



**FRIENDS AND LOVERS:** 1 – John, daughter Cynthia, right, Winner's ex Lorraine Doyle, left, and a friend. 2 – In Holland with Jenny Seagrove, 1990. 3 – John and Alyce's 1992 honeymoon. 4 – With Alyce and

Cleese, Winner and an awful lot of fondue... what happened when two gloriously grumpy celebrities invaded Switzerland on a six-day road trip to mark the end of another marriage

Our

by **Antonia Hoyle**

**O**NE is a cantankerous elderly man with little regard for social niceties, a catastrophic track record with women and a wealth of witty repartee that enthralls and appalls in equal measure. The other is not particularly different.

So it is perhaps not surprising that showbusiness veterans John Cleese and Michael Winner share a friendship that has spanned nearly three decades, survived marital breakdowns, malevolent break-ups and emerged stronger than ever; so much so that last month the pair set off on a six-day road trip to Switzerland to consolidate their extraordinary bond over fondues, lake views and somewhat lively debates over directions – or lack of them.

'We're both irreverent and mildly insane,' explains former film director and restaurant critic Winner. 'We're what people might call bad taste, at times, in the way we denigrate things,' 'We can be very pleasant and a bit ratty when the occasion, in our view, calls for it. It probably is insecurity.'

'We're very strong personalities, and going away was a bit nerve-racking. I thought, oops, will this survive, will we be friends at the end or will it all end in tears? I've never been alone with him for six days before. But actually, we survived very well.'

Aside from renewing their friendship their jolly romp served another purpose. It was what Winner, 72, gleefully describes as a 'Divorce-moon' to help Cleese come to terms with the collapse of his third marriage, to American psychologist Alyce Faye Eichelberger, after 16 years.

After announcing their separation in January, Alyce claimed half the Monty Python star's earnings since their 1992 wedding, half his nine properties, and an astonishing £900,000 a year to live on in the meantime.

It is a move that Winner, predictably, finds preposterous. 'John is a very generous man and the way Alyce is behaving now is absolutely appalling. I never used to think she was a gold digger, but she certainly is now, in my view.'

'He has been through two divorces before that he doesn't even remember lawyers being involved in. He offered her half a million dollars to get rid of the lawyers but she turned it down. It's so unnecessary. John was very shocked by the whole thing. It was his idea to go away. He needed a bit of cheering up. He's got a great sense of humour but there's no question this is hurting him.'

But, outrageous alimony claims aside, Winner says he's never seen Cleese, 68, so happy. 'It's as if there's a weight off his mind. He's alert, and he doesn't have to look over his shoulder and worry about what someone else wants. He feels he has got his life back.'

And Winner confirms that Cleese has a new romance – with 34-year-old American blonde Veronica Smiley, who joined the two on the final leg of their Swiss tour. 'It was almost a blind date,' Winner says. 'I don't think they'd had a major consummation before that, if I may put it that way. She's delightful, and definitely a girlfriend. He phones her at least every other day.'

Still sporting a mahogany tan from his Alpine travels, Winner is speaking from his glorious 42-room West London mansion. There is not a hint of the ill-health that nearly killed him last year, when he caught a flesh-eating bug in Barbados.

Neither is there any sign of his fiancée, Geraldine Lynton-Davies, whom he proposed to last spring after an on-off relationship of 40 years, though he is still 'nowhere near marrying'.

Winner has just returned from lunch with Cleese at the One-O-One restaurant in nearby Knightsbridge. Knowing he was about to give The Mail on Sunday an interview on their friendship, Winner recorded their conversation in between mouthfuls of rabbit and carrot puree, because, he says, John is 'very litigious'.

'I want to get it absolutely right because otherwise I'll be in trouble,' he explains as he pulls out his notes and rattles his reading glasses.

So why did Cleese, a notoriously private star, agree to have himself discussed by such a flamboyantly indiscreet friend? 'He knows everything I say is going to be absolutely accurate and I'm only going to say what he wants said,' says Winner. 'My loyalty is to him. Whatever he wants me to do, I will do. I won't murder anybody, but I'll go pretty close to it. I've known him for centuries.'

For all the similarities in personality, the two exude very different public

**'I never used to think Alyce was a gold digger'**

personas. Cleese made his name in Monty Python and its movie spin-offs such as *Life of Brian*. A long-term supporter of the Liberal Democrats, after writing and starring in *Fawlty Towers* he went on to co-write two best-selling self-help books. Winner, meanwhile, made his name with the violent *Death Wish* film series from the Seventies and Eighties starring Charles Bronson, a shameless amount of name-dropping and, latterly, through his forthright restaurant reviews.

Yet when they first met in 1985 in Barbados, where Winner owns a holiday home in the celebrity-laden Sandy Lane resort, they hit it off immediately. In addition to their exuberant sense of humour, Scorpio star-signs and, as Winner puts it, 'split' personalities, they discovered they had both studied law at Cambridge, with Winner graduating six years before Cleese.

'I enjoyed Cambridge immensely,' says Winner. 'I was deeply lonely before and it was the first time I'd ever been with people I could relate to. But John thought it was all rubbish. He probably was a bit above it all, bless him. But he worked and got a very good 2:1. I got a third, I was the bottom of the heap.'

It was while Cleese was at Cambridge, of course, that he joined the Footlights Revue and met fellow future Python writer Graham Chapman. Cleese, the

Looking for our food store?  
Hang a left at our pharmacy,  
cross over at our bank and  
it's right next to our travel agency.

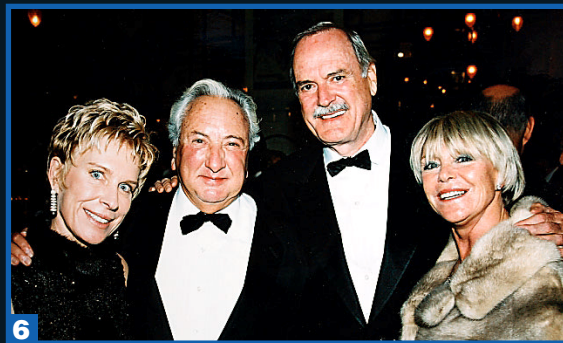
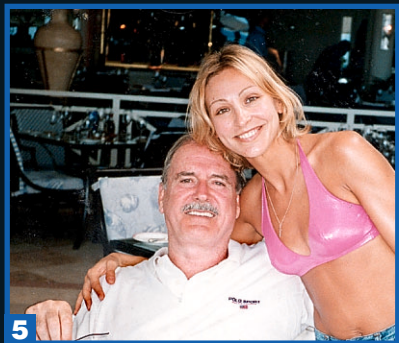
With over 4,000 outlets throughout the country, offering everything from food to funeral care, you're never far away from The Co-operative. However, it's not just our size and diversity that makes us good for everyone. In 1844, we were established to give people the chance to join together and buy quality products at a fair price. And to this day we are still owned by our members, rather than financial investors. So, instead of blindly chasing profits, we're able to steer our business in a more responsible direction. Excellent news, no matter where you're coming from.

Visit [www.co-operative.coop](http://www.co-operative.coop)

The **co-operative** good for everyone

food bank travel insurance pharmacy funeralcare





Vanessa Perry in Germany, 1998. 5 – John with Winner's ex Georgina in 2001. 6 – Geraldine, right, and Alyce on her 60th in 2001. 7 – John's new love 'Smiley'

**From Jenny to Veronica: How, over 30 years of 'mildly insane' friendship, the women have come and gone**

# Divorceymoon!



**BEST OF FRIENDS:** John and Michael in Thun, Switzerland, during their road trip last month

son of an insurance salesman from Somerset and educated at the private Clifton College in Bristol, credits Winner with helping him come to terms with his upbringing.

'It is an extraordinary irony that he thinks the British are all stuffed up and pompous, because he epitomises Britishness,' says Winner. 'He said I was so ill-mannered it helped him get over all the private-school crap he learned when he was at Clifton.'

Maybe it was Cleese's distaste for Britishness that led him to marry three American women – first Connie Booth, with whom he co-wrote and starred in *Fawlty Towers* and has a daughter, Cynthia, now 37, then actress Barbara Trentham, who gave him his second daughter Camilla, now 24. They separated shortly before he was introduced to Alyce through his psychiatrist in 1990. He and Alyce moved to California after he starred in the Hollywood film *A Fish Called Wanda*.

Winner's exes include actresses Jill Ireland and Jenny Seagrove. He has steadfastly refused to settle down despite, or perhaps because of, affairs with some 130 women. He

says: 'I didn't know Connie, but she and John are still close. Barbara was very cool, but a bit of a boozier, quite honestly.'

But it is Oklahoma-born Alyce for whom he saves his acid tongue. 'I wouldn't have found Alyce attractive,' he says. 'The voice alone could tear the testicles out of a rabbit. She never stops talking. I got the impression he was not madly in love with her

## 'Her voice could tear the testicles from a rabbit'

but married her because it was the right thing to do. He's very proper.'

Indeed, it was Cleese's staunch moral code that led him to reject both a CBE and a peerage in the late Nineties. (Winner would infamously turn down an OBE in 2006.)

'John asked if he'd be entitled to call himself Commander Cleese and was told no, and he said that as "we don't have an Empire anyway" he passed on it,' guffaws Winner. 'As for the seat

in the Lords, he said Paddy Ashdown explained he'd have to be there to vote on everything and it wasn't worth being in England in the winter.'

'I respect him for it, because it doesn't mean anything. Plus it meant Alyce would have been Lady Cleese, and most women would have liked that.'

Winner says that when Cleese and Alyce first had problems, around ten years ago, Alyce employed Fiona Shackleton, Paul McCartney's divorce lawyer. 'She told me she was going to take John for all she could. I could tell it was going to explode.'

'John would occasionally say he could never get away from her, that they wanted different things. He said that as a bachelor, I'd got it right. But he didn't want to let go. He likes "working at things". She wanted to be joined at the hip. And she was jealous of Camilla. John's daughters are delighted now. They thought she was bossy. She saw them as rivals.'

In all likelihood, Winner saw Alyce as a rival as well and is clearly thrilled that now she is out of the picture Cleese 'has become very much more available'.

For their tour of Switzerland they

hired a white Range Rover. Cleese drove and Winner navigated. 'I never put my seat belt on – even though I do insurance company adverts – so the car was making a beep-beep-beep noise,' he recalls. 'I said, "John, it doesn't matter." He said, "I've just got rid of the wife and now the car's nagging me."'

They drove from Lugano to Lake Lucerne to a small town called Thun. 'I told John we should go down one street with a lovely view of the river,' Winner recalls. 'He wanted to go down another.'

'I said, "John, I know this street, I've been here ten times." "No," he said, "I'll see you later."'

'I let him go, I wasn't going to lose any sleep over it,' he guffaws. 'But it wasn't as pretty as the street I knew.'

He adds: 'He says I'm a control freak but I think we're about equal. He huffed and puffed and made highly rude remarks about what we were up to but it was 50/50. He said we were becoming like Laurel and Hardy, except more abusive.'

Indeed, for all their camaraderie, Winner's account of the next few days reads like a comedy of errors.

Cleese, he says, got lost on his way to his hotel room, threw a strop when he discovered his bank card wasn't registered in Europe and burnt the steak they were given to grill at their restaurant table.

Cleese told Winner that travelling with him was like travelling with his soon-to-be ex-wife. 'He told me we're both neurotics, horrible map-readers and never stop talking, but that I was funnier and had money,' he says. 'I said, "So has Alyce, thanks to you."'

On the fifth day, Geraldine joined them and on the last day, in Zurich, Veronica – or 'Smiley' as Cleese and Winner call her – arrived. The vice-president of marketing for a magazine company in Chicago, she had initially caught Cleese's eye in an American hotel.

'When he was thinking of going out with her he texted Cynthia,' says Winner, 'asking his daughter if it was all right to date someone who, at 34, wasn't less than half his age. She replied, "Go for it – but use protection," and started her next text message saying, "Hi, you old slut." John joked that this is the kind of respect a father needs from his daughter.'

Winner says Veronica is 'a career girl, an intelligent human being. During dinner that evening she said her favourite wine was Puligny

## 'We're like Laurel and Hardy but more abusive'

Montrachet. John whispered to me that she was not a cheap date.'

After the road trip ended, Cleese and Veronica spent a week together at Lake Como in Italy. 'He's hoping she's going to get a job in San Francisco so she's near him in California,' says Winner. 'He likes her very much, and says she's wonderful.'

But he adds: 'I don't think he's looking to be serious at the moment. I think he's looking for a good time. He's not looking to get married. He says he doesn't know what it means any more. And he wouldn't marry without a pre-nup agreement.'

Cleese is currently staying in a London hotel while recording the voice-over for the DVD release of *Fawlty Towers*. He has recently sold his Santa Barbara ranch but Winner thinks he will probably keep California as a base. 'He's very keen on Americans, although he feels, unquestionably, that Alyce was a waste of time,' he says.

'I told him, "It's a pity you didn't get married in some place in the desert. You'd have given her a camel and two coconuts and it would all be over."'

Nevertheless, with the buoyant Winner by his side while his bitter divorce – not expected to be resolved before next spring – rages on, he'll surely not be down in the dumps for long. 'I don't think our friendship has changed much over the years,' Winner says. 'We've both stayed sharp and childish and moderately stupid.'