

THE CONTINENTAL CACTUS CRAWL
30th March to 2nd April 2017
“The Brexit Tour” - organiser James Gold.

THURSDAY James designates this Tour as the “Brexit Tour” six months ago, so Mrs May must ask his advice before she gives formal notice of quitting the day before. It is a nice sunny spring morning as we welcome our luxury conveyance provided by the excellent Mott's of Aylesbury, in the expert hands of our imperturbable driver Brian, with our indispensable guide Nicky. Nobody is late; nobody forgets his or her passport; so we leave at the stroke of 7:30 and start on our packed lunches.

In allocating seats James follows Joyce Jackson's Perceived Respectability Index. Those who are suspected of faction or fiction, fraction or friction, are placed in the rear half of the coach behind the toilet. Martin Doorbar and your correspondent obviously share a PRI of 25%, since we are three-quarters of the way down the coach. Alan Rollason is deprived of his traditional seat behind the heads, and Eddy Harris has been promoted to his position as Master of the Rolls, Lavengro, Facilities Janitor, whatever you call it. Two married couples are inserted among the suspects presumably to discourage hooliganism and senile delinquency.

There is time for coffee at Ashford International Terminal, the French let us through without even so much as a Gallic shrug, and it is a smooth ride to Cactusflower in Rumst near Antwerp.

There is something for everybody here, as regulars at ELK know. Then we have an easy ride to the Postillion Hotel at Dordrecht. Thinking that nobody would wish to stay in a hotel that would have us, we dash up to our familiar rooms, chuck our cases down, and rush for the best seats at the bar. Dinner is prompt and good. Then the hard cases demonstrate that they are not so hard after all: still remembering the hangovers of last year, they stick to Heineken.

FRIDAY Friday is Germany day. James insists that we leave at 8:00 sharp. That is, 8:00 Central European Summer Time. Everybody can handle that for a change, so we leave on time, for it is a long way into Germany and we are heading for Sabine Reinecke in Leverkusen, which is a suburb of Cologne beyond the Roman *limes*. Today's visits are rearranged because, of course, Specks has closed down. We have not been there before, but it is a friendly place that specialises in Hoyas and Pelagoniums. Inside the greenhouse Don Smith recruits a Chinese gentleman for the Mesemb Study Group.

Alas, the bridge back over the Rhine into *terra cognita* is closed to heavy traffic. We spend ages trying to find the Bridge at Remagen – or any bridge – like most of the population of the Rhineland Palatinate. So we are quite late at Piltz. We learn that Frau Piltz is seriously ill – very best wishes for a speedy recovery. Experienced visitors join the sales queue early so that they can get the coffee while it is hot.

An outbreak of old-fashioned raucousness breaks out after we leave Piltz, exacerbated by Martin spilling his tequila into his lap. Once the perpetrators are settled down, conversation sticks at the vital question as to whether the ice cream parlour outside Ingo Breuer's will still be open. It is. Your correspondent is not alone in buying a treble on the way in; nor is he alone in being able to taste ice cream for the next twelve hours or more.

As a result of our earlier *parlez-vous-ing* we are very late back at Dordrecht. Nevertheless the excellent staff at the hotel manage to feed us all at the exceptionally late hour of 9:00 while at the same time running the bar and catering for a teenyboppers' birthday party. Some of our members (with a very low PRI) consider gatecrashing this, though in this instance beer brings sanity.

SATURDAY This promises to be a hectic day – money to burn and six nurseries to spend it in. As usual, the first visit is to Jan Westeijn's wholesale nursery. The fence that Martin smashes down two years ago is now repaired and the boggy field is full of sheep. So Brian is not tempted to use it as a turning circle (see last year's thrilling episode). The small dog is there to herd us in, and the large dog to herd us out. I often wonder why wholesale nurseries are so welcoming. My guess is that we

are like leucocytes in the blood: we are there to remove all the cristate, monstrose, variegated, multi-headed and teratophytic specimens, leaving the management with thousands of identical plants.

After leaving Westeijn's, Brian extricates us from the little access lane in one easy movement, which no other coach driver ever manages. In no time at all we arrive at Van der Linden's. Some of our party make for the sub-tenant who sells gigantic caudiciforms, all seed-raised hem hem, while others scrutinise the ends of the benches where the leftovers and non-conforming plants are jumbled together. Others amuse themselves by trying to bully James into buying plants bigger than himself, but, unusually, he is not tempted.

The next stop is Cok Grootsholten's place. Diehard Haworthia fanatics (most of the U.K.'s population answering this description are of our party) try to persuade Cok to sell them various parched oddities out of his private collection. Otherwise we sit back and drink Cok and Ine's excellent coffee.

After this we move on to Leon van Zanten. This is new to us, and all that James can tell us about it is that it is an unknown quantity and that it specialises in Lithops. What we discover is astonishing beyond imagination. Yes, there are Lithops there: more Lithops seedlings than there must be in the whole of southern Africa. There are hectares of tabling covered with sheet polythene. But his speciality is in fact cacti. His business is to supply the big wholesalers with seedling plants: in other words he is the first link in a super-efficient Dutch chain. There must be millions of retail purchasers if such a gigantic undertaking can make a profit. What if they all join the BCSS? We are there to mop up the oddities after the main bulk have been shipped to smaller operators like Van der Linden in units of ten thousand.

Then off we go to Two Shovels. Cactus fanatics love this place, and they always seem to find something different, even if it is only the name on the label that is different. Non-cactus people amuse themselves by putting both feet together into one of Hans's clogs.

We finish at Gerrit Mellissen. He buys collections and sells them on, and he is a familiar sight at ELK. So his stock is always unpredictable but interesting, and plenty of plants are loaded on to the coach.

It is not far to the Postillion, and we are instructed to have our plants packed and on the coach immediately after dinner. At dinner Stirling on our behalf thanks James for organising it, and Nicky our guide, and Brian our driver, and the Hotel staff for looking after us, and Roger Day for securing permission to stable our cars at Capel Manor. Packers have been appointed, and no helping is allowed. In fact the packers do not let anyone within fifty metres of the coach. Because there are no huge boxes from Specks, and James has been exercising unaccustomed self-restraint, there is plenty of space for the first time in living memory.

SUNDAY An early start again, with not much traffic on the road, but Aad Vijverberg is waiting for us. He has lots of beautifully grown seedling cacti of types that the big mass-production nurseries avoid but which are the darlings of hobbyists like ourselves. So the interior of the coach is filled up with trays of plants. Then off we go to Blighty. We have an easy run into and through Belgium, stopping briefly at a motorway restaurant before reaching Calais Passenger Terminal in time for our train. Your correspondent is worried that he may be radioactive, but if he is, the sensors do not pick up any lingering traces of Technetium-99. Nobody has packed his or her passport under the mountain of plants, so we effect a soft Brexit. At the end Brian says that he likes driving for us, so we must be better than the school run.

Next year (assuming that James is still willing to carry on) must see some inevitable changes if we are going to cram it all into an extended weekend. He would be most interested to have recommendations from anyone who has travelled the Continent and knows the nurseries.