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Thinking of Touring in Europe? [1]

by Richard Hawkins, EBMA Board

Perhaps you?ve heard how rewarding the experience can be? New friends, new environments, new cultures, and new music? these things and more are all exciting and true. However, bands from America should keep the following general points in mind.

Representing bluegrass abroad
A tour to any foreign country takes planning, preparation, and thought far in advance. A year or more in advance is not unusual. And bands considering touring abroad should seriously ask themselves if they are ready to act as ambassadors of bluegrass music, because that?s exactly what they will be doing. An overseas tour is not just a paid vacation. It presents many challenges, and when show time comes the band is expected to deliver first-class music and entertainment. A leading bluegrass musician once said: ?You?ve got to do your best on stage, and you?ve got to have a best to do it with; otherwise it hurts you and it hurts us.? A band that delivers less hurts not just itself, but the promoters, the professional musicians who are trying to make a living with their music, and any potential audience for bluegrass music in Europe.

Are you still with us? The following tips and suggestions may help you prepare for your tour.

European venues
You are entering a crowded market. The bluegrass music scene in Europe is now well established and expanding annually. Naturally, many bands want to get into it. However, compared to the USA the number of potential jobs is limited, especially for new, relatively unknown bands touring for the first time. In addition, many venues cannot afford to pay as much as similar venues in the USA. The *O Brother, Where Art Thou* factor has not boosted the music in Europe as much as in North America.

On the positive side, if you?re prepared to perform at most any type of venue ? from cafés and house concerts to theaters and festivals ? you?re more likely to realize financial success at the end of your tour. Playing two gigs in one day (afternoon / evening) is a good way to supplement your income. Alternative venues can also be found through arts councils, cultural centers, universities, elementary schools, etc.

Contacts, booking, & promotion
An unrivalled database of contacts is the European Bluegrass Directory, published by the European Bluegrass Music Association (EBMA). The listings include national bluegrass associations, festival and concert organizers, and promoters. Some of this information is also available in the EBMA magazine Bluegrass Europe and online at www.ebma.org [2].
The European Bluegrass Directory is available for purchase by writing to: EBMA EBD, c/o

Angelika Torrie, Holeerain 29, CH-4102 Binningen, Switzerland.

A band or artist website, professionally recorded CD, and promotional material is essential. Promoters who don?t already know your music can research your materials online and form their own conclusion whether to pursue the possibility of a Euro tour. Many venues request press kits. These can be emailed (or put on your website for easy access), but high-profile venues usually want hard copy. Send all packages by air mail; surface mail is much too slow. Determine all needs for promotion, and provide whatever is needed or requested as soon as possible.

It is certainly possible to organize your own tour without involving a promoter or exclusive agent, but chances are you will need a lot of assistance your first time around. The Internet is an excellent starting point for researching potential venues, associations, and promoters. Emailing promoters is also a good start. You may or may not find a promoter willing to help book your tour. A primary agent, acting as your main contact, can be very helpful. Associations can offer a wealth of information and are generally interested in doing so. But don?t expect them to do everything for you; they have lives of their own. However, they may be able to suggest venues in their area, advise you on work permits, and so forth.

Bear in mind that very few promoters or agents in Europe are currently able to arrange full tours for a US band, and those few are flooded with requests. Some tend to work as individuals, setting his/her preferred dates. Others may become involved in booking your group, but only once a primary agent contacts them, requesting additional bookings for your tour.

After making email contact, a personal conversation by phone is always best. Call repeatedly until you reach the person in charge. You can usually proceed with email or postal mail after that. Keep a dedicated folder of all emails sent and received. This will save you a lot of time, as well as provide you with a record of what was said and when.

Occasionally two or more bands may be touring at the same time, competing for the same few venues. In that case, your tour may become less viable financially, for you and the promoter as well.

Do your own research ? try to find out if any other bands have confirmed dates in the regions you hope to visit, before scheduling any dates of your own that might conflict.

Logistics, expenses, & currency exchange rates

Once you?ve made contacts and have an idea of the areas you may be visiting, set a time frame for the potential tour. That will give you a starting and ending point for estimating many aspects of your trip. You may want to consider the travel distance between gigs to determine whether your potential tour is even feasible. For routing you should use a detailed European atlas.

Once you have determined the first and last dates, check airfares and vehicle rental rates for your time frame ? and book flights and vehicles well in advance. If you know what nights you will need to

pay for lodging, estimate those costs as well. Some venues provide lodging and meals; some do not (see Accommodations below).

Estimate total mileage and then fuel costs. Fuel will be a major expense in all European countries. You might consider renting a vehicle with a diesel engine and standard transmission for the best rates and fuel economy. If you are touring in Europe for more than two weeks, Renault ?EuroDrive? has an excellent lease program with brand new vehicles and extensive coverage included in the price. The leases are tax-free for non-EU citizens. Be sure to check which countries are not included in the contract.

Try to include a rough estimate of potential product sales in your trip expense estimates. After estimating total tour expenses you can then determine an estimated range for performance fees necessary in order to cover expenses and pay personnel. Just to be on the safe side, it may be a good idea to allow for miscellaneous expenses that may occur?and they usually do.

Be aware of the currency exchange rates that will apply to you when estimating your expenses and income. In most countries you will be paid in Euros. As of this writing, exchanging Euros to U.S. dollars will result in a higher total income figure.

Foreign banks and currency exchange kiosks charge relatively high fees for converting your U.S. cash to Euros. When making major purchases in other countries, you will find a credit card to be the best deal. It will automatically include the exchange rate at the time of your purchase, with no additional fees.

For your cash needs, the ATM machine can be your best friend! As long as a Cirrus-affiliated bank issues your ATM card, you can always get ready cash. The only dollars you will need in your pocket are whatever you might have immediate need for on your return home.

Booking flights
As mentioned above, once the first and last dates of your tour are confirmed ? book your flights. Booking well in advance usually results in the lowest airfare possible. It is also cheapest to fly into and out of the same airport. Nonstop flights are always the best option. Try to book your final tour dates accordingly. If you consult a travel agent well in advance of your departure date, he/she should be able to shop around for the best fares possible. It?s a good idea to book flights through a travel agent. If you run into any complications during your trip, your travel agent is likely to get immediate and positive results for you. Many a musician?s problem at the airport has quickly been resolved over the phone by a travel agent. It is best to arrive at least one day earlier than your first gig! Most international flights are overnight flights. It can be a real chore adjusting to the time change. If you have a long drive to your first gig, take that into consideration as well when choosing a departure/arrival date.

Instruments
Flying with instruments is generally not a problem. Many musicians with flight experience choose to carry them onboard and store them in the overhead compartments or in closets. Ordinary instrument cases, up to and including the size of guitars, will fit into most overhead compartments.

The major anxiety about checking instruments in baggage is the chance of theft or damage. If you?re checking your instrument, it is unwise to use anything but a sturdy flight case. Ordinary instrument cases can get severely damaged on flights... and it does happen! People with secure flight cases can check their instruments in baggage with no second thoughts.

Regardless of which method you choose, it?s wise to take the tension off the strings ? most

luthiers recommend dropping them at least one full step below 440 tuning. It?s also a good idea to cushion the neck with soft material where it rests on the inside of the case. Some banjo players remove the neck and wrap it in cloth inside the case. These measures can help prevent damage due to extreme temperature changes, or to sudden shock caused by throwing and/or dropping your instrument on its way to and from the aircraft?s baggage compartment.
With a little research, bass players can arrange to borrow or rent a bass while in Europe. It is customary to bring the owner a new set of strings if you will be borrowing it from someone.

Transportation
As mentioned above, consider renting a diesel vehicle with standard transmission for the best rates and fuel economy; and examine the excellent Renault ?Eurodrive? lease program if you?re touring for more than two weeks. A large van is highly recommended for a band. These can be surprisingly comfortable if you choose your vehicle wisely? even when storing an acoustic bass. A seven-passenger van is ideal for a four-, five-, or six-piece band. A nine-seat van is luxury! Some bands opt for multiple cars during their tour, but most find vans to be the best option.

Driving can be a challenge. However, the highways and secondary roads are well marked these days and shouldn?t be a real issue for most visitors. Again, it is a must to have a detailed European atlas. Be aware that direction signs list the upcoming cities and towns in descending order, with the top being the next city/exit up ahead.

Do not underestimate travel time from one place to another! Today?s European highways can be very crowded, especially when approaching major cities. And not all venues are on or near fast roads.

Respect the speed limits and pedestrian traffic. There are often traffic cameras that will take your photo as you pass by if you are speeding. This can be true on even the most secluded roads. There are usually warning signs that traffic cameras are up ahead. If you get your photo taken, chances are you will be receiving a fine in the mail a month or two later! Drinking and driving is not tolerated in most foreign countries and can result in harsh penalties.

Accommodations
If possible, try to arrange all lodging in advance. It may be possible for your representative in each country to help you with information, or perhaps even make your reservations for you. Some venues provide lodging and/or meals; some do not. It is not unusual to be hosted by a family in their home. Chances are if you don?t ask for accommodation, it may not be offered. Either way, you should definitely confirm lodging in advance? especially for your first night. If ? as is likely ? you have an overnight flight, arriving early next day in Europe, you will not feel like running around trying to find a room.

On arrival in Europe, most people find it best to try to stay awake until the evening. A long night?s sleep seems to help international travelers adjust to the time change.

Merchandise sales
It is virtually imperative to have a recording to sell to help make your trip a financial success. CDs are the media of choice. Cassette tapes are not popular and very few may ever be sold. Other products (T-shirts, caps, photos, etc.) usually realize limited sales. You may want to

consider whether it is practical to cart them all the way overseas. Bear in mind when packing your luggage that you will be dragging it everywhere you go! You can save a lot of time, some money, and hassle by shipping product ahead well in advance. Contact your host, agent, or first gig venue and arrange to have it delivered to them.

Different cultures
First of all, be aware that you are entering a vast territory of different cultures. You are not in Kansas anymore! Keep an open mind and don?t be afraid to try new things. As a rule, people living outside the cities in Europe enjoy a more relaxed, slower-paced life. Try to go with the flow. Enjoy the different cultures you will be experiencing for a relatively short period of time, and remember that you are essentially representing your own country.

As one might expect, the food in different countries is varied and specific to each region, and there are some amazing dishes to be had. The nearest thing to a full American-style breakfast is in Britain and Ireland. The usual Continental breakfast fare is fresh baked bread/rolls, some cold cuts, cheeses, a boiled egg, juices, occasionally cereal or oatmeal, and always tea and/or coffee. A typical meal in a restaurant or private home is generally a slower-paced experience than you are accustomed to having at home. Evening meals are typically a time for enjoying good company and conversation. It?s not unusual for a meal to last a couple of hours in some cases.

Business hours are very different from the USA. Keep that in mind when planning to buy food for the road, using banks or the post office, and so on. Many businesses are closed on Saturdays and most are closed on Sundays, with some exceptions in the cities. Holidays are also an issue when traveling? especially in regards to highway traffic.

Again? keep an open mind and enjoy your tour if you are fortunate enough to be chosen to perform in other countries. We hope this guide for touring will help you on your initial journey into international bluegrass music territory. The bluegrass friends and fans overseas are knowledgeable and extremely appreciative. You can?t help but have a good time; and a good relationship with the people and venues you encounter will make a return tour a lot easier.

The European Bluegrass Music Association thanks the experienced international promoters and touring artists whose contributions made this guide possible.
The EBMA?s European World of Bluegrass (EWOB) Festival is held in May every year in Voorthuizen, the Netherlands. Full details are at www.ewob.eu [3] and on the EBMA?s special EWOB brochure.

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