



by Tony Beckwith © 1998

“YOU’LL BE ABLE TO USE your languages,” they said. “Every day you’ll be talking to people of many different cultures,” they promised. “It will be the experience of a lifetime!” And they were right.

The manufacturer of Nivea cream hired three women and two men, all of us young, multilingual and enthusiastic, to tour the beaches of the Costa Brava. Our job was to promote their tanning lotion to the sun worshippers of Europe who came south to Spain every summer in search of the perfect bronze. Our mission was to drive two station wagons—the “Caravana Nivea”—from the French border to the town of Sitges, just south of Barcelona. Under normal circumstances we could drive this distance in less than a day. But since we were to stop overnight at every village and town along the way, our journey would take a whole month.

We pulled into a new town every afternoon, nosing through sleepy, narrow streets and along the coastal 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 music interspersed with announcements in many languages. Five sensitive linguists took turns shattering the peaceful siesta hours with amplified voices, feeling entirely justified by the credo: ‘You hear me, therefore I am.’ Our message was simple. “Bring some Nivea suntan lotion to the beach tomorrow and receive an incredibly exciting gift from you-know-who.”

This was July 1969, the month that mankind first stepped onto the moon. Anything to do with space travel 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—a play on the Spanish acronym OVNI, which is the equivalent of the English UFO). The Frisbees were dark blue, and of course “Nivea” was written across the top in white letters, making the discs look just like the lid of their signature moisturizing cream. It was a well-thought-out campaign.

During the summer the Costa Brava was a mosh pit of wild fun. The nations mingled on the beaches, everyone’s true skin color revealed for all the world to see. Champagne of 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.

By morning we stood slightly wilted at water’s edge, throwing the OVIs up against the onshore breeze. We were trained by the manufacturer in the 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 at the nearest store. *¡Por favor, se lo ruego!* When our backup stock of OVIs was all given away, it was time for lunch.

Then we’d move on to the next town and do it all over again. It was an excruciating schedule. We lived under a self-imposed celebrity status that required us to spend many hours cruising the nightclubs, talking to people of many different cultures. And on more than one morning we watched the sunrise as we stood up to our chins in the deliciously cool sea.

The manufacturer told us the campaign was a great success: sales rocketed in coastal areas that summer. We were supplied with OVIs by the truckload and scattered them by the thousands along the ancient Mediterranean shore. Though everyone enjoyed playing with this new toy, the long-suffering residents were no doubt relieved when we moved on and the soundtrack of the “Caravana Nivea” faded into the distance. Now when I remember that month, I wonder about the slight hearing loss I’ve noticed in recent years, and think maybe the Costa Brava and I are about even. ★