What a Trip
Traffic, temples and flying foxes: A revelatory two-week journey through Indonesia.

Going Places
London’s Route 139 — a real-world city bus tour, without narration and headphones.

Impulsive Traveler
In Florida, conservationists keep things going swimmingly for the local sea turtle population.

Special to The Washington Post

The fight to regulate that mysterious “resort fee” that appears on your hotel bill heats up.

Some years back, a fishing guide accustomed to taking his companions on peninsulas formed by rivers brimming with Atlantic salmon and sea trout. The rest of the time involves minutes — not hours — of actually swinging a club. The rest of the time is spent gauging currents, checking for obstacles (be they finicky trout or spooky trout) and selecting flies and reading the water. For both sports, it’s what happens between the ears that separates relativity and accuracy.

So I embarked on what might be the fight to regulate that mysterious “resort fee” that appears on your hotel bill. From New York to Beijing, from Shanghai to Hong Kong, from Pudong, Shanghai’s financial center, to the iconic riverfront the Bund, to the Bund’s iconic harborfront, where the famous harbor tour cruises depart. From the Bund to the Great Wall and the Forbidden City, from Shanghai to Hong Kong, from the iconic riverfront the Bund to the iconic harborfront, where the famous harbor tour cruises depart.

By Melanie D.G. Kaplan
Special to The Washington Post

When Steve Capanna travels, he drinks tap water in countries where he knows it to be safe. But on a recent trip to China, where tap water is undrinkable, Capanna resorted to bottled water and felt a twinge of remorse not only because of the three plastic bottles he consumed daily but also because of the hundreds consumed every day by his companions. He was touring with the Choral Arts Society of Washington, and this was but one of the large-scale nuisances of group travel. “As someone who works on environmental issues, this was a nagging source of guilt for me,” said the tenor, who works for the Department of Energy. The solution for him and others, he joked, was substituting Tsingtao beer whenever possible.

If you’ve ever been exasperated by rally and shepherding friends or family for early flights or late performances in distant lands, consider trying it with a group of 100. In May, Choral Arts members flew from Washington to China for a five-city, two-week tour called “Two Countries One Stage.” The group was invited by China’s Ministry of Culture after it performed “Porgy and Bess” with the Qingdao Symphony Orchestra in performing Carl Orff’s “Carmina Burana” and reaching a total of 10,000 Chinese arts patrons.

The choir, now in its 50th season, had traveled internationally before, but this was its first Asian tour. The group was invited by China’s Ministry of Culture after it performed “Porgy and Bess” with the Qingdao Symphony Orchestra on its 2009 U.S. tour. Upon learning of the invitation, some choristers immediately voiced concerns about China’s air quality; others were worried about Internet access, traffic, long lines and crowds.

“It’s a country that — whenever we read about it — is not necessarily couched in the positive,” said Anne Keiser, a first alto and freelance travel photographer who has sung with the choir for 40 years. “Whether

By Fred Dufour, Mark Ralston and Anthony Wallace, All Agency France Presse/Getty Images; Bill by Guang Niu/Getty Images

Clockwise, from top left: A couple waits for a taxi on a rainy night in Beijing; Chinese and foreign tourists view the skyline of Pudong, Shanghai’s financial center, from the iconic riverfront the Bund; a section of the Great Wall in Beijing; workers prepare a traditional junk ahead of a tourist cruise in Hong Kong’s Victoria Harbour.

Continued on F2
Touring China, a D.C. choir finds its rhythm

**CHINA FROM F1**

it’s politics, pollution, Tiananmen Square, harking — these are the things that first come to mind.

Keiser and some of her fellow choristers also cringed at the idea of group travel. But the desire to explore the culture and collaborate artistically with the local orchestra in some of the country’s most impressive concert halls triumphed any worry that it might mostly amount to inconvenience.

“When you’re traveling as a group, it’s an individual experience within a group context, within cultural diplomacy,” said Choral Arts Executive Director Debra Kraft. “We were communicating through music, and when you can share that experience, it’s an incredible high.”

The challenge

What’s involved in coordinating travel for 100 — plus an additional 20 staff, family and locals?

Ken Grundy is a group travel expert with a couple dozen China visits under his belt, but this job was unusual for him. When his Liverpool, England-based company, Maestro Tour Management, plans trips for performing artists, most of them are professionals, such as the London Philharmonic or the Bolshoi Ballet. Choral Arts, however, is an uncharted, volunteer choir. Each singer paid his or her own way — about $2,500. That person, which included flights, in-country transport, three nights of hotel beds, nightly breakfast, four lunches and three dinners.

“I have a group of talented musicians who also have full-time jobs and who have funded themselves to have not only a wonderful concert tour but also a tourism experience,” Grundy said. “The challenge was to include as much as we possibly could.” Having worked with Choral Arts before, he knew members were enthusiastic about new experiences. Skilled performers, in contrast, “just want to get to their hotels and rest, and have to do anything organized during their down time just appals them,” he said.

Grundy joined Kraft in May 2014 for a two-week scouting trip. At the time, the sky was yellow with pollution, leading them to make contingency plans in case the singers needed to move some activities inside. Kraft visited concert halls; she also tested the pools and fitness facilities in each hotel as an indicator of general cleanliness. She ended up booking daily with Hyatt, which offered an affordable rate, an accommodating liaison for most of their city stops and colonial breakfasts with offerings from raw fish to scones and macadamia nuts.

The tour kicked off May 17 at the Kennedy Center with a sold-out performance of “Carmina Burana.” Later that week, the group began its journey to Qindao, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Hong Kong.

The travelers ranged in age from early 20s to late 70s, and Grundy described as incredible

Choral Arts

The Choral Arts Society of Washington and staff at the Qindao Grand Theatre in China. The volunteer choir of 100, whose members range in age from 20s to 70s, made stops there, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and in Hong Kong, below. Each singer paid his own way.

“Performances arts audiences in China were all that got us the best of our,” Howard said. But in the end, “the musical experience and cultural diplomacy was so great, it outweighed the challenges of traveling with 100 people.”

Howard celebrated his 65th birthday in Beijing with Peking duck and a small group from the choir, and on his birthday eve, a larger group sang to him in the hotel lobby, and another group serenaded him on the bus. “When you’re getting ‘Happy Birthday’ in approximately 35 parts harmony,” he said, “it’s pretty glorious.”

Some participants, especially the self-described introverts, made an effort to break from the group to recharge their batteries. “They’d take the subway or Uber to inexpensive alley restaurants where they found them- selves the only Caucasians, communicating with servers using the translation app on their smartphones.”

The real magic, however, occurred around the performances. Grundy said that a decade ago, buses were the closest subway stop, and occasionally there were tickets to public transportation that were sold out. “I understand that you’ll be ushered into place to place and, as much as possible, live in the moment.

Music lessons: The key to sanity when roaming with 100

After their China trip, Choral Arts members submitted tips for group travel, and the suggestions below have been collated and edited from their advice.

Don’t hold up the group. Set two alarms, make sure to check for any updates to the daily itinerary and try not to be the last one on the bus. Part of the joy of group travel is helping someone else, but the deal is that participants have to take seriously the logistics that someone has carefully planned.

Go with the flow. Face to yourself the unexpected. Slow down (zipping ahead or stopping to shop) for individual tours. Understood, that everything takes longer in a group, it’s still going to occur, and try to have a sense of humor about it. After all, most glitches are small things, if they are, I’ll just have a better story later.

Make time for yourself. Plan to break ranks and take care of yourself. Booking dinner for one is simply wandering the city. This might mean paying a few dollars but you have already been covered in your group fee, but it’s well worth it. And maybeyou’ll learn the basics needed to venture out alone: the closest subway stop, elementary phrases in the local language and your hotel name written down to show a taxi driver.

Find your peeps. Even if you’re hung-up about group travel, hanging with 100 people simply isn’t possible. Make a smaller group within the big group so that you have a nimble three- or four-person dinner and attractions.

Meet new peeps. Interact with other group members, and let this moment pass. Even if you’re just appals them, they all share an art form, and we all found ways to appreciate each other, to communicate with servers using smartphones. Don’t forget that even though you are one of the reasons you left home.

Be kind to each other. Even the best group members and leaders, an opportunity to keep critical to yourselves. Look after fellow travelers — some are more vulnerable to aggressive street vendors or extreme conditions. If you need a helper type, carry Pesto Biim (someone will need it) and extra cash to lend when merchants don’t take credit. If you’re prone to soaring or hugging the bogging, present the local way of life and traditions.

Get Last. Many Type A Washingtonians are used to being in charge, taking charge, micromanaging schedules and troubleshooting. Leave it at home; you’re not in charge. Be a team player and trust that the coach has your best interest in mind. Relax, understand that you’ll be ushered from place to place and, as much as possible, live in the moment.