

Financial Times Article

Title: Josey Walker: Singing the praises of stag parties

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Government officials have told Josey Walker, an American businessman, that his clients are not the type of people they want coming to Hungary. Undeterred, Mr Walker waits at Budapest's Ferihegy airport for a group of eight young men.

Suspected gangsters? Balkan war criminals? Not exactly. As the easyJet passengers arriving from London Stansted enter the main hall, Mr Walker holds up a sign: "STAG PARTY".

With the recent arrival of discount airlines to the city, small groups of beer-guzzling British men have begun descending on Budapest, the newest popular destination for bachelor party weekends and rugby tourists from the UK.

Mr Walker seized the opportunity by launching Budapest Weekends, a small company that goes to surprising lengths to provide such groups a smooth, affordable and safe visit.

This year, his first full year of operation, he expects to handle 100 groups averaging between 10 and 12 people.

When he first approached the Hungarian Tourist Board's office in London, hoping to add his company to the list of recommended tour operators, officials refused. It seems that stories of drunken mayhem in Prague, where discount airlines have been bringing stag groups for a few years, had the Hungarian authorities worried.

The tourist board's reaction, says Mr Walker, is like the proverbial ostrich sticking its head in the sand. "It's new, inexpensive and the girls are pretty. These people are coming to Hungary no matter what anybody does."

No further proof is required than a visit to Becketts, an Irish-style pub in the city centre. In addition to Mr Walker's group, two rugby teams from England are mixed with expatriate regulars watching an English football match on television, swallowing pints of beer and shouting unintelligible verses of song.

"What a fantastic city," says Richard Henry, 38, of Redcar Rugby Club in the northeast of England. "By next year this will be the place to come to."

Declan O'Callaghan, the proprietor at Becketts, says he sees a definite increase in business from the stag and sports groups. "It has its ups and downs," he admits. "The problem with these guys is they are only here for three days and they do not give a damn about your establishment."

Mr Walker, however, insists he is not in the business of simply letting loose a drunken rabble on an unsuspecting city. He takes care, he says, not to steer a rowdy group into a quiet neighbourhood pub. He is also serious about protecting his clients.

"Do not," he tells the latest arrivals, "get into a random cab and ask the driver to take you to a random strip club. Chances are something bad is going to happen."

Two men from a previous group did just that. They were charged Ft350,000 (€1,378) for two brandies. The barman responded to their protests by drawing a pistol. A second, very large staff member escorted the two men to a cash machine.

The other crucial element to Mr Walker's approach is the part his clients do not hear about. This involves an impressive effort to bridge the gap between British expectations regarding service and Hungary's poor service culture.

Back at the airport to welcome the latest stag group, Mr Walker has instructed his regular van service to bring some bottles of beer. Mr Walker is pleased when the driver arrives on time. He inquires about the beer. "What beer?" the driver asks. It's just as well that Mr Walker has brought some beer himself - just in case.

Mr Walker tries to keep his operations as inexpensive as possible. He charges £145 per person for a two-night package including four-star hotel, airport transfers, a daytime programme - choices include a Trabant rally, Turkish baths and fencing lessons - one night of personal shepherding, printed guide material and 24-hour availability for problem solving.

"People who travel should always feel they got the best deal and the best service from a good guy," he says.

Somehow Mr Walker delivers the line without sounding like a used car salesman. Indeed, he has a homespun sincerity that clearly appeals to his customers. Already, 30 per cent of his groups are return customers or come to him recommended by a previous customer.

Now, if only he could do something about those rugby songs...