



The Caravana Nivea

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It was summertime in Spain and the Nivea Company's marketing department hired a team of five promoters to tour the beaches of the Costa Brava. We were all young, multilingual, and enthusiastic. Our job was to promote Nivea's tanning lotion to the European sun worshippers who came south every summer in search of the perfect bronze. We were to drive two station wagons—the *Caravana Nivea*—from the French border down to the town of Sitges, just south of Barcelona. Under normal circumstances we could easily cover this distance in less than a day. But since we were to stop overnight at every village and town on the coast along the way, our journey would take a whole month.

We pulled into a different town every afternoon, nosing through sleepy, narrow streets and along the coast road bordering the beach. Each vehicle had a large, menacing loudspeaker mounted on the roof. With broadcast equipment set to maximum volume, we bombarded residents and tourists with loud (some would say obnoxious) music interspersed with ad-libbed announcements in seven languages. Five sensitive linguists took turns shattering the peaceful siesta hours with a simple message: "Bring some Nivea suntan lotion to the beach tomorrow and receive an incredibly exciting gift."

It was July 1969, the month that mankind took a "giant leap" and landed on the moon. Anything to do with outer space had the public's full attention and Nivea had provided us with the perfect gimmick. Everyone is familiar with Frisbees now, but at that time they were unknown in Spain. Nivea introduced them that summer along the Costa Brava under the name OVI (meaning Identified Flying Object, IFO—a play on the Spanish acronym OVNI, which is the equivalent of the English UFO). The Frisbees were dark blue, with *Nivea* stencilled in white letters across the top, making them look just like the lid of the company's signature moisturizing cream. It was a well-thought-out campaign.

During the summer in those days the Costa Brava was a mosh pit of hedonism and carefree fun. The nations mingled on the beaches; everyone's true skin colour revealed for

all the world to see. Champagne of extremely modest pretensions flowed like water. There was more paella per square foot here than anywhere in the world. Nightclubs were like asylums where the crazy ones danced till sunup then ran naked into the sea.

In the late morning, Team Nivea stood—slightly wilted—at water's edge, in our white slacks, navy blue polo shirts, and espadrilles, tossing the OVIs up against the onshore breeze. The marketing boys had trained us in the fine art of throwing the Frisbee, and as the discs returned to our hands like graceful boomerangs, the crowd gathered. Everyone on the beach wanted an OVI: they were the Beanie Babies of 1969. People implored us to hold one for them while they ran to buy some Nivea product at the nearest store. As the purveyors of this latest fad, we were the centre of attention on the beach, and were mobbed like rock stars by our desperate fans. But when our day's stock of OVIs had all been given away our show was over, and it was time for lunch.

Then we would move on to the next town and do it all over again. It was an excruciating schedule. Our contract required us to spend our evening hours cruising the bars and nightclubs, talking to tourists from all over Europe, encouraging everyone to come to the beach the following day and receive the most exciting trinket they had ever seen. This demanding public relations work kept us up till all hours, and on more than one morning we watched the sunrise as we stood immersed up to our chins in the deliciously cool sea.

The campaign was a huge success; Nivea sales skyrocketed in coastal areas that summer. We were supplied with OVIs by the truckload and scattered them by the thousands along the ancient Mediterranean shore where Phoenician traders once peddled their goods. But though everyone enjoyed playing with this new toy, the long-suffering residents of the towns along our route were no doubt greatly relieved when we moved on and the deafening soundtrack of the *Caravana Nivea* faded into the distance.