

Obituary for Colin Murison Small

*The trailblazer for chalet party holidays, authentic Greek getaways –
and the co-founder of AITO*

Colin Murison Small, who died last week at the age of 93, was a trailblazer and pioneer of both summer and winter package holidays. His company, Murison Small (later to be known as Small World) was the first company to employ chalet hosts, or “Muribirds” in those non-PC days, whose job it was not just to cook delicious meals, but also to make that week’s group of strangers feel right at home.

The concept for the chalet party began back in 1958, when Murison Small travelled with friends to Yugoslavia. Two of his friends’ girlfriends weren’t working at the time, so the others all agreed to cover their costs for accommodation and food if they agreed to cook. After deciding that this made for a great business idea, Murison Small declared he would start the business when they returned, with the two girlfriends as his first employees.

The first chalet party holiday was held in Grindelwald, Switzerland, in the 1958/59 ski season - with the summer equivalent, villa party holidays, beginning in Blanes, northern Spain, in the summer of 1959 – unbelievably, now 65 years ago...

Murison Small’s passion was to bring his love of travel to anyone seeking to try the experience for themselves. By catering for singles, twos, threes, or however many you happened to be, anyone could book knowing that they’d be part of a fun, like-minded group (or “party”) once they arrived.

Over the years, the chalet party concept has formalised a little. Gone are the days of the chalet hosts eating with the guests and everyone mucking in to clear the tables and do the washing up. Breakfast in those days consisted of two large pots. One was filled with porridge, the other with boiling water. Beside the water pot were fresh eggs and a marker pen with which to write your name. The “Muribirds” weren’t there to serve you, they were there to make you feel at home – and at home, you boiled your own egg!

Although he is much credited for the chalet party holiday, Colin Murison Small’s heart belonged to Greece. In the early 1960s, he travelled to the Island of Rhodes, where he drove down to the beautiful - then tiny - village of Lindos. Overshadowed by a stunning acropolis and with its long, sandy, bay, he knew that this would be an incredible location for him to feature/sell to the UK market.

He had arranged to meet the local mayor in the little village square, who brought along a friend, a fisherman, who owned the grandest house in the village, on the seafront, beside the jetty. After working with them, and many others in the village, to teach them what British tourists felt was a basic level of comfort, he sent the first villa party to stay in “The Captain’s House”, as it was called, in Lindos in circa 1963. It is much changed today.

Over the decades to come, Murison Small travelled continuously to Greece, each year being more and more upset that the traditional Greece that he loved so dearly was being over-developed, with more and more all-inclusive hotels that, unfortunately, ruin local economies. He parted company with Small World in 1985, setting up a couple of new ventures, one being called *Hidden Greece* – where every destination had a mark out of 10 which he called “The Martian factor”. The higher the number, the more likely you were to meet other Brits!

Murison Small always had a very strong moral compass and a desire to fight for the rights of the less well off. In 1975, following the collapse of Court Line holidays, the UK Government

and Civil Aviation Authority implemented the Air Travel Reserve Fund. To be able to obtain your tour operator's licence (ATOL), you needed to provide a huge financial bond to ensure that all your holiday-makers could get home safely, and repayments made to those with bookings yet to depart, should your business collapse.

Although this was a good thing, it massively favoured the large tour operators of the day, leaving the small ones unable to operate.

Murison Small quickly called all his competitors and arranged a meeting in a London pub. From this meeting, the Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO – now The Specialist Travel Association, but still using the AITO acronym) was formed. This association provided the bond, backed by all the businesses, to enable them all to operate. Murison Small was its first chairman. It is still going strong and still fighting for the shared issues of the small, innovative, trend-setting, operators of today.

Colin Murison Small was the tour operator who you've never heard of – but he's also the man to whom all those operators you do know owe a huge debt of gratitude. He was a creator, an innovator, and a quiet but very effective driving force behind the travel industry that we have today.

He is survived by his three children and seven grandchildren. His funeral will be held on Thursday 7th March at 2pm at Salisbury Crematorium; please contact Alex Small on acm_small@hotmail.com for details and to register.

See below for photographs of Colin Murison Small, one or two Muribirds, and more!



Everyone loved a scan through the Murison Small brochure.



La Villars, 1967 – 2 “Muribirds” (Drina and Anne) off for a day’s ski.



Colin Murison Small with the compulsory camera – Lindos 1965



Richard Fraiser, Julian Wiltshire and Colin Small (L-R) at Corfu airport in 1965



Richard (snowman) with Lovedy (Muribird) in Grindelwald 1959