

Personal Audio Guide goes on the blink

by Donald Hiscock

At twenty-six Simon Leith was worried that things had gone badly wrong. It had been a few days since his personal audio guide had gone on the blink and he was feeling, understandably, very lost without it.

The numbers were there in all the usual places but when he tapped them into to the handset nothing happened or he got some kind of gobbledegook on the screen. He started noticing it just before the weekend but as he was due to be spending time on a retreat run by some non-conformist monks he didn't worry too much about it until his return to the city on Sunday night.

He particularly wanted some help with the number 48725 that had appeared above the telephone when he replaced the handset after telling his girlfriend about his weekend. She sounded cold and distant. Within seconds a number appeared, like always, and he would be moments away from getting an interpretation of what had just happened.

The quality of these interpretations, as you all know, vary tremendously, but over the years Simon had been satisfied with the general level of advice from his personal adviser. He cursed himself for not reporting a problem earlier, but last week he was in a rush, feeling good about himself and fully secure about what had been happening to him to the previous week. He was so confident, cocky even, that he had ignored several numbers that had popped up, adopting that swagger that young men his age often adopt when they feel they know best and basically it is too much of a bother to stop and complicate things with someone else's point of view. Simon, come Sunday night and on the receiving end of a bewildering conversation with Emma, was cursing his earlier arrogance.

The weekend had been great. He never thought that being in the company of monks when he could have been with his circle of friends – and Emma – in a vodka bar would have been such a laugh. By Saturday afternoon he admitted out loud to a gathering of strangers in the monastery courtyard as they sat on plastic beer crates in the so-called circle of honesty that he felt happy. This wasn't, of course, remarkable in itself, but the fact that he said it without being asked, into an embarrassed chasm of silence, was a surprise. Simon was never one to be afraid of breaking the ice, but to shout – because a shout it was, a bloody big yell – that he felt happy, was something that astonished him. Everyone started laughing. He laughed too, so long and so loud that he felt his stomach hurt. “Wow,” he said to the monk sitting three places away from him, “that felt so good.”

“Man, you had us creased up,” said the monk. “So cool.”

And because this was a retreat, participants were asked to leave all personal audio guides at home. As a declared area of spirituality no signal was possible within the confines of the monastery. So there was not a number for Simon to enter into his handset to explain to him what was happening. He was on his own. But this was true for every one of the dozen or so others who were gathered with him under the care and guidance of the Brothers of the IPA.

The brotherhood is popular with young people seeking a retreat from the stresses and strains of urban living. Such retreats have become so popular in recent years and a burgeoning literature has grown up about them. Through some excellent reviews in *What Retreat*, *Slammer* and *Vodka Bastard* magazine the Brothers of the India Pale Ale have ensured themselves bookings all year round. Simon was lucky enough to win his weekend stay in a charity auction at a gala evening to raise funds for research into premature ejaculation among third world coffee growers.

He was having a weekend freebie, and it was fun. No wonder he shouted that he was so happy. But he surprised himself that he had taken to the hospitality and friendliness of the monks so quickly. As soon as he arrived and parked his car in the car park on the edge of a field he knew that he was going to get on with them. He liked their sense of humour. There was a sign near to his car that announced he would now have to walk a considerable distance to get to the meeting house and that it may cause some visitors some discomfort. The monks had left an assortment of Wellington boots and similar footwear in a box for visitors to use. ‘To avoid damage to city loafers’ it said on the sign. Simon liked this.

The company of non-conformist monks is much sought after, particularly those who get their name from the fact that they brew their own beer and are well known for their musical weekends. They advertise their retreat weekends as ‘Spiritual Shindigs’ but Simon preferred the celebrity reviewer in *Vodka Bastard* who described them as ‘a bonkers bash of a big-up bender with a bloody good bunch of brothers’. And she had given it the coveted five gold shot glasses rating. And now Simon was in on the trendiest place for a retreat this side of Oslo.

And he had met some cool people. They were a little reserved at first, but that was only to be expected as most of the participants were, like Simon, finding it difficult to break loose from the regimented world order, what with its over-reliance on electronic gizmos like the latest third generation personal audio guides. And all that buggins. ‘Buggins’ was what Carl, the lead monk for the weekend, described all the clutter and crap of life that ‘blocks our brains’. Simon used to call the same thing ‘flotsam and jetsam’ but he soon realised after listening to the ebb and flow of Carl’s oration that he had adopted a cliché. One thing that really bugged

Simon, considering himself as something of a trendsetter, was finding himself using a cliché.

Being non-conformist monks, of course, they drew on alternative sources of language to describe their experiences. To put it in a nutshell, they were trying to encourage their guests to express their feelings through a primal way of speaking. You could call them earthy utterances, but Simon realised that they were really mumbled ramblings, that developed into throaty, guttural emanations that eventually turned into words that sounded sort of familiar and plausible. Like 'buggins'. But then when Ray, one of the other monks, found Simon wrestling with just this problem of how language can be a barrier to the expression of one's thoughts he suggested that Simon try out some noises.

"Express what you feel in noises. Dispense with words. In trying to find the right words it holds up the spontaneity of expression. Try a grunt."

"O.K." grinned Simon, enjoying the close spiritual attention of the brother.

"It will happen," assured Ray, leaving Simon to work towards his goal and going off to check on the fermentation bins, but not before he patted him on the shoulder and said: "By tonight, or your money back."

Simon spent some of Saturday afternoon wandering the shrubbery of the monastery grounds, being startled by peacocks, noticing strange berries, feeling the dampness of autumn air in his bones, listening to the flap of bird wings and experimenting with a range of noises. It was the coolest thing since digital dental floss.

And he met some nice people. There was Moira, for instance, who was probably in her sixties. She had developed, in no time at all, an amazing vocabulary that sounded like The Flowerpot Men. She told Simon that she, too, had been visited by the guiding hand of Ray and encouraged to ululate regularly, especially after meals. She said that she had rushed straight out of the walled vegetable garden and started ululating immediately by the side of the brook. She said that she felt that she had a gift for it. Simon agreed, and at the same time he felt inferior. If she had been a young man in her twenties he would have been dead jealous.

"When you get to my age Simon there's no point farting around umming and aahing about something, certainly not a thing as important as what we are here for. So I started making noises right away."

“So that was you,” said Simon, holding a tankard of foaming ale as if he always drank out of tankards and as if his nose always had a speck of froth at its end. “We thought it was one of the peacocks being eaten by a fox.” And they laughed at this.

Simon also had a nice conversation over dinner with Ferdinand, a prostitute from Essex. They talked about what a good time you can have on a weekend visit to Colchester.

“You seem very calm to me,” said Simon.

“It’s all an act Simon. The big stress I have in my job is that most of my clients are celebrities. They want me to be someone else. I can’t be me.”

“I suppose you can’t tell me who some of them are?” asked Simon, egged on by Duncan and Saleef, two others he had built up a rapport with.

“No, but you’d be surprised.”

“Ooh flobbadob,” said Duncan, a quantity surveyor.

“Lobba lobba lou,” said Moira, joining in the conversation.

“Grunty rumblings,” laughed Simon. And they all had a laugh at that.

“Anyone like more kippers?” asked Carl as he walked from table to table encouraging them to eat more fish. Simon stopped him and held on to his sleeve. Carl politely waited while Simon dug deep to exclaim:

“Big, big bloaters.” And at that Carl smiled sympathetically and moved on to dispense fish to other guests.

“That’s not quite right Simon. You still haven’t quite got it,” said Ferdinand. “You’re still thinking too hard before you speak.”

“I know. But I’m almost there.”

“Sure,” said Saleef, an importer of Scandinavian plumbing equipment.

Into the crowded and noisy refectory, with the guests intoxicated more by their new found method of expression than by the ale, Ferdinand let rip with the word “Spleen”, so loud that everyone stopped and there was a brief silence. It was a momentous and memorable moment. You could tell that Carl and the other

monks were pleased. With Ferdinand and the likes of Moira they had a good bunch to work with that weekend. Things were going with a swing.

“Rat-a-tat-a-tat,” shouted Moira in reply.

By the time the monks had tuned up their instruments, the amplifiers had warmed up and the sound of folk rock had filled the refectory with a rhythm that many found difficult to resist moving their bodies to, Simon was well and truly releasing his inner feelings without inhibition. If it took beer, kippers and a set of Fairport Convention covers to achieve Simon didn't care. For one small moment in time and with the noticeable and incredible absence of numbers hanging in the air and the impossibility of having anyone to advise you what to do next Simon found himself ululating with the best of them.

By Sunday morning the guests had sorted it all out for themselves. They had had a stonking good time. Some of the words people came out with were, Simon thought, almost beyond the realms of imagination. He had experienced the release, some time after midnight, when he shouted “Tombola of the soul” followed by an impressive “Na na na na noo”. For the latter he received a big wet smacking kiss on the cheek from a spaced out Moira who was sitting on top of an amplifier stack trying to get off on the vibration. But on Sunday morning he had a herring hangover. “Don't ever,” he said, to an imaginary fellow occupant of his cell “mix the marine and the malt.” It was just a regular hangover really, but in the monastery things felt different from normal.

And that's when he realised that he was probably feeling a lot better. Even though he had been sceptical he had to admit that there was something about this place that had induced a feeling of well being. It was definitely to do with not having the numbers. It was definitely to do with being left alone to think things through for himself. Actually, it wasn't quite like this because he didn't do much thinking. That was the beauty of it; he did things without thinking. There was no procrastination; no time for it. He did little, but none of it involved thinking. Or decisions. Or awkward. Disjointed. Sentences. Of course, he knew by Sunday lunchtime that there is no need to think in sentences. If only Hamlet could have experienced the same kind of weekend, thought Simon.

“It would have done Hamlet a power of good,” he said to Carl in the post-lunch reflection and evaluation session.

“Is that a reference to Shakespeare?” asked Carl, sounding more monk-like and distant now that the weekend was almost at an end.

“Of course,” said Simon.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know it.”

This was the only disappointment about the weekend. In fact, it was the low point. In a short time Simon had hit it off so well with these monks and their non-conformist ways. They seemed so urbane, yet otherworldly. There was no other word for it but ‘cool’. But when one of them, the one he thought was the most charismatic, even though he knew it was wrong to think of the monks in this way, admitted that he was unfamiliar with one of the greatest plays in the English language, he was disappointed. He wanted to challenge Carl, and for a moment he almost did, but he noticed the vacant smile from the monk that seemed to be defying Simon to do anything of the sort. He held back. But he was wrangled. ‘Hamlet’ is full of utterances, grunts and ululations, he wanted to say. It goes beyond mere words. But Carl looked in no mood for literary debate, even if he conveyed this mood in a faux congenial and amiable way. The moment passed. There was no number anywhere to help Simon over this one. So he let it pass. When he caught up with the evaluation discussion he realised that the others were discussing how liberating it had been to spend the weekend without their personal audio guides.

“But we always have a laugh once you’ve gone,” said Ray. “We watch you all as you trek across the field to the car park, trying to get a signal on your handsets. You’re like addicts who have been denied their fix for forty-eight hours.”

“Not me,” said Moira. “Not anymore. I feel so free.”

“Me neither, mine’s on the blink,” laughed Simon. No one, he noticed, laughed with him.

“I’m afraid so,” said Carl. “I’m afraid everyone says that they can live without their audio guides, but it’s somewhat sad to observe what happens to you the moment you leave the confines of the monastery.”

“So, why have we come here then? Why have we paid for something that’s not going to work,” said Ferdinand.

“What is it do you think you have paid for?” asked Carl in his monk like way.

Simon could have done without the kind of discussion that finished off the weekend. He had experienced a period of change, and if it didn’t last, so what? He now knew what it was like ‘to live outside his normal world’.

He had this phrase of Carl's in his head as he put the phone down after his conversation with Emma and stared up at the number 48725.

Of course, he knew that as soon as he got back to the city the effects of the weekend retreat would begin to wane. But he hadn't reckoned on Emma being the one to take the gloss off the last of the elation he was determinedly hanging on to. He tapped the memory button on the phone, ignoring the pile of mail that he had not opened throughout the week, and waited to tell his girlfriend of six months standing just what a riot of a weekend he had experienced.

But she was cold and distant. It had been a bad idea to ululate down the handset the moment she greeted him, with a sleepy sounding "Hi". He told her what he had been up to and she listened. He had that sinking feeling you get when you realise that you are talking to someone who is not really interested in what you are saying. It was one of those moments when you provide the inflection, the emotional phrasing, the intonation and unalloyed spark of re-calling an experience that can only ever mean anything to yourself. In brief, it all went flat.

And now he was left to stare at the number 48725. He knew from experience that anything beginning with four and eight was to do with affairs of the heart. He told himself that he was over-reacting, but this didn't do much to make him feel better. He was so used to getting an instant interpretation of any event. It was not having this interpretation that caused the anxiety. We have all grown so used to having our lives explained to us, that when this facility – which we take so much for granted – is removed, we are bereft. Confused. Our sweat levels increase, there is the dryness of mouth, the beating of the heart. We are at a loss. For god's sake, we have to work it out for ourselves.

Simon cursed himself for not getting his personal audio guide fixed. And it seemed so much more annoying, because he had just had a great weekend and he was feeling so relaxed and now that feeling of euphoria was replaced with anger. There had been such a sudden change. That's what he was angry about. He had been determined to let all those good feelings go with a fight, but they evaporated without so much as a minor scuffle. Phone down, look at the wall, see the number and that's it. All gone. It had slipped away. How could he have let it happen like this?

More numbers appeared. Of course, he knew this would happen. It's obvious, because once you start looking for the answer to one thing many other questions arise. He picked up the audio guide handset and tried it again, in the hope that it would suddenly start to function. He shook it, tapped it lightly against a table edge, warmed it for a few seconds between his two hands, spoke to it encouragingly, knowing that doing all these things could not make any difference.

He tapped in 48725. Nothing happened. He would only have to get through the night and then wait for the repair centre to open the next morning. He toyed with the idea of calling out a private emergency company, but he knew this would be a waste of money. It could wait. And so could another phone call to Emma. He wanted to have a stand-off. Actually, he was just too frightened to call her again.

He waited for sleep to come, once or twice getting out of bed to grunt quietly in the bathroom, not wanting to alarm the neighbours. He ran the shower and let out a yelp. He shouted at the grouting, trying to focus his energy on a speck of mould growing between two tiles. He was trying to get back to where the brothers of the IPA had led him. But it would never happen.

He drifted off to sleep. He repeated the number 48725 inside his head. Where else? Like counting sheep, he hoped. Counting numbers. This one had a calming rhythm. And what's more, the numbers added up to 26, the same age as Simon. The last thing he thought about as he fell asleep was whether this was significant. Or not. He was worried that things had gone badly wrong.