of university, and was pondering whether I had done the wrong thing by failing to apply for VSO, when my eye alighted on a poster – 'man required for student overland trip to India'. It was worth a try. My interview was in Fay's top floor flat in Marchmont. As I was descending the stairs afterwards, one of the interviewers came running after me and said the place was mine provided I would be banker."*

Ali B: *"I had just finished my three-year journalism training course at The Scotsman in Edinburgh, and had secured a job as a news reporter in the paper's Glasgow office. One day I was asked to go to the personnel office in North Bridge – not usually a good sign. But the personnel manager said they had been asked to send someone on this trip to India, to send back reports on the Edinburgh contingent's progress. Would I like to be that someone? How could I resist – especially when they paid my £50 fee and gave me a shiny new portable typewriter!"*

At the same time contingents from, yes, Durham again, as well as Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Exeter, Glasgow, Keele, Kent, Lancaster, Leicester, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Newcastle, Oxford, St Andrews,

*Buses are places for sleeping.....Right? And so it proved during Cuddles' epic drive. (Top) Iona and Carol get in some zeds, while below Bob uses Pru and Don C as pillows.*



Sussex and Yorkshire were coming together in a similar fashion.

There are some funny tales about their fund-raising efforts: for example Jon Snow, the Channel 4 news presenter, had joined the Liverpool contingent. In his book **'Shooting History'**, he recalls his attempt to break the world record for sitting on a loo:

*"My bid was staged on a platform in the front hall of the Students' Union. Twenty-five hours I sat on the thing, with my trousers around my ankles, only to discover that the prudes at the Guinness Book of Records would not accept it. In truth, I was never able to establish that it was a record anyway, but I raised £1,200 from sponsors including Armitage Shanks, who made the thing, revealing an unexpected sense of humour. In the final hour students were allowed to buy eggs for 20p each, and reduced me to a ripe old mess."*

As the crew came together over May-June 1969, various training courses were organised involving driving, coach maintenance, cooking and navigation. For example:

- \* Chief mechanic Alastair S went on a course organised by bus manufacturers Vauxhall Motors of Luton, to enable him to carry out maintenance and repairs en route
- \* Fay attended a Leaders' course
- \* The Drivers went on a course at the Royal Corps of Transport at Aldershot
- \* Navigators were trained by the RAF at Bicester
- \* Pye Telecommunications held a Radio Operators' course at Cambridge
- \* Cooks were trained at the North Staffordshire College of Technology
- \* Iona went on a money-handling course by Lloyds, the Comex bankers

While these courses were generally reckoned to be valuable – especially for the drivers and mechanics – some felt they hadn't learned much. For example, Tony remembers attending the radio operators' session in Cambridge and coming away *"having only learned how to switch the damn thing on and off!"* Still, it was another example of the thorough preparation upon which Greg insisted.

**COMEX III 2 EDINBURGH CONTINGENT**

Suggested clothing and other personal items.

| MALE                                  |  | FEMALE                    |
|---------------------------------------|--|---------------------------|
| ✓ 1 pr. Pyjamas.                      |  | 1 pr. Pyjamas             |
| ✓ 2 prs. Shorts.                      |  | 3 Cotton dresses          |
| ✓ 3 prs. lightweight trousers.        |  | 1 pr. Shorts              |
| ✓ 3 prs. Underwear (cotton)           |  | 1 pr. Blouse              |
| ✓ 1 KILT (5 cotton waistband)         |  | 1 WHITE dress             |
| ✓ 1 Tie                               |  | 1 Tartan sash             |
| ✓ 1 pr. Shoes for dancing <i>West</i> |  | 3 prs. Underwear (cotton) |
| ✓ 1 pr. Shoes <i>West</i>             |  | 1 pr. Shoes for dancing   |
| ✓ 1 pr. Sandals (open)                |  | 1 pr. Shoes               |
| ✓ 1 sweater pull-over                 |  | 1 pr. Sandals (open)      |
| ✓ 1 Plastic mac                       |  | 1 Warm jumper             |
| ✓ 1 pr. Swimming trunks               |  | 1 Cardigan                |
| ✓ 3 prs. Socks                        |  | 1 Plastic mac             |
| ✓ 1 WHITE shirt                       |  | 1 Swimming costume        |
| ✓ 3 Cotton shirts                     |  | 1 Cotton shirt            |
| ✓ 1 pr. Woolen socks                  |  | Nylons/ tights            |

| Essential                                 | General | Optional                          |
|---|---------|-----------------------------------|
| ✓ Kitbag - not framed or hard <i>West</i> |         | Pen / pencils                     |
| ✓ Stereocamera                            |         | Notebook/writing paper            |
| ✓ 1 Kilt bag (5 contents)                 |         | Thermos flask (esp. crew member)  |
| ✓ 2 Face towels                           |         | Mirror                            |
| ✓ 1 pr. Sunglasses                        |         | ✓ Polythene bags                  |
| ✓ Deodorant                               |         | Penknife                          |
| ✓ Soap                                    |         | Shaver                            |
| ✓ Insect repellent                        |         | Plastic mug (caves unpacking)     |
| ✓ Chlorine tablets                        |         | Camera/film/flashbulbs            |
| ✓ Sunburn cream or Calamine lotion        |         | Creams/foam or the like           |
| ✓ Shoe cleaning equipment <i>West</i>     |         | Radio/record player/tape recorder |
| ✓ 1 2-pt. Water bottle                    |         | ✓ Floppy hat                      |
| ✓ Cotton lining for sleeping bag          |         | <i>Comex</i> <i>C-V</i>           |

This is a rough guide on suggested clothing as prepared for the Glasgow contingent. It does not have to be strictly adhered to rigidly and leaves plenty of room for personal preferences but please remember the restriction of 30lbs. per capita for personal effects.

Every MALE is expected to take a KILT. The kilt is a comfortable garment (do not take an army kilt); it avoids the cost of a tropical suit and the trouble of keeping the latter presentable. Coats and jackets have not been included in the lists.....*shouraks?*

EVERYTHING that is classified as an outer garment and which will need to be washed must be **WASH-DRY** so that some semblance of respectability may be achieved with the minimum of effort. Avoid nylon as it is non-absorbent and tends to hold sweaty odours.

MEDICINES ~~such~~ such as analgesics, antacids, salt tablets etc. will be carried in the medicine chest. People suffering from mild allergies should take their own (sufficient) supplies of anti-histamine or whatever.

FILM will probably be bought by Johan - and paid for by you - at a reduced price sufficient of us want a sufficient amount.

A cotton lining should be used with your sleeping bag....more hygienic and comfortable. For those who appreciate the luxuries in life.....take an air mattress.

CHLORINE tablets for water sterilisation; each person must take sufficient to purify their own supply of drinking water - all water **MUST** be purified and, if you become ill, you are just an extra burden on the coach - it is not as if you are travelling on your own.

SOUVENIRS: most people will want to bring back some souvenirs. Please remember when considering what articles you will take. Kitchen sinks will remain at us - and a word on the souvenirs - Take and flame may look very cuddly, but do not take good travelling companions.

SHAVING - not for any potential bearded beauties - electric shavers can be recharged by the battery with the drivers permission - but previous experience (not papers shown that cream - soap - and ordinary blades are the best.

GIRLS only - Tampax and the like you will not find in the East - so go prepared.

INSURANCE: centrally, through Lloyds, we are covered for:-  
Every risk except war.

Personal liability  
Medical treatment - but you will not be flown back if the cost of flight is more than that of the treatment in the country concerned  
Accident policy - but only so far as the driver of the coach is concerned i.e. if you must be run over, choose the coach and not a bullock cart.

NOT covered are:-  
Life insurance.  
Personal baggage.  
Flying home in the case of death in the facility or other the best of the flight we are not that of the treatment.

Last time, Greg covered such things as this out of his own pocket for those it properly covered by insurance. This time we must all be properly covered before we go, otherwise we shall become dependent on Greg. This we don't want - do we?

The kit list supplied to Edinburgh Comexers

The contingents collected their specially-modified coaches on June 7 from the chairman of coachbuilders Duples at their Blackpool factory, an opportunity used for the first of what became many photo-op sessions to demonstrate the impressive sight of 20 cream and green buses moving out in formation. We were filmed for a sequence that was broadcast in the BBC 2 news later that evening. Edinburgh's shiny new coach was then driven back to Edinburgh, mostly by Jim Moyes who was the only person with a PSV licence at that time. **KNK358G** was christened Cuddles by Alastair S. T'other Alastair, who had been forced to acquire some vehicle maintenance experience through his foolish ownership of an unreliable MGA sports car, volunteered as second mechanic.

Don C then had his PSV test in Cuddles around Sighthill. Part of the test is the emergency stop. The inspector got up and walked back to look out the rear to make sure there was no-one behind then gave several quick beeps on the pushbutton bell. Don was watching him and jammed on the anchors real quick! The inspector fell over and landed in the passage. He staggered back to the front seat muttering "F\*\*king good brakes"....hardly surprising considering the bus was brand new!

Plans also emerged from the hard-pressed Comex operations HQ (aka Annie Murray) for a week's preparatory camp for the whole expedition. This was held at Wollaton Park, Nottingham, from July 1-6, and most of the Edinburgh contingent attended.

It was a seminal event, as for the first time we started to appreciate the sheer scale of the expedition and the lifestyle that it created. For example, while lots of us had slept in tents in their sleeping bags, we'd not done it before with 24 other folk who were mainly strangers. But most memories seem to be positive, eg Tony: "*The setting in the park of Wollaton Hall in Nottingham was great – but the rolls sold in the Buttery were even greater!*"

*Greg (right) in typical forceful style during Comex 3; (below) we tentatively tackle Shakespeare at the Nottingham camp during a read-through of our chosen play*



One particular challenge caused considerable debate amongst the crew. It had been made clear that each contingent should organise a 'cultural performance' of some unspecified kind, so that they fully participated in what seemed a pretty daunting series of public shows that the expedition was scheduled to deliver, both en route and in Delhi itself where we were due to spend a week at a purpose-built arena capable of holding 10,000 spectators. By Nottingham it was clear that some other contingents had already put considerable thought into what they would deliver.

For instance (probably inevitably) the Oxford, Cambridge and Bristol contingents were rehearsing a combined Shakespearian Pageant, which they ended up performing over a dozen times on the way to India and in Delhi itself. Newcastle was doing a Northumbrian Rapper's Dance, Yorkshire had its Folk Dancers, Liverpool its Beatles tribute group called Colonel Gregory's Band, Kent a comedy act 'The Green Eye of the Little Yellow God'..... and so on. There were several Comex-wide acts, such as the GoJo girls dancing troupe, choreographed by a girl from Oxford, and a choir of over 60 people. And some individual performers such as Chris Nicholls of Keele who sang the Comex song Baba Noma, and Zoe Salmon of Bristol who played the classical guitar.

The expedition was carrying its own film crew, a three-man group from Bristol who popped up continually throughout the three months – often at frustrating times, such as recording the Comex convoy passing through various scenic or symbolic settings.

Before Nottingham we had settled on a contingent production of *Midsummer Night's Dream*. In preparation Pru had made a spectacular Bottom's Head out of wire mesh and fun fur, with massive eye lashes. Star parts included Gordon as Puck and Jim L as Oberon. We had

also discussed doing a Scottish country dancing set but St Andrews and Glasgow were already co-operating on such a venture.

By the time of Nottingham we had done virtually no rehearsals. Armed with Shakespeare's finest words, we had several read-throughs and attempted to stage some scenes. However we quickly and uneasily became aware that our thespian offering was going to be much below par by comparison with other, better-prepared contingents. So we compromised by settling on a combination of our own Scottish country dancing performance for use when we were out visiting on our own, and individuals participating in other acts. So Carol and Pru became core members of the GoJos, whose fame came to include performing for Pakistani TV in their Rawalpindi studios. Piper Brian was much in demand to support other acts and ended up supporting one of Glasgow's crew who danced an impressive solo Highland fling. And Gordon with his trusty mandolin did an excellent Dr Zhivago's Theme.

Our coach started filling up with most of the necessary equipment. The Nottingham week was the first time we were able to practice putting up the double-sided tents that were designed to enclose the coaches. We also started work on the long list of modifications that the crew (particularly the drivers) felt essential to enable the bus to cope with the extreme conditions we had been told to expect travelling across some of the most hostile terrain on the planet. These included:

- Cooling fan directed at the driver
- Wooden rack slung under the coach's side skirt to provide more badly-needed storage
- Seats swung round to form facing sets of four
- Quartz-iodine headlamp bulbs
- An additional halogen spotlight on the dashboard



*The impressive line-up of 20 Duple Vista Comex coaches at the manufacturers' Blackpool factory*

We were now 25-strong and full. Everyone was making their individual preparations for what we had been told to expect. Some overlooked the timing of the return trip through an autumnal Europe. Iona: "I bought a very warm light sleeping bag but my mother, who had been brought

up in India, said I didn't need any warm clothes, so I didn't even take a warm jumper which was a mistake. However I took a rug, a homemade cape and a cotton strapless evening dress, all of which produced memories." There was also dosh to consider. We had individually been

recommended to take £50 spending money – today's equivalent of £575 – as banker, Iona was facing a different level of challenge. "I was given the bank – a metal cash box with key and some currency for all countries up to and including Iran, plus a considerable amount of American Express dollar travellers cheques. This was to cover everything communal, mostly food and petrol – the prearranged campsites and accommodation was either paid for in advance or provided free, given Comex's cultural purposes."

According to Greg's book Crying Drums, each contingent was allocated a budget of £500 for food and fuel: "a tight budget but just enough if handled wisely," he said. Although that same sum is worth £5,700 today, it was indeed a tough budget and placed a lot of responsibility on Iona's shoulders from day one.....which she would prove to handle admirably. While at £60,000 the overall expedition budget also seemed a remarkably small sum for such a large enterprise, we started with a heavy load of food stocks, issued at Nottingham, such as egg powder, oats, milk powder, tinned puddings (including Ambrosia creamed rice), Smash and sugar. These were either bulk buys or sponsored contributions from manufacturers.

As departure day drew nearer, an impressive list of supporting messages flowed in for Comex from around the Commonwealth, including the likes of Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and his New Zealand opposite number Keith Holyoake. The overall expedition patron, Prince Philip, sent regular telegrams. Finally, after a farewell photography session with The Scotsman outside Fay's Marchmont flat, we drove out of Edinburgh on the evening of July 13 1969, heading for Dover where the following afternoon we were due to meet up with the other 19 contingents at a camp in the grounds of the Duke of York's Military School.....and for the biggest adventure we had ever undertaken! On the way south we listened to Prince Charles being invested as Prince of Wales - very patriotic. When we arrived, most of the other contingents had already lined up in Comex-style formation on the school's vast parade ground.....so in typical Edinburgh fashion we parked opposite the serried ranks as if to take their salute. Seeking our own spot became something of a trademark of our contingent as we journeyed across Europe and Asia. END



*Edinburgh 'takes the salute' at the Duke of York's Military School in Dover before we embark for Europe*



*The kilts make their first mass appearance in Zagreb as we try out some informal Scottish country dances....from left, Tony, Bob Dickson, Ali B, Fudge, Don C, Gordon, Dave, Bill, Don W and Jim L.  
(Below), Ali B and Don C with Ros at the campsite, and (R) Cuddles at the Yugoslav border post with the country flag being changed*

