Notes from an offbeat world

Mourn the burying of the sardine...
Enter the belly of the dragon...
Chameleon for a headache...
Boiled in oil for eternity...
Spice with the Fab Four...

Derek Workman

Part of *The Travelling Life For Me* series

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INTRODUCTION

Spend enough of your life travelling and you will inevitably come across a fair amount of the weird and wonderful. Sometimes it's a minor point in an otherwise straightforward situation or venue, at others it's the whole place itself. Often enough it's simply a moment when you least expect it that will never see the light of day in an article but gave you a giggle nonetheless.

Most of my twenty-plus years as a travel writer were spent in Spain, Morocco, and Thailand, which I used as a base to travel Southeast Asia. Living and working in three totally different continents and cultures, it has amused and entertained me to see such complete difference between east and west. I've always been a sucker for idiosyncratic collections passed off by eccentrics as merely a 'hobby', and Spain has an abundance of eccentric museums, usually built on one man's obsession (and it is almost always a man). Thailand, on the other hand, lacks much in the way of giggle-worthy museums but has a delicious lack of decorative reverence as far as their temples are concerned, where Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and trios of fat grinning ladies are as equally part of the decoration as grand gilded Buddhas or googly-eyed demons intent on gouging out your innards, and a temple is as much a social club as a place of worship, as they would have been in Europe in Medieval times.

This book is made up of such places and moments, split into two parts; *Notes From An Offbeat World* and *Gone But Not Forgotten.* Consider it the Kindle version of a 'toilet read', akin to the book or magazine you

leave in the ‘rest room’ as our American friends would have it (although personally I never go to the toilet to simply rest), where you can dip in and out as time and situation allow. It is part of *The Travelling Life For Me* series; the first book under the same title is available on Amazon, soon to be followed by *A Diverse Plate*, a selection of stories about the food that sometimes appears on a plate that we’d rather not appear at all, and *Better Late Than Never – Stories from a late-life traveller,* a collection of articles that will hopefully encourage those armchair travellers who have yet to step out into the wide blue yonder do just that.

Derek Workman
Antalya, Turkey
June 2021

Notes from an offbeat world

THAILAND

Big Beasts and Fighting Fish
San Pat Tong Buffalo Market, Chiang Mai

The first thing that strikes me as I cross the busy road aren't the big beasts that give the Buffalo Market its name but the small grubby glass bottles stacked in rows in which gloriously coloured Siamese fighting fish slowly circle, changing direction with a flick of their beautifully-hued tails. As gorgeous as some of these tails might be, I'm told by a young man inspecting them with the eye of an aficionado that you need to avoid those who have a tail drifting behind them like a diva's feather boa, they'll get short-shrift from the nippy little devils with the shorter stern.

For longer than most people can remember the Buffalo Market, a couple of kilometres south of San Patong on route 108 from Chiang Mai, has seen farmers and traders tethering their livestock to wooden posts every Saturday at five a.m. These days it's an enormous affair spreading out on either side of the road and while the stalls on the left are basically a great big outdoor clothing mall, those on the right are still devoted to the needs of the local community, however diverse those needs are. Gaudy fake flowers courtesy of Technicolor, traditional health remedies, straw hats, agricultural equipment of every size suitable from plant pot to rice field, brightly coloured rubber boots for kids and adults, mock leopard-skin knickers, huge apples in bags of five for 70 baht. It's all there. Plenty of juice stalls and coffee stalls and no shortage of food stalls to keep the energy levels up.

I wander through the narrow spaces between the canopied stands, heading to the back where the buffalos and cows are tethered. I spot a pair of varnished half coconut shells glued to a short piece of wood that look a deviant's stiff bra until it's explained to me that it's the perfect thing to rest your head on if you have neck problems. I have, but don't see me getting much kip with my neck lying between two painfully hard coconut shells.

Onward through the crowded lanes and the crow of cockerels harshening the air, until I arrive at an area of round bamboo cages, their garish occupants strutting around like tin-pot generals in kitsch uniforms. In a circle of denim-covered legs, a couple of fighting cocks have a momentary stand-off before hurling themselves at each other in a flurry of wings and feet. Not being armed with the vicious spurs that are found in more secretive cockfights, most of the damage seems to be to their pride rather than to their body.

The buffalo has historically played an important role in Thai agriculture and despite their sometimes huge curved horns is usually a very placid animal, with farm kids often learning to ride them with legs spread wide over a broad back almost before they can walk. Attaining weights up to six-hundred kilos by the time they are fully grown they still fulfil their traditional role of ploughing, their strong flat hooves perfectly designed for them to walk through the sticky mud of rice fields hour after hour.

Despite its name, most of the beasts on sale at the Buffalo Market are cattle, some individually, some with a calf or two. Traders barter for younger animals for fattening and future re-sale or older ones for meat, and woe betide anyone who foolish enough to ask how old the animal is. You've just shown your lack of experience so be prepared to be taken for a ride – and won't be on the animal's back! Like checking the health of a horse, the cow's teeth are given a good look at but an even better indication of the animal's quality for consumption is the yellow vet's tag pinned through the ear, certification from the slaughterhouse.

As the morning drifts on it's time to eat. A brief glance at a stall selling cooked insects, and I move on. I've tried various species before and not been particularly impressed; cricket, which I dislike because their crispy fried legs get stuck between my teeth, silkworm has a pulpy texture that I find distasteful, and a large bug called a *mengda*, which translates into 'pimp' in English, so-called because it follows the female around.

I stop at vegan hades, a rustic kitchen whose menu is made up entirely of innards and gizzards. Once used raw for the traditional spicy northern Thai dish, *larb*, (about as far removed as you can get from the anodyne dish served in many Thai restaurants) they are now usually cooked, either in stews or grilled, although the dark paste fermenting in one aluminium pan looks a bit suspect. On the battered old charcoal grill, curls, slabs and misshapes of pigs' guts are cooked, including a thick tube that my Thai friend describes simply as 'pig's dick', although I was always under the impression that a pig's penis was corkscrew-shaped.

Two large aluminium bowls are simmering away, one the colour of rich brown gravy with chillies, kafir lime leaves, and an assortment of things I try not to look at too closely. I'm told the abundance of spices is to cover the smell and flavour of the animal ingredients. The lady cook persuades me to sample *tom som*, which turns out to be a soup of chickens' innards including tiny hearts and a handful of minuscule unformed eggs, plus a small bowl of *aom* curry, something to do with beef but I really don't want to pursue the ingredients any further than that. Both are reasonably tasty in a thick, spicy sort of way but, like the best way to jump off a height into water is to hold your nose, the best way to eat at any of these stalls is to close your eyes and not look at what's on the spoon.

While I'm savouring these rustic delicacies a customer extols the delights and benefits of the 'pig's dick' so I finally give in and accept a slither. About as chewy and tasteless as anything I've ever put in my mouth. I ask my friend to find out what the Thai name is. When the uproarious laughter finally settles it seems that it wasn't pig's dick after all, simply the pig's large intestine, but the staff and customers thought it was hilarious that this easily-convinced foreigner would eat pig's penis, even just to sample the local gastronomy. Too late, I'd swallowed it by then.

Map: San Pat Tong Buffalo Market (Saturday mornings only)

Happiness is a Fat Buddha

Bangkok, October 2015

I've only experienced a couple of genuine seers in my life, but a chance encounter with a couple of mechanical ones at Tesco Lotus in Bangkok's Chinatown took me back to the clanking and whirring of fairground automatons of my childhood.

Encased in elegant wooden and glass cases, two characters presented themselves. On my left, a fat Chinese 'Happy' Buddha with an ear-to-ear grin, held a stick that appeared to be raised in preparation for striking a young boy dressed in bright yellow silk pantaloons who toiled at a wheel with numbered notches. On my right, an ancient, haggard-looking indigent with a pained, constipated grimace stood over another young boy, this one squatting yoga-like with a beatific smile on his countenance. Set him in motion and a series of spinning, flashing lights flicker like the multi-coloured strobes of a fairground ride. When the flickering stops, the last number illuminates your prediction for that day and is printed on a slip of paper that you take from a series of slots in the case below. I opted for the Happy Buddha, working on the premise that his jolly smile might elicit a more cheerful prediction than the dour indigent's.

I drop my five baht coin in the smiling Buddha's machine, he raises the branch in his right hand while the young boy turns the wheel. Around the spindly arms of the small chap go, he bending double with the mechanical effort until the Buddha drops his branch as if to beat him to speed up the process. But the stick lodges in a notch on the wheel, stopping its turning at number 17, my fortune for the day. I take a slip from the requisite slot, although the text is all in Thai so I need to get it translated.

The Victorian charm of the machine is such a delight that I'm tempted to put more coins in just to watch the action, but I don't want to

offend the gods by saying I don't believe them so I make do with whatever number seventeen has in store for me.

When I get back to my hotel beside the Democracy Monument, I ask the delightful receptionist, Lekky, if she can translate my reading. She freely admits that it's such archaic gobbledygook that it's barely understandable in Thai, but puts it through google translate to see what comes out – basically, gobbledygook in any language:

I do work provoked opaque House. Will become malignant homophobia. Do not be impatient to imagine any deliberate I dig the notion gradually Mei Meng. Maintains that the call is gay.'So we must be careful preparation. He had but we all concision. Turned to look at the wound, but a diversion. People ask me how I feel comfortable. Or involve matters that are asked.I do not doubt all win I doubt very thick receivables The friends I have not met the eye. But Fortune's love will be there.

It's never occurred to me that I might be in even the slightest way either homophobic or gay, but perhaps the Buddha knows more than I do, and I've been tucked in the closet without me realising it. Still, it's nice to know that 'Fortune's love will be there.' It certainly hasn't been around much in the past!

On Bulbs, Batteries and Brakes

Weird Thai beliefs about cars

In 2011, the then-Thai government announced the following ten years as Thailand's 'Decade of Action on Road Safety', which, like many Thai government announcements, fizzled into nothing. By 2016 Thailand topped the rankings as the country in the world with the highest death rate in road accidents, followed by Malawi and Liberia, according to a global survey by Worldatlas.com, although it was beaten into second place by Libya in 2020.

With a death toll of 22,000 vehicular deaths as of 11 November 2020, an average of fifty to sixty people a day, (as many in one day as the total number of deaths during the first nine months of the Covid-19 pandemic), the World Health Organisation (WHO) described Thailand's roads as the deadliest in Southeast Asia and among the worst in the world, a far cry from the Thai government's announcement of a goal of a maximum 664 road deaths per year from 2020.

While these figures might seem extreme (most of them caused through drunkenness, 45% and speeding, 29%) there's a slightly lighter side to Thai beliefs about driving that, while not being quite so deadly, nonetheless show lack of education, ignorance of their vehicles, or just plain stupidity, and illustrates how far of an uphill challenge the

government has in achieving that goal of a maximum 664 road deaths per year from 2020, especially as at the time of writing, that's nine days hence.

If you see a car or motor scooter (known in Thailand as motorbikes) coming toward you at night with their lights switched off, don't bother to wave at them to let them know, you'll only confuse the driver, which might well cause an accident for which you will be blamed. (An unpleasant truth about Thailand is that as a farang (foreigner), you will always be to blame, even if the Thai driver is drunk out of his skull and rams into the back of your car while it's parked in your own driveway, it will be your fault because your car was in the way. Trust me on this one, never, ever offer assistance to anyone at any accident unless you want to lose your shirt when they take you to court – and they will!)

Common Thai reasoning for not having their lights switched on at night (taken from comments to an on-line article about Thai driving):

"I asked my Thai friend why he didn't turn the light on when driving in the dark. He said to save power in the light globe (lightbulb) as it is expensive to change so he only used it when absolutely needed."

"I once pointed out that someone was driving with no headlight at night. His reply was that he could see fine without a headlight. When I pointed out that other people could not see him without a light, he looked at me like I was crazy and walked away."

"You see many bikes with rear lights out. They think if the light isn't working evil spirits can't see or find them."

"I was a passenger in a Thai female's pick up when the sun was just going down. I asked why she hadn't put her lights on yet. 'It's because I'm saving on diesel. If I put my lights on the lights drink too much diesel.'"

And the same applies to windscreen wipers.

"He said he saved the battery when he doesn't use the lights. I had that off a taxi driver about turning his windscreen wipers on in the pouring rain. I leant over and put them on, you couldn't see more than a foot in front of the car."

"Excuse me?" I say pointing to the smeared, greasy dirt on the wiper sweep. "You think it's a good idea to clean the windscreen so you can see where you're going?" I proposed.

Thai taxi dude, "Why I need to see where I'm going? I know where I'm going."

My own experience comes from a two-day trip with a Thai friend to visit a friend of hers in a village in the Samoeng District of Chiang Mai, a region of steep mountain roads.

The first inkling of a whole new world of driving was when she said that she wasn't too sure about driving in the mountains, given the steepness of some of the ascents.

“Don’t worry,” I assured her, “You’ve got a good automatic car that can handle any of the slopes we’ll go up.”

“It’s not the slopes,” she said, “it’s that I’ve just put new tyres on the car and going up hills will wear them out quicker.”

A quiet moment on my behalf.

“Who told you that?”

“Nobody. It’s just something I thought of.”

“Sweetheart, you could drive up a brick wall and it will use no more rubber than driving on a totally flat surface. Perhaps you should stop thinking so much.”

So we went.

As we cleared the lower slopes and the gearbox started to take the strain of the steeper climbs, she suddenly changed gear.

“A friend told me that when you drive up steep slopes you have to change gear.”

“A Thai friend?”

“Yes.”

No surprise there, then, especially as my friend had never driven up anything more than a pimple in twenty years of driving, the local area around Chiang Mai being as flat as the proverbial pancake.

“You need to listen to the sound of the gearbox, love. The gears will change themselves when they reach the point they need to. That’s why it’s called an ‘automatic’. Keep changing gear yourself and you’ll bugger up the gearbox.”

After a short practice of listening to the gearbox and her keeping her hand away from the gear stick, she tentatively understood the reasoning for the ‘automatic’ part of the name.

The following day we are heading back to Chiang Mai, taking the same homeward-bound route as we did on the way out, including steep slopes, but this time in reverse. We come to a particularly sleep downhill with a right-hand turn at the bottom on a bit of an iffy camber. We pick up speed.

“I think you need to start braking now,” I point out.

Quiet from her.

“I really think you need to start braking now!” I point out more forcefully.

“I had the brakes done at the same time as I changed the tyres, and I don’t want to use them too much and wear them out.”

“BRAKE FOR FUCK’S SAKE!”

She braked.

“No need to shout!”

“Listen, the brakes are to slow you down so you don’t hit the bloody barrier. By not using them you might save a couple of baht, but it won’t matter because you will be through the barrier by then – quite possibly

dead – so you won't have to worry about saving a few baht on using either your tyres or the bloody brakes!"

A stony silence.

Night descends quickly, as it does in these part, and we are still short of Chiang Mai by about forty kilometres when I see the red light on her petrol gauge beginning to blink, even though she'd seen it herself and had plenty of time to fill up at either of the two filling stations we'd seen in the last half hour.

"I think you'd better stop at the next filling station and fill up."

Ten minutes later we see a PTT filling station – and she keeps going.

"Why didn't you stop there?" I ask, a hint of agitation in my voice. It's dark, we're on an unlit country road in the middle of nowhere.

"I only use Petronas petrol, and we haven't seen one," which is hardly surprising, what with Petronas filling stations being about as rare as a virgin in Soi Cowboy, the main street in Bangkok's notorious hooker district.

Maintaining as much cool as I can, "Wherever you fill up, at whichever company's pumps, the petrol is virtually the same. It comes from the same hole in the ground, it's refined in the same city of pipes and tubes, and sold in bulk to smaller companies that just slap their own name one it, and when you are running on fumes, just be bloody grateful when you see a big bright sign by the side of the road shining in the darkness that means you might get home.

"So I'll tell you what. When we run out of petrol, which we could well do at any moment, given the bright red glow on your dashboard, you can walk alone along this dark, lonely road until you find a filling station, and we have absolutely no idea how far that will be. Then you can ask the man if he has a can you can fill with petrol of any brand whatsoever. Then you can walk all the way back alone on this dark and lonely road and pour it into your tank to get us home because there's absobloodylutely no way I'm going to do it."

A chilly silence until ten minutes later we spotted the 'big, bright sign by the side of the road', where she filled up with petrol that wasn't Petronas.

Surprisingly enough, we stayed friends.

Where There's a Wall There's a Way

Thae Pae Gate, Chiang Mai

They have the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, more correctly called the Western Wall, a place of Jewish pilgrimage; China has its ancient 13,171-mile Great Wall (if you add in all its branches); there was once the Berlin Wall, a concrete barrier that physically and ideologically divided Berlin

from 1961 until being torn down in 1989, and last, and oh so definitely least, is the wall that stretches thirty metres either side of Thae Pae Gate in Chiang Mai.

The first three examples of the great art of walling may have – or in the case of the Berlin Wall, had – great historic significance, a pull on the heartstrings of generations and, again in the case of the Berlin Wall, creating a market in collectibles when it was reduced to so many bits of rubble. As one wag commented, "If every piece of the supposed cross of Jesus venerated in churches worldwide were reassembled, it would create a cross six miles high and four across", and similarly, if all the bits of the Berlin Wall sold as such were reconstructed it would give the Great Wall of China a fair run for its money.

While the Great Wall of China spans almost three millennia since its conception, the Western/Wailing Wall originated with King Herod in 20BC, and the Berlin Wall closed off East Germany for a mere twenty-eight years – although to those on the Eastern side it probably seemed a lot longer – the 'ancient' wall of Tha Pae gate can only claim a true history of thirty-four years, a tad more than the Berlin Wall, but lacking the emotional impact of the latter, which separated generations of friends and families. If a wall is only about 100 metres long, with an always-open gate in the middle, it's easy to slip around the end and take a cup of tea with grandma without the risk of a guard taking a pot-shot at you, isn't it?

You may not feel inclined to fork out for a brick from the Medium Small Wall of Chiang Mai – and woe, woe, woe betide you if you tried – but that doesn't mean it isn't as venerated by locals as any of its more famous counterparts, even if that veneration is more for the idea of the wall than it's actually construction, given that its emotional 824-year history actually only physically goes back to 1980, when city authorities decided to try to replicate the authenticity of the original 1296 design, using old photos and drawings from before World War II. Underwhelmed critics described the finished reconstruction 'a contemporary piece of imagination.'

Drunks spray-paint wall

In November 2018, a drunken pair, Canadian Brittany Schneider, 22, and British man Lee Furlong, 23, were bouncing their way off walls as they tried to make their way back to their hostel near Tha Pae Gate, by their own admission, "ridiculously drunk". They came across a bottle of spray-paint and, not having two sober brain cells to rub together, decided it would be a bit of a lark to spray their names across the mellow red stonework of the wall.

Showing a singular lack of spelling ability, Furlong spray-painted the words 'Scousse Lee' (*sic*), misspelling the colloquial reference to the people of his home town of Liverpool, England, that has a single 's', while

Schneider didn't get past a spray-painted 'B'. "I came to as I finished writing the 'B' and I stopped because I knew it was bad," she later told police. "But it was already too late." Unfortunately for them, in their drunken state they hadn't seen the CCTV camera pointed in their direction.

The pair went back to their hostel and went to sleep, but the next morning a member of the hostel staff woke Schneider and said there was an issue downstairs.

"I walked downstairs, opened the door and there were like seven police officers standing there." Schneider said. "They showed me a video and asked if it was me in the video spray-painting the wall. I said, 'Yes, it was me'".

Schneider and Furlong were arrested and taken to a police station where they were charged with vandalising registered ancient artifacts, (overlooking the fact that the 'artifact' is actually only four decades old, redefining the word 'ancient'), and, if found guilty, could face up to ten years in jail – and Thai jails are known to be best avoided even for a short spell – and a fine of one million baht (£25,000).

The sobered-up pair admitted to the crime, with Furlong claiming he was a "little bit drunk" at the time, something of an understatement, given he'd previously admitted, "I'd been drinking all day. I mean, I was really, really drunk."

Despite the anger felt by Chiang Mai residents, Schneider and Furlong escaped without a prison sentence, were smacked with a 200,000 baht (£4,700) fine, and shuffled off out of the country, quite possibly with the proviso, "Don't ever show your faces around here again!"

Furlong's mother told The Daily Telegraph that her son's trip to Thailand was his first trip abroad and that she is "disappointed in him", probably another bit of an understatement.

Selfishy background

Apart from the rare occasion of being used by dumb drunks as somewhere to scrawl their name, the wall at Tha Pae Gate is a favoured spot of Instagrammers and selfishy (*sic*) takers, mainly SE Asian tourists, as few westerners appear to think that having a photo taken in front of a pile of old bricks counts as a tourist memoir, something that might just as easily be done against the wall of their back yard at home. Unless, of course, you are Scousse Lee from Liverpule, who's mum would probably be even more 'disappointed' in him if he pulled the stunt at home, drunk or otherwise.

During the day queues form for that 'must-have' beneath the brass plaque on the wall that identifies it as being of 'historical' importance, and shows that the selfisher actually got that far; at night, standing close to the up-lights fixed into the ground to cast a diffused shadow across the apparently ancient brickwork. As pretty as the bricks might be, the

backdrop is somewhat lacking in charm compared to the Great Wall disappearing into the vast distance of China, although possibly just a tad better than a few stones from the Berlin Wall. Working on the 'fake it until you make it' scenario, you could probably fake one of the high points of recent German history almost anywhere in the world that has a few ruined buildings with stone blocks lying around – and there's plenty of them.

Anywhere crowds gather, so do pigeons, hoping to get a quick peck at the scattered seed before the photographer makes a loud noise to scare them into flight and provide that wonderful image of his beloved totally obscured by flapping wings. They were probably hoping for something a bit more romantic, but that's usually what they get. It's more likely, though, that the pigeons, being so used to the noise, simply flap their wings a couple of times in the desultory sort of way that says, "Yea, go on then, we're terrified. Get on with it so we can get back to lunch."

The latest wheeze, that the pigeons don't seem to have got used to yet is that for a few baht a man with a three-metre long bamboo pole pushed into an empty two-litre plastic water bottle waits until the subject of the photo is in position and surrounded by pigeons, then quickly rakes the bottle across the ground, making a noisy, rough, grating sound, scaring the pigeons into flight while the photographer clicks the shutter, the raucous noise sometimes, quite literally, scaring the shit out of the birds as they scatter above the crowd, although in some cultures they do say that being shat on by a pigeon is good luck. I suggest whoever 'they' are, they get down to Tha Pae Gate on a busy day.

Map Thapae Pae Gate

Stay Ahead – Get a Hat

Mr Sompong Chanraksa's used crash helmet collection

Some people fill their gardens with beautiful roses with exotic names….., others with dahlias or chrysanthemum, while some gardeners prefer to perfume the air with the aroma of culinary and medicinal herbs. Sompong Chanraksa prefers to use his garden to display his collection of more than seven-hundred helmets taken from crash sites.

As you enter the garden, what appears at first glance to be a motorbike with a child holding an adult from behind, seated on it in front of a shrine, turns out to be a pair of mannequins, deliberately designed to look real. Walk further into the garden and the bizarre collection spreads everywhere, dangling from trees, hanging from perimeter walls, overflowing from shelves, peeping from the undergrowth, with a pile behind the motorbike that puts you in mind of an ossuary, the long-dead grimacing from their skeletal skulls.

While Mr. Sompong's collection may seem just that bit gruesome when compared with, say, a collection of salt and pepper shakers or ceramic chamber pots, he sees it as more of a memorial, and a dire warning to those who leave their helmets in the front baskets of their motorbike, perhaps feeling that they don't look so good when wearing them.

"I made these mannequins to remind people to put helmets on before leaving home for their own safety, to remind people, when you go to the market, wear a helmet."

Thailand's roads are some of the most dangerous in the world, with an estimated 20,000 people dying in fatal crashes every year, around three-quarters of which are people on two or three-wheeled vehicles.

For almost fifty years, sixty-year-old Sompong Chanraksa has been taking motorcycle helmets from crash sites where their previous owners were often killed or injured. Picking up a helmet from a display where he remembers each story, regardless of how old they are, he says: "With this helmet, a motorcycle crashed with a bus. The person died suddenly. It was drizzling and I was eating before I went to work. I heard the bang and went out to see. Two people died. The accident responders didn't collect helmets at that time, so I brought it back home from the accident site."

"In this area, all the helmets come from dead people," he continues. "These people were motorcyclists who died in accidents and they put their helmets in the baskets of their motorcycles." Indicating a very damaged helmet, he comments, "This one is from a very serious accident as only half of it is left. This helmet's owner died at the crash site.

From the shock of sudden death to the poignancy of a young life lost, a plastic doll hangs from the limb of a tree, suspended above a flower bed, its blonde hair and body bleached white by the sun. "This helmet and the doll belong to a child," Mr. Sompong explains. "She and one of her parents died in hospital but I don't know their names. I found the doll together with the helmet so I kept them both as I didn't want to leave anything behind."

Occasionally Mr. Sompong is asked what the stains on a helmet are, his stock reply being 'paint', but while he insists that his collection is a physical safety reminder for his community, his macabre collection has sparked rumours the house is haunted.

"Some people came to my house late at night once and asked if I was holding a house party. I said no, there are only three to four people in our family. They didn't believe me as they said they saw so many people. He says children, scared by the mannequins in the drive, have crashed their bicycles into the ditch outside. Adults who borrowed the helmets quickly returned them, complaining that they couldn't sleep and felt like they were being followed.

Despite the nervousness of some of his neighbours, Sompong doesn't feel scared. "My only feeling is wanting to help them [the victims]. Leaving their helmets on the side of the road doesn't look pleasant so I thought I should help them by keeping the helmets at home to look nice."

Sompong Chanraksa lights incense to help the crash victims cross safely to their next life."When I make merit or give alms, I dedicate the merit to the dead and the owners of helmets which I collected. Some people could perceive that it's disrespectful to the dead. But in fact, I don't think so. I collect the helmets and they are displayed as a reminder. I also asked for permission to collect them. I make merit for them every day."

While the collection has frightened some people and inspired ghost stories, Mr. Sompong says it has also prompted many of his neighbours to take road safety more seriously; it's a stark physical reminder of the fact that the majority of people killed on Thailand's roads are motorbike riders.

"Many of the people who've come to my house have said it's good to see helmets like this. If they don't wear their helmets, I might be the one who goes to collect them," he says.

Asked if he ever wears dead people's helmets, "I've worn them many times," he replies. "Sometimes, I don't have a helmet so I wear these to go out to the market."

Si Quey, Thailand's Hannibal Lecter
Finally gets to RIP – after sixty years

It's a Monday afternoon in late January 1958. Somboon Boonyakan, an 8-year-old boy living in the seaside town of Noen Phra, in Thailand's Rayong province, is sent to buy vegetables from a local Chinese gardener for the family's evening meal. Growing increasingly concerned as daylight fades, fearing that his son might have wandered off and got lost, the boy's father, Nawa Boonyakan, calls together a group of friends to search nearby woods.

As the search progresses, the group comes across See Uey Sae-Ung, the gardener Somboon had been sent to buy from, burning a pile of brushwood. While questioning See Uey (soon to become widely known as the infamous Si Quey), Nawa sees a small leg hidden in the burning debris. In panic, he drags the fire apart and discovers to his horror the half-burned and disemboweled body of his son, his stomach hacked open and intestines dragged out. Enflamed with emotion at the sight of his child's viciously abused body, he attacks See Uey, pinning him to the ground until police arrive.

Within days, the story of the horrific murder of little Samboon Boonyakan became headline news nationwide, only to shock the Thai people to their very souls when Si Quey admitted a killing spree of five years, one gruesome murder after another between 1954 and 1958, all with the same *modus operandi,* evisceration after being stabbed in the neck. *Police Arrest Child Murderer Who Rip Outs Victim's Heart and Sucks Fresh Blood* screamed the headline in the daily national, *Pim Thai*, on February 3.

Si Quey's trial opened on March 25, 1958, and during the following nine days Si Quey, a 32-year-old migrant from China who spoke no Thai, admitted through interpreters to the murder of six children between the ages of five and 11, five boys and one girl, all, like Si Quay himself, ethnic Chinese. He selected children because they were easier to entrap and kill.

His first taste of eating human flesh was during a fierce wartime siege when he survived by eating parts of his fallen fellow soldiers, although another story suggests he once met a Chinese hermit who advised him that eating children's intestines would grant him supernatural powers.

His reason for carving out their hearts, kidneys, livers and organs, and then cooking and eating them was, as he admitted in his confession to the police, because he liked human flesh, especially the hearts, and believed that consuming them would rejuvenate him. He made one exception, for 6-year-old Muaychu Saehua, whom he murdered near Chitlada Palace in Bangkok, saying her heart was too small for a hearty meal, so he dined on her gullet instead. "It tasted delicious," he said.

Initially sentenced to life imprisonment, prosecutors appealed the verdict, arguing that the mandatory clemency granted for confessions should not apply in this case because the evidence would have been enough to convict in itself. The appeals court agreed and sentenced Si Quay to die. He was incarcerated in Bangkok's notorious Bang Kwang prison until being executed by firing squad on Sept. 17, 1959.

Execution by shooting was normal practice in Thailand until 11 December 2003, (with the first execution by lethal injection taking place the following day), originally using a rifle and in later years by being shot in the back by machine gun. A mock-up of the execution process was displayed in the now-closed Prison Museum in Bangkok, where a document entitled '*The process of an execution by machine gun may be as follows*', gave details of the steps that were taken during the execution. Number 10 on the list, the very last item, read

> *'The executed prisoner's fingerprints will be taken for examination in order to ensure that he is not the wrong person.'*

which would seem a bit like closing the stable door after the horse has bolted.

With his notoriety ensuring him a place in Thai folklore, a culture where spirits, ghouls and the macabre sit perfectly at ease with the everyday, Si Quey's body was embalmed with paraffin wax and put on display, standing propped up, leaning on his shoulder, in a glass case reminiscent of a telephone booth, in the so-called *Museum of Death*, in reality, the Forensic Medicine Museum at Siraraj Hospital, the oldest hospital in Bangkok. His corpse, stained and shining like a well-polished dark brown boot, entertained and terrified visitors in equal measure for sixty years, becoming the bogyman for generations of Thai children, whose parents kept them in line by dire warnings that Si Quey would come and eat their liver if they misbehaved.

In recent years, the idea that Si Quey, Thailand's Hannibal Lecter, was responsible for all the six murders has come under scrutiny, given the distance between the provinces they occurred in, the lack of any form of DNA testing at the time, the readiness with which the police were known to make scapegoats of the innocent simply to clear a crime, his confessions to the crimes were inconsistent with the evidence, with police providing no hard proof to tie him to them, and the fact that they had already arrested and released another suspect, Sawai Pinsilpachai, a Thai butcher, who was identified by police as the serial child killer and locked up for nearly a year. A court released him on bail in January 1958 – one month before Si Quey's arrest. Although, admittedly, there was no doubt that Si Quey had murdered and eviscerated Somboon Boonyakan, making him Thailand's only convicted cannibal, reason enough for the death penalty

After public efforts to end the spiritual agony of Thailand's supposedly worst serial killer, the wax-covered cadaver of Si Quey was removed from display in the museum at the request of the people of Thap Sakae district, where Si Quey lived and worked as a labourer before he was arrested, and the National Human Rights Commission. His spirit was finally able to gain peace when he was cremated at Wat Bang Praek Tai, near Bang Kwang Prison in Nonthaburi, Bangkok on 23 July 2020. However, the final resting place of his ashes will not be made public, given the strange propensity of the Thai people to venerate the spirits of murderers of both sexes, no matter how gruesome their crime.

The Second 'Cannibal Killer' – almost!

In October 2017, 24-year-old Paere Jongthong, from the village of Dong Suang in north-eastern Thailand, confessed to police he had killed his elderly neighbour, Tan Loon-ubon, 79, after the old man claimed to have killed his father. Jongthong told police he was visiting his neighbour as he often did, though on this occasion he had taken a tablet of methamphetamine and smoked some cannabis.

As he was being arrested, police found Tan Loon-ubon's liver in Jongthong's pocket and asked if he intended to eat it. "Yes, that's right,"

was the reply, saying that he had a recipe for a spicy salad, for which the liver would be the main ingredient, reminiscent of Anthony Hopkins as Hannibal Lecter in the 1991 psychological horror *Silence of the Lambs*. "I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice Chianti", although for Tan Loon-ubon a bottle of Thai-brewed Chang beer would probably have had to suffice.

A Delicate Touch

The fine art of traditional Thai fruit and vegetable carving

Imagine yourself in the court of King Sri Indraditya in Sukhothai in the year 1364. You are the king's consort, Nang Nopomas by name, and you are trying to think of a way to jazz up your kratong, the small decorative offering given for the annual festival in November, to catch both the eye of the king and Phra Mae Khongkha, Goddess of Water, who, hopefully, will smile benevolently on you and forgive your failings and indiscretions of the previous year. "I know," you think, "I'll carve some fruit and veg into flowers and make my little raft look like a huge water lily." And so Nang Nopomas did, charming the king so much that he decreed that fruit and vegetable carving would become a heritage art of Thailand and be taught at a special school in the Royal Palace, bearing the name kae-sa-lak.

As with most legends, however, there are various versions. The story is usually attributed to the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng, the founder of Sukhothai, but as he turned up his toes in 1298 it's unlikely he could admire the handiwork of his beloved Nang Nopomas sixty-six years later. And so it was also with King Sri Indraditya, he snuffed it in 1270, which would also put him out of the running in the fancy fruit and veg stakes. And to complicate matters even more, dear old Nang Nopomas never even existed; she came into being as a character in a novel written in the early 19th century to give guidance to women hoping to become civil servants. The truth is that Loi Krathon is based on a Brahman festival to worship the gods Siva, Vishnu and Brahma, and when the Thai people adopted Buddhism they simply adapted the ceremony in honour the Buddha's cremated bone. But surely such an elegant and decorative art as the hand-carving of fruit and vegetable needs a delightful legend to complement the beauty of its designs.

Almost any fruit or vegetable can be carved and used as decoration. Traditionally flowers were the main designs, based on natural colour and texture but in more recent times animal forms and abstract designs have become included in the caring repertoire.

Two Styles of Carving

Skin Carving involves the use of fruit and vegetables where the interior is a different colour to the skin, such as melons (and legend has it that the melon was one of the fruits carved into flowers by Nang Nopomas – which would have meant a pretty substantial khratong to stay afloat under its weight). It's the contrast between the skin and the flesh that emphasises the design.

In Three Dimensional Carving the fruit or vegetable is carved to give the appearance of a real flower, animal or other object, and often used to grace a table for a special occasion. It's common in larger decorations to combine both carving styles.

Pannee Tooranuparp trained in fruit and vegetable carving in Thailand, before putting her skills to good use in restaurnats in San Carlos, California. Her signature is a small white swan created a Chinese daikon, a large white radish, for the neck, body and wings, chili pepper held in place with a wooden skewer for the beak and black peppercorns for eyes. It's the serendipitous origin of her signature that is beguiling.

"I went to the Chateau Montelena Winery with my husband, Warren, a few years ago. It's a beautiful location at the base of Mount St. Helena and at one time it had been owned by a Chinese couple who created a lake called Jade Lake and built two Chinese pavilions in the middle of it with a flock of swans. I'm allergic to alcohol so I went to look at the pool. It was so peaceful and calm with still water and I watched the swans for a while and decided to see if I could copy them." Back at the restaurant, when a customer ordered a combination dish she put swan in the middle with food displayed around it. Eventually clients ordered the combination because of the bird, which they took home as a souvenier.

Preparation is everything when Pannee is asked to make a display for a special occasion. Few people have any specific idea of what they want and are happy to leave the design in her hands.

"A large centrepiece can take up to three days to create, especially if it includes soft fruits such as strawberries, so I start with the hard vegetables first, such as carrots because once they are carved I can store them in a box in the refrigerator for three days. If I'm using watermelon I have to do that in the morning and then everything is assembled in the afternoon." The watermelon might become a radiant red flower with white tipped petals, a pineapple transforms into a dragon and chilies become delicate flowers. And when the celebration is over, with care the beautiful display can last a few more days.

The beauty of Thai fruit and vegetable carving mentioned in the poetry of Thai King Rama II went into decline in the 1930's but fortunately it made a come-back and is now taught in schools and private classes throughout Thailand. A delicate art made more beautiful by being ephemeral.

SPAIN

Home is a hole in the ground

Guadix, Granada

When Julius Caesar marched his way through Spain in AD 45 (although it was called Hispain at the time) he settled his weary troops for a much-needed rest after the battle of Munda. The spot where he pitched his tent became the colony of Julia Gemela Acci, later to take on the last name when it became a true city. The name by which the city is now known, Guadix, came with the invasion of the Moors who gave it the name of *Guadh-haxi*, meaning 'river of life'. Under Moorish rule, the city maintained its strategic importance, but more as a commercial center than a military one.

As you walk around Guadix, each succeeding conqueror's architectural style is displayed, but it is the haphazard buildings of the Moriscos, (Muslims who had ostensibly accepted Christianity after the forces of Jaime Primero drove their non-converting compatriots out of the country), that give Guadix its modern-day rather wacky renown. When the Moriscos were thrown out of the city they took to the hills – and dug into them. From this arose a whole town of troglodyte dwellings, which is still as lively and lived-in as it was in Moorish times. Over two thousand caves are inhabited in the Barriada de Cuevas, with the same amount to be found in the area surrounding the city.

From the vantage point of the viewing terrace at the top of the Barriada (which looks like a series of high-rise chimneys until you get up there and discover it's all a façade), you have the opportunity of looking down on cave life in Guadix. From here you can see the historic and the modern, the ruin and the renovated, the tarted up and the downright tatty. It's worth the climb just to get a sense of the surreal. Below you are hundreds of mounds and hillsides with little doorways cut in them which give the impression that a swarm of privacy-minded termites has set up home. At least it might if it weren't for the forest of TV aerials from which hundreds of meters of cable travel before suddenly disappearing into the ground.

Follow the two old ladies taking a stroll along the well-worn path over a hillock, and you are actually walking over someone's living room. Those funny pillars with holes in the top are chimneys, although you'd feel sorry for old Santa trying to struggle his way down one, and you can just imagine kids throwing fireworks down them on fiesta nights.

If you are tempted to sit on one of the many low walls, just be aware that if someone comes out of their front door and looks up they could well see your bum, because you are sitting on the roof of their porch. Cables and ropes crisscross everywhere; phone lines, electricity cables, TV wires, and washing lines create a cat's cradle made by a cack-handed giant.

There are proper roads of course, but they aren't half as much fun to meander as the rough, roof-top footpaths, and when you see an actual house with real walls and roof it looks completely out of place in this human warren of white-painted courtyards. Shops, garages, businesses of all kinds appear to be nothing more than a façade of a door and a couple of windows – even the medical center is half underground.

In this world of the weird the Cuava de Antiquarios at Vereda, 18, sticks out like a highly decorative thumb. The owner sits outside in the sun, chatting with a group of cronies, beside a painted sign that reads 'Quo Vadis Tango 1' – it probably makes sense to someone! He invites you inside to show you small rooms filled with an eclectic collection of antiquities and *object d'arte* – i.e. a vast array of junk that defies description.

The back room was where the donkey once lived, and a room to the right of the entrance was home to the family who owned him, and whose living quarters were not much bigger than the donkey himself resided in. These days the rooms are packed with iron beds, pots, pans, picture frames, washstands, battered copperware, wooden pulleys, candelabra, clocks – and that 'must-have' souvenir – a little plaster model of a cave house.

When I ask the price of something his answer is in an accent so thick as to be impenetrable, and when I ask him to write it down he tells me he can't write. Careful scrutiny of the figures promenading in the sun gives the impression that most of them are in direct lineage from the original home-diggers, and that there are probably very few surnames.

In the center of Guadix the Cathedral is a masterpiece of Renaissance and Gothic ecclesiastical art. Built between the 16th and 18th centuries, over a mosque and earlier Gothic cathedral, it has the most important *coro* (altar) in the whole of Spain. Surrounding the Cathedral, however, the square is a combination of the glorious/horrendous schools of architecture, with beautiful Modernista buildings unhappily rubbing shoulders with the sort of excrescence for whose designers the *garrote* should be re-introduced.

At the rear of the cathedral, at the end of Calle Arco de Palacio, the narrow passageway that passes under the covered archway that links the Cathedral with the Palacio is what must be one of the most glorious adult education centers in Spain. Pillared, pergolad and painted, it is rock-a-hoola Rococo with a sense of tongue-in-cheek.

Just around the corner, in the tiny plaza off Placeta del Conde Luque, a small doorway tucked in the corner, under a cut-out sign of a picador on horseback about to lance a bull, is a strange little café. Behind the wooden slab of a bar, the owner, dressed in cloth cap and quilted jacket, looking for all the world as if he'd just walked off some mountainside, draws his own wine from vast barrels in the storeroom behind the bar. It's also where he keeps his stock of bridles and bits, curious pieces of leather, and an assortment of odd agriculturally looking things that he sells as a sideline.

When the bar/shop is open, caged partridges, hung around the doorway and on the walls inside, sing away as if serenading their love-mate. Actually, they are totally insane. How would you feel about spending your life in a cage only a whisper bigger than your body, without even the space to spread your arms or turn around? It's not surprising they all bob up and down manically.

Map: Barrio de Cuevas

He Sees Sea Shells

Sanlucar de Barrameda

I found out a couple of years after this article was published in Living Spain Magazine, that Sr. Garido had died in 2011, and shortly after, his wonderful museum had been demolished as part of urban regeneration of the area. While Spain lost one of its most uniquely personal museums, the like of which will never be seen again, and no-one can ever again experience the warmth and enthusiasm of this charming gentleman and his idiosyncratic home, I decided to include it in this book as a perfect example of one man's devotion to a friend.

From the orange-tree-shaded terrace of the Palacio Ducal de Medina Sedonia in Sanlúcar de Barrameda, the 13th-century palace that was once home to generations of the infamous and slightly naughty, Guzman family, I gaze across the rooftops of the village where the conquistadores would have taken their last view of their homeland faceing the wild unknown of the Americas. In the distance I can see the treetops of the southern-most reaches of the Cota Doñana, Spain's biggest national park, with sparkling glimpses of the Riu Guadalquivir, the ancient link between Seville and the sea that separates pueblo from campo.

In the patchily clouded blue sky above, I watch a hawk beat its wings as it lazily circles, scouring the rooftops and alleyways below for food. As my eyes drop from watching the hawk, I get my first sighting of *El Galeon Pirata del Trujo*, what looks like a beached shipwreck unceremoniously dumped on a roof in the middle of the town by a tidal

wave. It's as if Davy Jones had a big clear out of his Locker and the owner of the ramshackle building thought, "I can use that." In a curious way, that's what actually happened.

On 13 February 1959, a bitter night to go fishing, with the crew of the *Amparito* wrapped in heavy weather gear to ward off the Atlantic cold, twenty-five-year-old José María Garrido was working alongside his best friend, José Sanche Pérez. When the boat settled in its fishing grounds, they dropped anchor, and as the cable rattled with the weight of the anchor dragging it downward, the crew heard the screams of José Sanche as he was whipped over the gunwale, his leg caught up in the anchor chain. The forty-kilo anchor, heavy enough that two men were needed to move it, plunged deeper, with José Sanche's heavy winter clothing acting as a sponge, becoming rapidly sodden and making movement impossible. He was thirty-nine years old, with a wife and five children and another on the way. His body was never found, and it was the last day that José Maria Garrido went to sea.

For the next weeks, José María searched the coastline for the body of his friend, asking at every village if anyone had seen him. No-one had, but twenty years later it was those same beaches that he had desolately walked along that were to provide the material for a monument to the memory of his lost friend.

José María tells me his story as we sit on the 'deck' of El Galeon Pirata del Truco (The Trick Pirate Galleon); in other words, the roof of his home, the *Museo del Mar Las Caracolas* (Sea Shell Museum), where a sign tells you that it is *el museo de Garrido y tuyo tambien*, Garrido's museum and yours as well.

He is a small chap, dressed in a singlet and floral Bermuda shorts, his wispy grey hair tied back in a small pig-tail as suits an old sea dog. As we talk, with me getting lost occasionally in the s-less Andaluz accent, his face and body are wonderfully animated, sometimes jumping up and acting out his story with theatrical gestures and grabbing a piece of the marine detritus that litters every square inch to illustrate a point.

For the decade before his friend's death, José María had been a fisherman, but first took to the water when he was eight, helping his father on the family rowing boat that ferried the day's catch between fishing boat and beach, at a time when Sanlucar had no wharf.

After his friend's death, José María became a painter at the Bodega Barbadillo, but in his spare time would wander the beaches, picking up odd bits and pieces.

"I saw a lovely shell one day, so brought it home and glued it to the wall. After that I began to pick up more and did the same, and one day a friend came to the house and said how wonderful they looked, so I decided to add more and more, creating a memorial to my old friend José

Sanche." Eighty thousand shells later, the walls of his home are now, quite literally, covered with them.

We walk around the Museo del Caracolas, with José María acting not so much as a guide than as a raconteur, suddenly lifting a photo of the wall and describing it's significance in detail, or delving into a corner to bring out something that I might have missed but "is really, really interesting and unusual because……" A shell lighthouse, shell picture frames, model boats, a fancily decorated turtle shell, shell boxes, shell….everything, all made by hand by Sr. Garrido.

It is the position of Sanlucar de Barrameda on the battleground where Mediterranean meets Atlantic almost at the mouth of the Guadalquivir, that accounts for a strange natural selection process and the reason why José María was able to gather so many of the fascinating collection of shells, amphora, coins, and general flotsam and jetsam. (For the pedantic, there is a technical difference between the two: jetsam has been voluntarily cast into the sea (jettisoned) by the crew of a ship, usually in order to lighten it in an emergency, while flotsam describes goods that are floating on the water without having been thrown in deliberately, usually after a shipwreck.)

"For some strange reason, with the force of the two seas coming together, the heavier things end up on the shores of the Cota Doñana, and the lighter ones on the beaches on the Sanlucar side. This is why the big round shells are only found over there and the smaller ones on this side. Long before the river was clearly marked for navigation it was a very dangerous passage and there were a lot of shipwrecks, and with the Guadalquivir being one of the most important rivers in Spain, because it linked Seville, Spain's most important trading post with the Americas, with the open sea, there was a lot of very important traffic passed this way."

Which brings us back to Davy Jones.

For a change from scouring his local beaches, one day José María took a small rowing boat across the river to the Cota Doñana, long before it became a national park or even had regular visitors.

"I was amazed because I suddenly saw all these wonderful shells and things that had been lying there undiscovered for centuries. No-one ever went there, so no-one picked anything up. For me, it was a treasure trove!" And in true piratical style, José María began to hide his treasure by burying it in holes dug in the beach and returning for it later, dragging it back by the sack load.

It took twenty years without help and without money to complete his task of covering the walls of his home with shells, but he also passed his time making his models and building the 'deck' of his ship. One of his most fascinating productions is a small replica of the bow and wheelhouse of a boat, named the Amparito, constructed of metal. In it

are thousands of tiny shells, and when José María drags his hands through them, pulling them up the sides of the hull and allowing them to cascade back again, it makes the most perfect sound effect of a wave-washed beach. Add a sunlamp and you can have summer island magic even in deepest February.

'Unique' is a much-overused word, but in this case there is no other to describe El Museo del Mar de las Caracolas. Unfortunately, it's this uniqueness – or perhaps better referred to as idiosyncrasy – that appears to count against José María Garrido. He receives no help or publicity from either the Town Hall or local tourism authorities, who seem to see his wacky individualistic structure almost as an insult to the image of the town – rather like a pile of dog muck on the pavement of Bond Street – preferring to promote their cathedral and castle, as something special, which they aren't other, than to cathedral and castle buffs, and tourist authorities. As if every other city in Spain didn't have both!

So visit soon. In his mid-seventies, José María knows that it won't be so many years before his museum's door closes permanently. Then, no doubt, one of the weirdest little museums in the world will disappear, its eighty thousand shells consigned to a rubbish skip instead of being washed up on the beaches of the Mediterranean.

The Man Who Paid For America
Valencia City

Tucked away on a shelf in a salon of a 17th-century palacio in Valencia, is a diorama of a room in the house of a 15th-century nobleman. In it, a group of tiny figures, each no more than two inches tall, stand beside a wooden table on which rests a golden crucifix and a leather case with metal studs. The figure of a lady in a blue dress and golden crown is conversing with someone across the table, an elegantly dressed man in a maroon jacket, green trousers and leather gaiters, with a sheathed dagger hanging from his belt. The scene depicts the moment Queen Isabella of Spain surrendered her jewels to a banker, Luis de Santangel, to provide funds for the building and equipping of the *Pinta*, the *Niña*, and the *Santa Maria*, leading to Christopher Columbus' discovery of the Americas.

The name Luis de Santangel is virtually unknown, but without him, the United States of America wouldn't exist. A Jewish banker resident in Valencia, his family had converted from Judaism to Christianity a couple of generations earlier, more on the basis that as bankers to Spanish royalty a Christian crown couldn't be seen to be borrowing money from a Jew, than any change of religious ethic.

de Santangel was a friend of Christopher Columbus, and in 1486, when the sailor wanted to put the idea of finding a new route to Asia to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, Santangel acted as intermediary. Los Reyes Católicos turned him down, but just as a major petrol company these days might have said to the first person who came up with the idea of an electric car, "Look, we don't want to develop your car, but here's a few thousand a year for you not to take it anyone else," the King gave Columbus an annuity of 12,000 maravedis (about €650 at today's rate) not to hawk his idea elsewhere. To keep him sweet, three years later he was given documentation that could be used to get free bed and board in any Spanish municipality.

When Columbus had had enough of this and was about to offer his services to the French King, Charles VIII, his big pal Luis de Santangel had another go at Queen Isabella, this time convincing her that the prospect of converting Asia to Christianity made the voyage worth the risk, not to mention that there might be a few maravedis to be made.

The story goes that Isabella pawned her jewelry to pay for the trip, but she didn't. Luis de Santangel stumped up, and not so that she wouldn't have to hock her diamonds as the fable tells us, but in much the same way as if the Mafia asked you to lend them a few bucks to finance a little scheme and you thought it wise not to say, "Not this time thank you, Don, I'll pass." Santangel knew what was good for him and raised the money to finance the voyage of discovery, even going so far as to put in a fair amount of his own money. Isabella's beads were symbolically put up as collateral for the 'loan'.

To be fair, de Santangel did cut a deal for a fair percentage of any profits, (and probably all of the losses if the adventure had gone belly up; it would have taken a brave - or incredibly stupid - person to hang on to the Royal Jewels if it had ended in disaster). As part of the agreement, he was given the right to receive the first letter from Columbus if indeed a new route to the Indies was found.

Even after the success of Columbus' little venture and de Santangel's part in it, the banker's family was persecuted during the Spanish Inquisition. His older cousin of the same name was beheaded during the religious ferment, but because of his service to Spain, on 30 May 1497, Luis de Santangel had his blood officially 'cleansed'. Ferdinand proclaimed in a royal decree that Luis de Santangel and his family, present and future, were to be protected from the Inquisition.

So what does Valencia, the city that hosted one of the most important moments in history, the agreement by Luis de Santangel to fund Christopher Columbus' jaunt to the Americas, do to promote one of its most famous sons? Nada de nada, nothing, other than a street named after him and a small bust on a pedestal by the side of the dried-up River Turia, where the head of Luis de Santangel has something black running

from his nose that makes him look as if he has a virulent cold. Half-way down the pedestal is a plaque that reads:

LUIS DE SANTANGEL
GENEROSO COOPERADO
DEL DESCUMBRIEMENTO DE AMERICA
(*Luis de Santangel Generous Co-operator*
in the Discovery of America)

which is a bit like saying that the orange had a little something to do in the creation of a glass of orange juice.

(*The diorama can be seen at L'Iber, Museo de los Soldaditos de Plomo in Calle Caballeros. See It's A Small World.*)

Light the Blue Touchpaper and .....
The Spanish off-hand approach to fireworks

The Spanish have always had a curious attitude to gunpowder. On the one hand, they know that bombs are made from it, and with enough of it packed into a tight metal container it can be a pretty nifty way of making a very, *very*, big hole in a wall, while on the other they revel in the delights of enormous firework displays, oohing and aahing over the bursting star blazes and Technicolor cascades raining down on them.

There are regular tales of the absurd…or they would be absurd if they weren't so appallingly sad and stupid. Perhaps one of the more idiotic stories is one that occurred a few years ago. The mayor of a small Valencian town and his brother-in-law had been to collect the fireworks for their local fiesta in a van owned by the council. The day being warm, they drove with the windows down, and when the brother-in-law decided to have a smoke, he just threw the still lit stub out of the window when he finished his cigarette.

There's probably some scientific law that says, '*The result of throwing a lighted cigarette out of the open window of a car travelling below forty kilometres an hour is that it will invariably blowback on you.*' Obviously the idiot-in-law hadn't heard of the law, because that is exactly what happened. The resultant bomb going off in a tightly packed metal container made absolutely sure he won't do it again, because there wasn't a great deal left of him by the time the fire brigade put the roaring fire out. The mayor was considerably luckier – although 'lucky' might be a relative term – as he survived, but spent the next months in hospital recovering from burns over seventy percent of his body.

As part of the celebrations of *Hogueras,* Alicante's main annual fiesta, one night is devoted to the *Nit de Foc*, a whole night where a section of the city is cordoned off and young dudes and dudesses are actively encouraged to hurl enormous fireworks and blazing torches at each other. While Valencia's *Fallas*, one of Spain's most famous and explosive fiestas that takes place in mid-March, thankfully doesn't have the jolly good fun of immolation on its programme, vast quantities of gunpowder are still *de riguer* for having a good time.

Now, call me an old fuddy-duddy, but I call it distinctly anti-social behaviour when a group of grown youths (physically anyway, not sure about their mental status) hurl fat bangers at each other in a sense of fun. Fun! Flaming, explosive projectiles chucked from point-blank range is not my idea of a celebratory event! ("Hey Paco, do you have your moped handy, I think we need to get Juan to hospital sharpish!") But you can't really blame the *chicos* (and the more sturdy *chicas*) because it's all the fault of the mums as far as I'm concerned.

As the countdown to the big day begins (i.e from the start of March), life in the *casal*, the temporary home of each of the *fallas* associations, begins to pick up speed as various little soirées are held. Each afternoon, mums and their pre-school children gather for a bit of a gossip in plastic chairs in front of the *casal*. By way of entertainment, these three-year-olds are handed a constant train of mini-bombs lit from a fuse that ma holds and ignites them like a well-trained granny handles a pair of knitting needles – automatically, without a glance at her hands.

The nipper, unsupervised, then wanders off down the street to drop his little device, hopefully by then being of sufficient mathematical turn of mind to be able to count down the 'light blue touch paper and retire' time. ("I'll be back in a sec Juanita. It looks like our Roberto has just blown his fingertips off.")

Then we've got the *mazcleta*, a twenty-minute ear-bashing, brain-spinning, nerve-twanging of fireworks, a so-called 'artistic experience', held bang on two o'clock every day from the first of March in Valencia's Plaza de Ayuntamiento. The mazcleta isn't built on colourful displays as most others are, it is purely designed on sound, the louder and faster the better. Fifteen seconds after the first whiz-bang lifts into the air, the whole square is covered in a dense pall of smoke and cascading cardboard detritus. Lesser ones happen throughout the city, and while they may only last a couple of minutes, car alarms set off by the air pressure caused by the explosions claxon away for ages after.

Not everyone goes for the 'orchestrated' clatter. A female friend of mine says she loves the smell of the smoke and finds it very sensual. As I've no sense of smell I'm not in a position to judge, but I did offer to buy a box of fireworks for her that we could set off on my

terrace…alone….with a chilled bottle of champagne and a candle-lit dinner waiting in the wings. Sadly, she didn't take the hint.

Whacky Mythology and Scary Beasties
Betanzos, Galicia

My first view of Betanzos was through a narrow arch beside the river, with a steeply curving cobbled road leading between ancient houses; interesting, but not overwhelming, but like a little box that slowly unfolds to show an unusually large interior, I soon discovered that this apparently uneventful little town is a total delight, thanks in no small part to the brothers García Neveira.

Juan and Jesús García Neveira were stony-broke when they set off for Argentina in the middle years of the 19th century. Forty-some years later they returned to their home town, if not as rich as Croesus, then pretty well off, and they spent a large part of their fortune on philanthropic ventures to beautify the town and do 'good works' for its inhabitants, with everything done in the latest Modernista style.

The grand Escuelas García Hermanos, that doubled as a school to educate and feed local children, using all the latest educational methods, and somewhere old people could go to get a decent meal, at a time when the 'third age' wasn't even invented; an-up-to-the-minute *lavadora*, a public washhouse that dangles over the river and was the height of industrial elegance at the time; and the Plaza Hermanos García Naveira, (beneficent they might have been, but they wanted it to be known), where their statue now stands, watching over the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of those they helped. But the most delightful of all their many delightful works was the *Parque del Pasatiempo*.

When the brothers returned to Betanzos in 1893, Don Juan began to construct a fantasy park on the outskirts of the town. At a time when most people barely left the street they lived in, never mind travel halfway around the world, his intention was to show the locals the wonders he had seen on his travels. A cornucopia of caves, pools, grottos, gardens, statues and molded relieves, which he grandiosely called his '*parque enciclopédico*'. I'm not sure which encyclopedia he was talking about, and it's unlikely he actually saw some of the weird monsters and machines that decorate his folly unless he partook of some seriously strange herbs on his travels, but the effect, even more than a century later, is wonderful in a gigglish sort of way and must have been absolutely jaw-dropping when the first visitors passed through the gates.

I was disappointed when I was told that the garden was closed on the day I visited Betanzos, but I took a walk to peer through the railings anyway. I'm not sure if the sneaky Don Juan designed a hidden entrance, but I discovered one, descended a narrow flight of steps disappearing through a plant-covered grotto, and suddenly found myself stepping out into a whacky wonderland of mythology and scary beasties, all alone except for two Edwardian ladies and one gentleman sat on camels, escorted by a couple robed as if they had just stepped out of the desert. Unfortunately, they were statues fixed in time, and unable to regale me about their adventures, as I'm sure the brothers García Naveira would have done to packed houses.

I went through an entrance with a plaque of the Mezquita Mohammed Ali in Cairo hanging over my head, and worked my way upwards, ducking through dark caves of cement stalactites and stalagmites, until I came to a mirador with views across the town, much changed since Juan finished his Disney-esque garden. The silence was eerie, and I was dubious about making my way back through the gaping mouth of a ferocious lion.

On my way down to the main pool, I passed an enormous map of the Panama Canal, which wouldn't have even been opened when the brothers made their homeward journey. Eighteen plaques beside it represent the *Hijos Republicanos de España*, the Republican Sons of Spain, the countries that makeup South America; Venezuela, Uruguay, Honduras, Mexico, and onward. For some reason, they also thought to include Brazil, but my limited geographical knowledge whispered to me that surely that was Portuguese.

Layers of terraces, twisting, turning and curving steps, sometimes overhung with bushes, other times disappearing behind a statue, finally bring me to the pool, covered in floating plant life and reflecting in its dark depths the cupola-topped *Fuente de las Cuatro Estaciones* that stands in the middle. A fearsome sea monster made an open-mouthed snap at me while a winged serpent made a vicious attack on an enormous bat. A deep-sea diver wielded his heavy mallet, about to strike open a treasure chest, and a phantasmagorical underwater carriage trundled its way across the ocean bed.

It is one of the most wonderful gardens I've ever visited, and it made me think that with all the amazing technology we have nowadays, I doubt that anything we can create would seem half as impressive to us now as did this boisterously beautiful garden of the imagination when the Dons Juan and Jesús escorted their first wide-eyed and wondering visitors to their Parque del Pasatiempo. If every town and city had patrons like the brothers García Naveira the world would be a better place….or at least a more interesting one.

Map: Pareque del Pasatiempo

Flouncing About in Fanciful Feathers
Benidorm

When Arabs settled Spain in 711, they brought with them a culture that was to permeate almost the whole of the Iberian peninsula. Their language, their food, their arts, are recognisable in every aspect of Spanish life. They also brought with them the pigeon.

The prime importance of the palomo was economic, it was valued for its meat, its plumage and for providing *palomina*, a high-quality natural fertiliser. Documents dating from 1268 tell of a vast population of pigeons living in the ninety-seven towers of the city of Murcia and the surrounding countryside. The people of the city had taken the bird to their hearts and specially bred pigeons, often the descendants of those left behind when the Arabs were expelled or fled, were trained by professional *colombaires*.

The first pigeon sports club was started in Murcia in 1773, but it wasn't until more than two hundred years later, in 1994, that pigeon breeding was finally officially recognised as a national sport when the Federacion Espoñola de Columbicultura was set up.

In essence, the *Palomos Deportivos* consists of eighty garishly painted male pigeons chasing one female. This might seem like yet another example of male domination of the gentler sex, but, as followers of the sport hasten to point out, the female is highly trained, and always referred to as a 'professional' *paloma*. Her skill is to entice, hide, outmanoeuvre and out-fly all her pursuers except for the few she considers worthy of her courtship. The male, far from being just a gaudy bundle of lust out for a good time, has to show his prowess, not only to attract the female but also to attract points from the judges. He will pit himself physically and psychologically against his opponents. If he is intelligent he will distract his rivals by moving haphazardly or appearing to lag back so that he can suddenly swoop around to appear, as if from nowhere, at the side of the female. Sometimes he'll take part in the mid-air fights, which can result in the death of a weaker opponent. All the while, he performs an aerial ballet, trying to invite the adoration of the female.

For Pepe Cano, president of the Benidorm Association of Columbiculture, the skill of the pigeon is much like that of the footballer.

'They each have their different tricks and techniques when they are dealing with their opponents,' he says, 'and you can see the way some of the better ones, those who will go on to become champions, watch what the others are doing and adapt their game accordingly.'

Training begins when the pigeon reaches sexual maturity at three months. First he will fly individually with a female, learning to recognise the scent that will later be his sonar on his route to possible championship status. After a few flights, he is joined by other male trainees and begins to learn the courtship routines necessary for success in competitions to come. Eventually, the best of the flock are selected to take part in the first level of competitions, the *comarca*, which lead finally to the Spanish championships – at least for the best of them. 'It's like raising children.' says Pepe. 'You feed them and look after them, and as you watch them take their first flights you see which are the strongest, the ones which will be entered for competitions.'

The competition takes place around a tree - no particular tree, but preferably one with quite dense foliage where the female can hide when she needs a rest, although a particularly clever male can make extra points by finding her and settling down to a bit of private billing and cooing while his rivals tire themselves out flapping around elsewhere. It takes place over six consecutive days, and points are awarded for the time the male stays in the air with the female and for time spent in the courtship routine on the ground. Extra points can be gained for the elegance of his flight and courtliness of his attentions to the lady.

As the beginning of the competition approaches, a rocket is set off to alert the owners and trainers, who release their birds from gardens, patios and balconies all around the town. Slowly they congregate in their wheeling flight until the referee decides the moment has arrived to release the female. Instantly she is pursued by the gaudy conquistadores and for the next two and a half hours she will try to confuse them to avoid their amorous intentions.

As fatigue and hunger override lust, pigeons will begin to retire from the chase, until only a hardy few will be left at the end of the allotted time. Their individual points will be added to their running total for the six days and the winner will go on to the next stage of the competition. As might be expected, the winning male is applauded for his stamina while the female gets scant recognition of the fact that she has had to clock up an equal amount of air-time, without which there would be no competition in the first place. But there again – she is a professional!

There is no official record of when pigeons began to be painted, but with up to eighty birds in the air simultaneously the referees would be hard pushed to identify which one was closest to the female if the birds didn't wear their distinctive markings. Reds, blues, greens and yellows fill the sky in the '*torneo amoroso*', where the rapid dodging and weaving, unforeseen exits from the sanctuary of the tree, and mass close-up adoration make for a kaleidoscopic flurry of feathers.

Every club member has his own colour scheme but might have a number of birds wearing his house colours, each identifiable by an

individual mark. The referee needs a phenomenal memory and keen pair of eyes to keep track of the action, but most of them have been involved in the sport since childhood and will have attended one of the many courses to educate children in the care of their birds.

As in horse breeding, pigeons carry names that identify them with their lineage and are instantly recognised by aficionados. The parents of *Chulo de Abajo* (The Pimp from Downstairs) obviously sired a youngster with a temperament for waywardness, and the owner of *En el Nombre del Padre* would seem to be looking for a bit of divine intervention. *Ida y Vuelta* (Go and Come Back) at least seems to have a likelihood of returning to its home in Seville if it should go astray, and whilst *Violento*, *Rasputin* and *Renegado* might well be named to strike fear into the hearts of their opponents, *Desequilibrio* (Unbalanced), would suggest a bird with poor sense of direction or difficulty with getting into the air in the first place.

During the course of the competition, garbled voices crackling from walkie-talkies exchange information as to the whereabouts of pigeons that have wandered off from the main performance. With a national champion worth anything up to £60,000, security is high, and many pigeons will have chips implanted in their legs so that they can be located if they go astray. A club in Murcia bought a microlite aircraft to monitor birds during competitions, and Benidorm even went to the lengths of hiring a helicopter for the international championships held there in 1997.

'For me, the sport has everything.' comments Pepe, 'You train the birds and get excited when you see them doing well in a competition. During the competition itself, you have moments of intense activity but also of peacefulness. It's beautiful to see the whole brightly-coloured flock flying gracefully through the sky.'

A Trio of Weird Fiestas

Entierro de Sardina (Burial of the Sardine) - Cuevas del Almanzora, Almeria.

The Burial of the Sardine is the tongue-in-cheek parade that ends Carnaval in February. One story claims that the sardine is buried to bring luck to all of the fishermen who will be responsible for feeding everyone throughout the forty days of meatless lent. Madrid even has its 'Happy Brotherhood of the Burial of the Sardine', and in Cuevas del Almanzora in Almeria, for reasons unknown, the proceedings include a cleric wearing only a bishop's cape and mitre, carrying a hunk of lard shaped like a huge book whose centre pages are garnished with Spanish sausages. A

supporting cast of four widowers who carry the corpse of the sardine on their shoulders and a widow represented by a man, complete the ensemble.

El Salto del Colacho (Baby Jumping) – Castrillo de Murcia, Burgos

El Salto is one of the most bizarre of Spain's many bizarre fiestas. Since 1620, on the Sunday following Corpus Christi (the Thursday following Holy Trinity Sunday), men dressed as the Devil have jumped over babies who lie on mattresses in the street. The festival is said to purge the town of evil, and when the devil jumps over the babies, he takes all their evil with them, and the children are cleansed. The origins of the tradition are unknown but it is said to cleanse the babies of original sin, ensure them safe passage through life and guard against illness and evil spirits. It is seen as an honour for the participating babies.

In recent years the Vatican asked Spanish priests to distance themselves from El Colacho, and to downplay the tradition's connection with Catholicism, as the Church still teaches that it is baptism by water, not a giant leap by an airborne devil, which cleanses the soul. Even though there are no reported incidents of babies being crushed by devil's hooves, various sources rate it as one of the most dangerous in the world – for the babies, one presumes, not the devil.

Arrastre los Cacharros (Running with pots and pans) – Tenerife

Pamplona may have its running of the bulls, but Puerto de la Cruz has its own version. On 29 November, the eve of the Fiesta de San Andrés, small children run through the streets dragging cans tied to a piece of string, making as much noise as they can. As the evening wears on the pullers get bigger and the metal heavier and noisier; old microwaves, washing machine drums, exhaust pipes, with so much weight that it takes up to five in a team to pull them. A leader points out obstacles the team can hit to make the loudest noise possible. The fiesta ties in perfectly with local bodegas opening their doors to sample the new wines.

Before Your Very Eyes!

El Rey de la Magia, Barcelona

At number eleven Carrer de la Princesa, a narrow street off Barcelona's Via Laietana, one of the main roads leading from the port, a painted be-turbaned head glares out from the curve of a large blue question mark. Below it a glass display case holds playing cards, puzzles, wands and intricate explanations of the illusionist's art. This is *El Rey de la Magia*, founded in 1881, just before Gaudi began work on the Segrada Familia, and the oldest magic shop in Spain.

At the time, Joaquin Portagas owned a *drogueria*, a pharmacy, but was intrigued with the world of illusion. After a trip to South America where he learned some new tricks and techniques, he decided to take a full-time step into the magic world and opened El Rey de la Magia, a brave step at a time when the illusionist's art was understood and practiced by only a few. At that time magic was mainly performed on street corners, in markets and bars – it wouldn't become really popular until the 1930's, when it finally entered the theatres and became a major hobby. In 1933, at a time when magic was seen by many as part of the arts, the first magic group in Spain was started in Barcelona, the *Asociación Catalana Illusionistas*, in Quatro Gats, the same café where Picasso, Joan Miró and other artists, writers and poets would meet.

At fifteen years old, José Maria Martinez had his first taste of magic, and from then on he became a regular visitor to El Rey de la Magia, learning – literally – the tricks of the trade. When the owner, Carlos Bucheli, a well-known magician who worked under the stage name Carlston, decided to retire in 1984, Jóse Maria bought the shop and made his passion for magic his life. But the shop goes back over a hundred years before José Maria took up residence.

In the shop and the small museum of magic nearby, posters going back to the early years of the last century advertise the famous magicians of the day, a number of them dressed in flowing Chinese robes. Why the Chinese influence? "The bright costumes were seen as very exotic when they first appeared, and besides – there was plenty of space to hide things!" grins José Maria.

In 1940, David Tobias 'Theodore' Bamberg, an itinerant magician who traveled with his full evening magic show from early to mid-20th century, arrived in Barcelona. It was said that no other great illusionist could match Bamberg's skill. "Carlos Buchelli became a great friend of Fu Manchu and sold a lot of his illusions in the shop," continues José Maria, "but magic had begun to become popular almost a decade earlier."

By the time Jóse Maria took over the shop the magic business had been in decline for a number of years – there was even talk of converting the property into a bar. At that time he and his wife, Rosa Maria Llop, were professional actors who included magic in their specially produced performances, something they still do today. A lull during the 1990s was a struggle to get through, but they kept going, with the aid of New Yorker, Jack Silver, another magician who has spent many years in Spain.

"Magic is now a very popular hobby again," says Jack, "and even though most people quite like the very grand David Copperfield-type illusions, it's still the close-up, more intimate stage performances that people really prefer." And you don't get much more close-up and intimate than the performances held at their tiny theatre, where toddlers to granddads goggle in awe at the 'magical' Sunday shows.

The theatre is part of a museum of historic magic props (where you can see Rosa's grinning head mysteriously suspended in a glass case), but in the workshop below, Jóse Maria works devising new tricks for customers world-wide, although Jack likes to point out that in the world of magic nothing really changes.

"Basically magic is defined by a few rules – levitation, changing colour, shape or place, and breaking something apart and putting it together again. Even if you're chopping someone's head off you still have to put it back again or where's the magic? There isn't - it's then known as murder!"

Technology plays a part, but whilst the equipment used might be complex and very carefully designed, magic comes down to one major thing.

"The most important thing in magic is creating the truth of something that doesn't exist," says Jóse Maria. "That comes down to technique, you need to focus the public's attention where you want it. One of the most difficult illusions to do is levitation because it needs about four minutes to set up, in full public view, and four minutes is a very long time for a magician to stand on stage and do nothing."

Map: El Rey de la Magia

Where the Streets Run Blood Red

Buñol, Valencia

An aficionado of twisting alleyways and cobbled streets will be in their element in the meandering thoroughfares around the church and castle of Buñol, a small mountain town in the province of Valencia, where the medieval square is still in much of its original condition. The town may have centuries of history, but these days, Buñol is most famous for its annual tomato battle, the Tomatina which, in a country known for weird fiestas, must be one of the weirdest.

The narrow streets run deep red in the blistering mid-day sun as forty thousand sweat-soaked, semi-naked combatants fight hand-to-hand or hurl their missiles into the surging, rosé stained crowd. From the first gun, battlers from Argentina, Italy, Japan, Germany and all points of the globe (particularly favoured by Australians, Japanese and Koreans than other nationalities) will join with those from the four corners of Spain in sixty minutes worth of frantic warfare, which will result in no more serious injury than the occasional bruised ego. It's not blood that flows, it's the sodden pulp of tomatoes – 120,000 kilos of them.

At least the town doesn't try to claim that the slinging of over-ripe fruit has any deeply hidden religious significance, but is the result, as

one of the many stories of its origin goes, of an early form of karaoke. In the nineteen forties, a resident of the town, slightly worse for wear thanks to a few too many glasses of morning wine, was wandering across the square in front of the town hall on market day, singing – badly – 'Amada Mio' from the Rita Hayworth film, 'Gilda', using a funnel as a megaphone. Shoppers and stall-holders alike objected to his raucous rendition and began to pelt him with fruit, and as some of it missed the intended target and hit other promenaders, a salad battle soon filled the square. The following year a local civic dignitary was in the wrong place at the wrong time and found himself the centre of unwanted attention as youths gathered in the square (this time with their own tomatoes) to celebrate what was already becoming known as 'the day of the tomato'. Through bannings, prison sentences, public uprisings and even a parade for the 'funeral of the tomato', when a giant fruit was paraded through the town as a demonstration against yet another clampdown on their bizarre celebration, the people of Buñol fought to keep their annual mush fest.

On the dot of eleven on the last Wednesday in August, a single shot gives the signal for the gang of men roped to the insides of five enormous wagons full of ripe tomatoes from Extremadura to heave their rapidly decaying cargoes onto the eager crowd cramming the Plaza del Pueblo, the main square of Buñol. The orgy of squashing and slinging begins as an avalanche of tomatoes are gathered up and hurled around the square. For an hour the crowd, dressed in the robes of Buddhist monks, wearing huge Mexican sombreros, luminous waistcoats, and any other outrageous outfit it deems suitable for the occasion, slithers in the bright red slush until on the last chime of twelve a second shot is fired and the exhausted throwers sink wearily into the puree.

They don't get long to settle though, before a swarm of town hall staff, volunteers and neighbours swoop down on them with hose-pipes, buckets and brooms. While the worn-out revellers drag themselves to the showers in the Municipal swimming pool, the Plaza del Pueblo is scrubbed spotless in less than an hour. Picture a strip of tomato burnt onto the edge of a pizza, and then imagine what a hundred and forty tons of the stuff would do if left to dry in the scorching August sun.

It Wouldn't Be Christmas Without a Belen
Bocairent, Valencia

On a metal shelf in the corner of a workshop in Bocairent, a village high up in the Mariola region of the Costa Blanca, once famous worldwide for its beautiful woollen blankets, is a gilded picture frame,

measuring about 50cm by 30cm. The frame surrounds a 3D model of a belén, a nativity scene found throughout Spain as anything from a single crib to a monumental Christmas story. The scene is a simple one; Mary, Joseph, a couple of animals and a shed, set against a painted backdrop of the Mariola. As you would expect, there's Jesus on his mum's knee, but whereas you would usually see the child coddled and cuddled by Mary, in this image he's getting a sponge bath, with a towel wrapped around his naughty bits for decency's sake. A perfect example of the tongue-in-cheek wit that José Molina has brought to his models over a sixty-five year span, since he built his first at the age of nine.

Arrayed on shelves around the workshop are the most unlikely of belénes; a mini-version in a clay water jug; in the bowl of a ceiling light (which his wife, Concha, hangs in their home over Christmas); one that shows four different scenes from the nativity story as it slowly revolves, driven by a tiny motor, and (my favourite) the stable set in an 80's portable TV – turn the volume knob and the light changes from bright daylight to star spangled night.

"When I made my first model it was in 1949, and there wasn't much money about so I had to make all the figures myself. It was my hobby, but as well as making belenés I've made models of the village and pueblo life – although I've no idea how many."

Because he didn't just stick to traditional themes and material, José Molino's models follow not only the history of Bocairent but the changing history of household products – the ceiling lamp, portable TV and others. His *pièce de résistance*, though, is a grand automated and illuminated model of the pueblo as seen from the main road.

"I wanted to illustrate the four main elements that kept the village alive; bread, wine, olive oil and the water that powered the factories that brought income to Bocairent." Miniature men pop up and down as they stomp the grapes; two donkeys walk in a never-ending circle pulling heavily-loaded sleds to thresh corn; a conical millstone crushes the olives for oil, and thrashing water-driven belts drive the machines that kept the village going. And above it all the bell of the village church, the Iglesia Verge de l'Assumpció, perched at the top of the village, continues its pendulous toll.

The origin of the belén dates from 1223 when Francis of Assisi arrived at Greccio in Italy on an evangelising mission, sixteen years after Pope Innocent III had prohibited representations of the sacred family. While walking in the surrounding forests of his rustic dwelling he discovered a grotto that he thought would make an ideal place to create a 'living birth', so he asked a friend to recreate that night in Bethlehem when the Infant Jesus was born. His friend agreed to do so and set up the first nativity scene, using live animals and people. On Christmas Eve, St. Francis, carrying a lighted torch, led his followers and all the

townspeople to the woods where the nativity scene was located and celebrated Mass. As Mass was said, there, before the eyes of all to see, was a stable, animals and a manger. It was said on that night Francis' message was so powerful that when the people looked into the empty manger, they saw the Christ Child.

The evening proved to be highly successful, leading to nativity scenes being set up in churches, where people brought gifts to the Holy Infant. The Franciscans, following the example of their founder, became the pioneers of the 'Bethlehem' in the churches and convents that opened throughout Europe. Because of this, San Francisco is considered the universal patron of the belén.

The first Bethlehem is thought to have been made by the architect Arnoldo di Cambio, in 1289, a crib designed for Florence's cathedral, which is now preserved in part of the Basílica of Santa María La Mayor in Rome. During the 14th and 15th centuries, nativity figures began to be built inside Italian churches. During the Baroque period scenery was added to the sculptures. Many of the finest historical examples of belénes are held in museums, ecclesiastical institutions, private collections, and foundations and are often crafted in extremely valuable materials such as gold, silver, pearls, ivory, and coral.

The belén industry is now world-wide. With it comes changing styles to suit personal tastes. Francesco Esposito, a Neapolitan and one of the world's leading craftsmen in miniature shepherds, said he had received a confidential e-mail from a big-wig in Hollywood saying he'd pay anything for a model of George Lucas, director of Star Wars fame, transformed into a proud miniature shepherd warrior with a shield. Sr. Esposito can also supply you with upscale manger accoutrements, including tiny silver swords, miniature golden pouches and hand sewn leather shoes for the figure of Virgin Mary. And if you want to update your figures you can even choose from a large selection of limbs and terra-cotta heads.

Elsewhere in Italy, children clamour for the latest trend - a belén made purely of pasta. Using spinach noodles, squid ink rigatoni, and red pepper fusilli, a craftsman who gave his name only as Giuseppe said working with his preferred medium of pasta was akin to Michelangelo expressing the divine inspiration through stone. "I prefer pasta, the texture, the colours and shapes," he said, as he nestled the baby Jesus snugly onto a bed of spaghetti.

Thankfully, the Spanish don't appear as yet to have used their national dish of paella to create nativity scenes – but it can only be a matter of time!

Amusing Muses
Private museums

It probably never crosses your mind when you enter the British Museum, the Tate, or some other space dedicated to the weird and, sometimes, wonderful, but if it wasn't for the obsession of the odd curious individual (who would, more likely, refer to it as a 'passion'), most of the world's museums wouldn't exist. We like to think that we British have the handle on eccentricity, and it's fair to admit that we are inclined to have our fair share of those who might well otherwise be known as 'nutters', but the Spanish have produced a fair few whose singlemindedness has created a little bit of collectible nonsense they can call their own.

It's A Small World

Museum of Miniatures, Valencia City

One of the first things that many doting fathers do when their son reaches the age of three or so, is to buy him a Scalextric motorcar racing set, not because son understands much of what's going on, but because dad uses it as an excuse to revert to childhood and back to playing with toys. Probably in much the same way, Álvaro Noguera's father bought him a beautiful set of toy soldiers for his third birthday in 1941, but whereas the Scalextric usually ends up in the back of a cupboard with wheels missing, that set of soldiers was the acorn that became the oak tree of the largest collection of miniatures in the world, with over a million pieces.

Sitting in the office of Alejandro Noguerra, Álvaro's son and director of *L'Iber, Museo de los Soldaditos de Plomo*, a toy soldier museum housed in a glorious Gothic-style palace in Valencia's Calle Caballeros, is like being a little boy on Christmas Day before he's allowed to go downstairs and see what Santa has brought. Through the door beside his office is the biggest toy box in the world, and I'm itching to get at it.

Hardly able to keep myself still, Alejandro takes me into the museum, where I salivate at a boyhood's unrequited dream. In nine rooms over 60,000 pieces are on display; lining shelves, in individual dioramas and in large table-top depictions of actual historic scenes. The largest is the *Battle of Almansa*, where almost 10,000 pieces have been used to re-enact, in finger-size scale, the battle that took place on April 25th, 1707; a defining point in European history, where a Bourbon King took the Crown of Spain, ending centuries of rule by the Roman-Germanic Empire.

Moving around the museum is incredible; scene after scene of historic re-enactments that bring the dry pages of history books to vivid, Technicolor life – everything from the Rape of the Sabine women, Hannibal's elephantine march, Neolithic man hunting, a Roman bacchanalia, to twenties shopping in *gay Paree*, Victorian seaside promenading – complete with braying donkey – a barber with a well-lathered customer about to have a shave, and a hundred-and-one other different vistas besides.

The attention to detail is awesome, but hardly surprising, given that Alejandro is a professional historian and archaeologist. When you see hieroglyphics written in the Egyptian scenes you can be absolutely sure that they would have been correct at the time the scene took place in reality, partly because of the extensive research done at such historic sites as Luxor, but also because Alejandro spent three years studying the ancient writing system.

"I was walking past a diorama of the Roman Emperor Tiberius a few weeks ago and saw some Afghan hounds. I wasn't sure that was correct, but when I checked, it turned out that Alexander the Great had brought some to Rome after his invasion in 330BC." All that research just for two dogs!

The origin of toy soldiers is the flat, one-dimensional figures produced in Bavaria and Austria, used mainly for decoration and hanging on Christmas trees, but it was the French manufacturers Lucotte and CBJ Mignot who created the true 3D models we recognise today. It was the soldiers produced by Lucotte that are said to have been the origin of the miniatures being used as toys by small boys, when Napoleon Bonaparte, who used Lucottes soldiers to place on maps when planning his campaigns, gave some to his son. Courtiers being courtiers, they copied the boss, and soon all the Court's kids had their own little armies.

The French may have begun the trend, but as far as Alejandro is concerned, it's the British who are the masters of the craft of sculpting miniatures. He shows me a tiny Egyptian chariot pulled by two black horses, with an archer with bow drawn, by the English maker, Andrew Rose. "He was the best sculptor of soldiers ever. He had a complete affinity with the work and his models are so refined that you can almost see the movement in the figures." Even for someone who used to use his soldiers more for gory battles than historic interest, I can still appreciate the superb workmanship of the Rose chariot. Greenwood and Ball – the Da Vinci's of solder painters – also rate highly with Alejandro and he shows me three figures, a guardsman and two Indian Army officers, painted in extraordinarily fine detail.

Before I can get myself lost in the dusty boxes and start playing soldiers and castles, Alejandro takes me off to the *Vida Cotidiana* room,

with its displays of daily life – or at least daily life as seen through the eyes of Alexi Poliakoff, grandson of the famous artist. The figures are stunning – tiny slim, elegantly fashionable ladies that form part of a series styled on the top Parisian fashion houses; grocer, fruit seller with his barrow, pharmacy, book shop, beach photographer and languid lady sitting on a rock with her parasol – all displayed in their original box with a painted backdrop. Art in their own right.

As I leave, I linger over the Battle of Almansa, wondering what it would be like if I could just fire a cannon into that lot over there in the blue jackets and see them scatter all over the place, or maybe have a cavalry charge at those blokes in the black tricorn hats, or even…….

Map: L'Iber, Museo de los Soldaditos de Plomo

Glorifying the Gozunda

Cuidad Rodrigo, Salamanca

Not everyone may have been able to rest their buttocks on a receptacle padded with velvet and studded with gold nails as Henry VIII did (at a cost of £80 – a royal fortune in those days), but everyone – counts and marquises, popes and bishops, saints and sinners - would have used a potty, jerry, or, as it is known in Spain, an *orinal*.

Despite the fact that it is recorded that in 2500 BC the Harappa civilisation in India, at a place called Lothal, had water-borne toilets in each house which were linked with drains covered with burnt clay bricks, very few scholars documented precisely the toilet habits of our predecessors, so a pottied history of the subject is hard to discover. The Nobel Prize winner for Medicine (1913), Charles Richet, attributes this silence to the disgust that arises from noxiousness and the lack of usefulness of human waste - although not as far as the Romans' were concerned it wasn't.

By 315 AD, Rome had 144 public toilets. Unlike with later civilisations, where bodily actions such as eating, dancing, or walking, were thought of as healthy and acceptable, and defecation considered very lowly, the Romans treated going to the toilet as a social event, a place to meet friends and catch up on the news, where they wiped themselves with a piece of sponge fixed to a short wooden handle, which was then rinsed in a water channel that ran in front of the toilet and reused. (It's said that this practise gave birth to the phrase, 'getting hold of the wrong end of the stick'.) If possible they would keep their evacuations separate, as urine was regarded as the bees knees for keeping all those patrician togas sparkling white

But even long after the invention of the flush toilet, a receptacle was often used to gather the most intimate of bodily functions. The Greeks

referred to it as a 'friend'; Juvenal and Petronio wrote of them, and in the first century A.D., Saint Clement harangued against those that used the 'refined' version made of silver, (although it would appear that Queen Victoria ignored him as she had one made from the very same material). The Roman Emperor Heliogábalo went one step further and lined his golden bowl with freshly cut flowers.

Whereas the British have 'chamber pot' or 'bedpan' to describe this highly personal piece of equipment (the colloquial 'potty', 'jerry' or 'gozunda' slightly extending the vocabulary), the Spanish have no less than 13 names for each different type of waste product recipient; fifteen if you count the Cuban *tibor* or Aragónese *tiorba. Chata, galanga,* the terrifyingly named *tigre* (tiger), and the elegantly titled *dompedro* (which seems to have taken its name from its usage by some quality gent), each describes the different use to which it was put, or as the Spanish delicately refer it *'el abandono de caulquier otra suerte de humores excrementicios'* ('getting rid of any other kind of excremental waste').

In 1994 when José Maria del Arco's collection reached 600 hundred *orinales* hanging from the beams of his basement den, he decided to remove them for fear that they would bring his home tumbling down around his ears. (Or to be more truthful, his wife decided for him in the time old, "It's either them or me!") He didn't stop collecting though, and now, with 1009 of them, he is thought to have the largest collection in the world.

"My first jerries came when a friend from my home town of Ciudad Rodrigo in Salamanca was knocking down an old hospital in 1980. He found a box containing some old military uniforms and potties from the War of Independence. He asked me if I wanted them, knowing that I was an inveterate collector, so I said, "Yes." "

Having the odd potty around the place was part of the eighties kitschy culture – they made fancy flowerpots – but by 1996 José Maria had 700 hundred of them from 29 different countries, including Mexico, Hong Kong, China, the UK and Argentina. Every one different, made from tin, wood, brass, ceramic, porcelain, earthenware, glass and gold.

"Most of my collection came from friends," says José Maria, (well, you wouldn't expect a Potty Swaps Club back then, would you?), "But after my first small exhibition in Málaga in 1996, which appeared on television and radio, the national newspaper ABC did a feature on me and my collection, and I had potties sent from all over the world." People were so intrigued with the idea of a collection of jerries that over 20,000 visitors passed through the doors of a 16th Century palace in Salamanca when his collection was exhibited there.

A saunter around José Maria's collection (no longer hanging on his basement ceiling), is a drift through the lowly levels of history. "What people forget is that these pieces were fundamental furniture in almost

every house for thousands of years, and are as much a part of our cultural history as any ornate archaeological artefact." And not only for the use to which it was put but also as part of social ritual, as with the example of a French chamber pot inscribed '*Vive la Marie*' (Long live our marriage). As late as 1930s France, the bride and groom would be given a potty on their wedding night from which they would drink champagne – probably for the first and last time!

The collection comes in all shapes and sizes, from one the size of a chickpea (not for functional use, of course) to a ceramic monster forty-five centimetres high. "Spanish jerries tend to be of thicker material and be much courser than the English variety, more like cooking pots. They are usually wider at the top than the English designs, which are more feminine and elegant."

The early British travellers brought their own equipment on visits to the Iberian Peninsular. "A potty was a very personal item," explains José Maria, "And would only usually be used by one person. When they travelled they used models encased in wood or tooled leather." And when in the comfort of their own home they would use the *dompedro*, or 'commode' as it was known in Britain, a potty hidden in a piece of furniture, often cunningly disguised as a chair or footstool. If the potty was made of rough material, comfort would be enhanced by covering the seating area with velvet or by using cushions. And this in a time before washing machines!

"The English potties were the best in the world," enthuses José Maria, "Very fine quality ceramics, particularly in Victorian times." The English chamberpot became the toast of Spain when a Victorian industrialist by the name of Pickman started a ceramics factory called La Cartuja in 1835. His factory made the plates for the wedding of the Infanta, the King's daughter, but it isn't recorded as to whether he also supplied their Highnesses with their 'gozunda's', (as in, 'goes under').

The English enhanced this 'culturally significant artefact' (although they probably didn't think of it as such in those days) with ornate decoration, fancy handles and gold paintwork on the rim. José Maria lovingly handles a twelve-sided little number; extols the beautiful decoration of another featuring a hand-painted design of mountains, water, boats and windmills working its way around the pot from one side of the handle to the other; and positively drools over a pale blue '*modelo Ingles*' from the 1860 '*nouveau*' period, painted in green with flowers and scroll-work in relief – which it probably provided a great deal of in its working life).

'Cultural significance' also accounted, it is said, for the wide-brimmed Spanish sombrero, as protection from the 'night-soil' hurled out of a bedroom window into the street below, although the more pedantic might claim that it was simply as protection from the sun.

José Maria's collection encompasses the intimate oddities of hospital life, with unusual-looking objects that would allow patients to complete their personal movements with a modicum of privacy. The *galanga* for example, a bottle-like affair with an open lip for the ladies, or the Boot's slipper bedpan for ladies and gentlemen, that looks like a baby bird with its mouth open waiting to be fed. He also has some fine examples of *escupidera's,* spittoons to the British, which, despite their usage being even more ill-regarded than the jerry, were equally as ornately decorated.

The collection travelled throughout Spain, displayed in *castillos*, *palacios*, ancient halls and 'culturally significant venues' in keeping with these 'culturally significant artefacts', before finding a permanent home in Ciudad Rodrigo, José Maria del Arco's home town.

But with the continual packing and unpacking of his collection now finished, has it finally reached an end? "There is no such word as 'end' for a collector," he grins. "There's always one more."

Map: Museo del Orinal

Putting Your Best Foot Forward

Museo de Calzados, Elda

Does it say something about our Victorian forefathers (and, to a degree, our Victorian foremothers) that the only examples of fetish footwear on display at the Museo del Calzado, the Shoe Museum in Elda,are English – and the crippling lace-up boots with their excruciating curved heel *definitely* weren't designed for walking in!

Almost no other functional item has had such lavish attention paid to it over the millennia than the shoe. Frocks have got fancier, coats got comfier and the invention of the zip played merry havoc with the button trade, but the shoe, almost from the time it was little more than a bit of leather with a couple of thongs, has separated the high from the low, the rich from the poor and the elegant from the ignorant. You can just imagine Mrs Cavewoman sewing a brontosaurus toenail onto the front of her sandal just to be that bit more *a la mode*.

And talking of high and low, Elton John, before he became 'Sir', might have thought he was the bees-knees, cautiously strutting his stuff on stage in a gaudy pair of platforms a yard high, but he was *waaaayyy* behind the times. The Venetians were doing it centuries ago, in embroidered beauties, complete with 'buttons and bows', to keep their dainty tootsies out of the water when the Lagoon flooded its banks and to be one step up for *Carnival.* (Sir Elton does sho(e)w his face at the museum, though, in a display case where old boots are painted with the faces of celebrities – perhaps a case of art following reality.)

The museum is the brainchild of one José Maria Amart, one-time professor at a local college, now director of the only museum of its kind in Spain and only a handful in the world. As a former engineer in the shoe industry (Elda is the major producer of high-quality shoes in Spain), José Maria had built his own collection of weird and wonderful machinery used in shoe making over the centuries. It turns out that a couple of his fellow professors had the same, somewhat obscure, interest and had quietly been building their own collections. You can imagine the conversation over a coffee and cigarette in the staff-room one day…. "Look, what do you think would happen if we pooled our collections and……." The 'and' became the *Museo del Calzado*.

But how do you go about filling a museum when there's never been a museum of its kind before? "We just asked," says José Maria, with the sort of look that says, "Well what else would you do?" And they must have asked an awful lot because there are over 5,000 shoes on display – and six times as many in storage! Just think of the amount of space he must have cleared in other museums who had no idea what to do with the hundreds of pairs of cast-off footwear that didn't fit into their display criteria.

Using the 'clouds and silver linings' adage, the museum acquired an unusual collection of 18th-century footwear stored at an un-named English museum that had been deposited there after a cemetery had collapsed into the Thames. Apparently a soggy grave is a good place to conserve leather because it likes to be kept damp.

"We have shoes from every age, culture and tradition," continues José Maria, "but we wanted to create a section that people could relate to so we asked famous people to let us have a pair of their shoes." Famous in Spain is not famous world-wide, but they do have a pair each from ex-King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia. Nothing fancy actually, but they keep the Spanish punters intrigued in a sort of, "I had a pair like that but the soles went," sort of way.

In the same cabinet are copies of the most expensive pair of shoes in the world, a chi-chi pair of diamante sling-backs with a tantalisingly dangling pendant designed by Stuart Weitzman and worn to the Oscar's by Mexican actress and ex-Miss USA, Laura Elena Harring, more formally known as Countess von Bismarck-Schönhausen (although you might well ask, who?). Only someone like Mohamed Al Fayed, once the owner of Harrods, could possibly think of owning the originals, a snip at over half a million pounds each one, but even the copies still set the museum back a whacking €40,000.

When you walk into the museum almost the first thing you see is a Gulliver in the land of Lilliput-size gents maroon leather number, alongside which is its award from the Guinness Book of Records for being the biggest shoe in the world. Real leather it is, and so elegant that if you

bunged an engine in and gave it a set of wheels you'd have a pretty nifty little sports car, fit to turn the eye of any gold-dangling Marbella bit of totty.

The first floor deals with the archaic equipment used to make shoes in the 19th-century. The gilded insignia of the Singer Sewing Machine Company is there, as it was in every corner of the globe where something had to be stitched – and probably still is. Ancient – and terrifyingly dangerous-looking – belt-driven machines used to make lasts are much in evidence, along with the tumbrels of wood to supply them. (If you'd care to see the lasts used for the shoes of Queen Elizabeth and Lady Diana, they are in the case upstairs, alongside the shoes of the Spanish monarchy.) This floor is like having a meal as a child – you have to eat all your greens before you can get to the pud, because upstairs is what you've really come to see.

If you are a shoeaholic (or leather fetishist) the entrance to the upper floors should have a health warning displayed – 'Do not enter on the grounds that you may destroy the carpet by salivating over it within five minutes. (It's parquet, actually, but you get the drift.) Case after case of shoes, boots, clogs, heels, sandals, trainers, high heels, low heels, cultural, sexual, staid, erotic, functional, 'oh God, if only!', hand-made, miniature, gigantic, historical, modern, 'not possible!', rainbow and monotone, watered silk and plastic, "I'll have three pairs but can you make the heels a couple of inches higher – with spikes?". But while the deviants dribble over metal clasps and ever-so-tight lace ups, there is actually a serious side to the museum.

"The shoe trade has suffered a tremendous amount over the last few years because of competition from the far east," says José Maria, "but one of the most important aspects of the shoe museum, and one that not many people know about, are our training courses.'

For thirteen weeks each year a group of no more than fifteen hand-picked trainees are given intensive tuition in shoe-making. "Spain has always been the country with the best shoe designers in the world. When the upper crust go shopping for shoes they say "I'm going to buy some new Manolos," meaning they are going to buy shoes by Manolo Blahnik, the world's top shoe designer, and Spanish. That's not what we are about, but it would be wonderful if one of out students could be the new MB!"

What they, or at least the course, is about is specialism. "People come here to see the shoes, that's obvious. They want to imagine themselves wearing the gorgeous high-heels to some elegant dinner or have a collection of the beautiful miniatures that the top designers often make to see how their designs look. But as you walk around the museum you will also see the lasts of some very special designers, those whose names will never be known but whose work will give more pleasure to one person that a hundred copies of the Stuart Weitzman sexy sandals."

José Maria is referring to the wooden lasts created for the feet of disabled people, of which a small display forms an important part of the exhibition. “These days, just because your feet are malformed doesn’t mean that you have to wear the ugly black boots with fat platforms that your parents did. Now you can wear beautiful shoes that suit your style and personality, just like everyone else.”

Elton John’s booty face; high fashion snake skins; the belted, booted and bewildered, Elda’s shoe museum has it all – and it’s pretty sure you won’t find them in a high street branch of Clarks!

Map: Museo del Calzado

Pick a Card, Any Card

Museo del Naipe, Oropesa del Mar

Juan Carlos Ruiz could be described as one such eccentric, and never have I heard someone wax so lyrical about the humble playing card – or not so humble, as some of the stars of his eight thousand plus collection show. Such is his enthusiasm that he has converted the ground and first floor of his house in the old town of Oropesa, on the Costa Azahar, into the only private *museo de naipes* in the world – mind you, there are only eight in total, one in Cuba, for some obscure reason.

As a mere strip of a lad of fifteen, Juan Carlos began work with Heraclio Fournier, a playing card manufacturer in Vitoria in the north of Spain and for the next forty years assembled his collection, including some totally unique examples from around the world. Five years ago he took early retirement, moved to the Med, and set up his museum.

Here’s a man quite wondrously obsessed with his hobby and, like any collector, can’t wait to show me his latest ‘find’, a still sealed, boxed presentation pack from 1949 celebrating the centenary of Harrods.

“This is a real joy, and very rare, because it hasn’t been opened and the cards still have the British government wrapper on them saying that if they aren’t cancelled in writing the owner can be fined £5. How much is £5?” Not much now, but about half a working man’s wage back then.

The Chinese are thought to have invented playing cards, based on the fact that they invented paper. The first record of the word *naipe* (playing card) being used is in a poem by the Catalan Jaume March, in 1371, and a document of six years later, in a typically miserable bit of Barcelona bureaucracy, prohibits all card games in the streets. Prior to that only the nobility could have a bit of a flutter, because every card was made and painted by hand and cost a fortune. Gradually, by way of stencil, and wood and stone printing blocks, *naipe* became more available to the man-in-the-street – as long as it wasn’t the streets of Barcelona!

From the thumbnail-sized smallest pack in the world, which measures a mere one centimetre, to the Guinness Book of Records monster that weighs in at 14 kilo and stands a metre high, Juan Carlos has everything conceivable in-between; round, square, mini, teardrop, curiously elongated Chinese versions with sensuously executed caligraphy, the oldest pack in the world in private hands (1748), triangles, all the favourites of Happy Families including Mr Bun the Baker and his daughter Miss Bun-in't-th'oven (vary rare indeed, that last one), and a real tongue-in-cheek pack called Stars Behind Bars, which show the mug shots of such celebs as Steve McQueen when he was done for drunk driving, Michael Jackson for being rather too close to little boys, Hugh Grant for trying to get a lot closer to grown-up ladies, and Frank Sinatra for being nicked in 1938 for carrying on with a married woman. It's practically what he was paid for in later life.

The use of cards in magic came in around the beginning of the 19th century, for the simple fact that they were easily transportable; three decorated bits of paper and you had a show. Juan Carlos explains this to me as he does a quick three card trick using Mr Plod the Policeman, a three of hearts and an ace of *picos*, the replacement for spades in an English deck. I know he's just using his fingers to slide the cards about, but it still flummoxes me how Mr Plod gets from the bottom to the middle when I never took my eyes of his copper's helmet.

Strolling around the *Museo del Naipe*, you can't help but agree with Juan Carlos that many of the cards on display are miniature works of art, but some fulfilled a more dramatic role than simply having a quick game of poker.

On one wall hangs a framed set of the backs of a Bicycle pack, so called because of the image of an angel riding a bike, and used by magicians worldwide. Turn the frame over and you will see a detailed map. These would form a pack where the map was sandwiched between the back and the numbered face of the card, and carried by those parachuted behind the enemy lines. By peeling off the face and laying the cards side-by-side and end-to-end, a map of the area would be created for use in undercover operations or – in the direst of cases – when attempting to escape.

Juan Carlos tells me that journalists always ask which is the most valuable pack in his collection, and his reply is truly that of the devotee. "It isn't the financial value that's most important, it's how special it is to me, and usually it's the one I've just bought."

Map: Museo del Naipe

Worth Its Salt,
Salt and Pepper Shaker Museum, Guadalest, Valencia

The next time you knock over a salt cellar and throw a pinch of the salt that spills over your left shoulder to ward off bad luck, bear in mind that those few white grains would at one time have formed part of someone's wages. And besides, that thing with the holes in the top is called a salt shaker, not a salt cellar.

It's amazing the things you learn when you least expect it. I'm getting an in-depth lecture about the world of salt, salt and pepper shakers, and salt cellars from Andrea Ludden and her son Alex, at their delightfully idiosyncratic Salt and Pepper Shaker Museum in Guadalest. And jolly interesting it is.

"Salt is much more important in our lives and history than most people think," says Alex. "The word *salarium*, salary, comes from the fact that Roman soldiers were paid part of their income in salt. It's also thought that the word 'soldier' itself comes from the Latin *sal dare*, to give salt. If you look at common phrases such as 'the salt of the earth', 'he's not worth his salt', 'below the salt', etc. you can get an idea of how important salt was." And it still is, because without salt in our diet we couldn't survive.

Far from being just a wacky Belgian lady with a fetish for salt shakers, Andrea's collection began from a totally different direction than something simply to display on the shelves in her kitchen. As an archaeologist, she had spent many years working in South America, where her main interest had been in how people travelled and communicated.

"The salt trade was of major importance, not only because of its commercial value but also because it allowed foods to be preserved, letting people travel much greater distances than they could without having preserved foods, never knowing what fresh foods would be available," Andrea tells me. "But pepper was also important, and records show that when the Gauls invade Rome they demanded twenty thousand pounds of pepper as part of the ransom."

As we wander around the museum I find it hard to believe that the twenty-thousand pair display of fat chefs, ruby red tomatoes, guardsmen in bearskins, The Beatles, Santa's feet sticking out of a chimney, pistols and potatoes, a copy of the salt and pepper shaker cufflinks that Lady Diana wore, (which, fortunately, are sealed, or their contents would have sprayed everywhere when she shook hands), have any other reason for coming together than simply being someone's idea of being collectable – but they do.

"When we moved to the States there was no work in archaeology so I began to look at social anthropology," continues Andrea. It's often by

looking at the apparently more mundane articles in everyday life that you can build up a broad picture of a specific period. And that's what Andrea began to do.

"There's almost nothing you can imagine that hasn't been copied as a salt and pepper shaker, and many of them reflect the designs, the colours, the preoccupations of the period. For example, a cooker from the 1940s will look totally different from the cookers of the 1990s, and it's through using these differences and the materials they were made of that we can get an idea of how people lived at any given time."

It wasn't until the 1920s, when Chicago-based Morton Salt added magnesium carbonate to their product, that it was possible to pour salt from a sealed container. From this moment the salt shaker was born. Prior to that, small bowls or containers, usually with a spoon, had been used at the table, (the original salt cellar), as salt has a tendency to attract moisture and become lumpy.

"Morton's development was the beginning of the salt shaker, but funnily enough, it was the automobile that led to them becoming collectable items," continues Alex. "It was because people could travel more freely, either for work or on vacation, that the souvenir industry came about. Salt and pepper shakers were cheap, easy to carry, and colourful, and made ideal gifts. Imagine you lived in an isolated village somewhere and your son or daughter brought you a set in the shape of the Golden Gate Bridge when they came on their annual visit home. It wouldn't get used, it would be carefully kept as a decorative item. That's how, in the main, many of the early collections began."

The hey-day of salt and pepper shaker production was between the 1920s and 60s, with those made from plastic in the 50s and 60s being of special interest to some people. "Plastic is breakable, so fewer of those examples exist, and there are specialist collectors that pay highly for models from that period." But the world of salt and pepper shakers and cellars knows no boundaries; from the Cellini *Saliera*, cast in solid gold (and sometimes referred to as the 'Mona Lisa of Sculpture'), insured for $60million, to the prosaic plastic red pepper, a steal at only 75 cents at the local cheap-o shop, there's something for everyone.

Andrea's collection of over forty thousand pairs, half in Guadalest and half in their museum in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, started by the simple purchase of a pepper mill at a garage sale, shortly after the family moved to the US – but it didn't work.

"That first one didn't work, so I bought a couple more. I used to stand them on the window ledge of my kitchen, and neighbours thought I was building a collection. Nothing could have been further from my mind! They began to bring me some beautiful ones, and eventually, I had about 14,000 on shelves all over the house, even in the bedrooms. One day my

husband said, “Andrea, you either find somewhere to put these things or it’s a divorce!” So we decided to create a museum.”

Some of the best museums I’ve come across have come about because of someone’s wish to show their collection to the world; the unique Playing Card Museum in Oropesa, the Shoe Museum in Elda, the curious collection of potties in Cuidad Rodrigo. “I think a museum like ours is different from a big municipal institution because it deals with things on a very personal basis. Even though there are so many shakers, you begin to recognise ones your grandmother used to have, or you saw when you went on vacation somewhere, or you gave as a gift once. People come back over and over again and think that we are adding to the displays, but we aren’t, it’s just that they didn’t see them first time around.”

Displaying the almost endless selection of models in no mean feat, but Andrea has an excellent eye for how it should be done. “It’s almost impossible to categorise them, because you can work by style, age, subject matter, colour etc, but I try and do it to combine all these elements at the same time. I have a very visual memory, and I can walk into an antique shop or go to a garage sale and know instantly if I see one for sale that I have in the collection or not, even if it is just the salt or pepper shaker and not a pair.

And will the collection ever end? “Never! It’s the hunt I love, the hope that I’ll find something different, something special. And ‘special’ doesn’t necessarily mean the most ornate or the most expensive, it can be something quite simple that I fall in love with the moment I see it.”

So the next time you see a museum that’s full of the weird and wonderful, don’t immediately think, “What on earth is someone collecting this lot for?” because it might be yet another delve into social anthropology and not someone’s bizarre obsession – but there again, it just might!

Map: Museo de Saleros y Pimenteros (Museum of Salt and Pepper Shakers)

MOROCCO

Frightening Away Phantoms

Marrakech Medina

Seeing ghosts has never been a major preoccupation for me, but if ever I find myself frightened of phantoms I know exactly where to go – to the Spice Souk in Marrakech, where Ahmed will create a secret blend of

dried chameleon, iguana foot, sea urchin, hedgehog and fish bones. I'll grind them, throw them in fire and breathe in the cleansing fumes.

Dried chameleon and hedgehog may be some of the more obscure ingredients on offer at the Berber pharmacies, but for whatever ails you they will have something to swallow, breathe, rub on or wash in. Too much stress and not sleeping? An infusion of nutmeg flower. Trouble with migraine or sinus? A few tiny black *nejillia* seeds wrapped in a cloth and inhaled after a quick rub on your palm will blow your head off, make your eyes water and instantly clear your head. It's also great to stop snoring.

Ahmed spots a shaving cut on my face and gives me a piece of *alawn* stone to rub on to aid quick healing. With a sidelong glance he tells me that it also 'creates new virgins', a topic I prefer not to pursue. Continuing with the theme he suggests that should I ever need help in the 'men's department' he'll mix me a concoction of Moroccan ginseng tea with just a smidgen of Spanish fly, a tiny insect so toxic that they are sold in the most minuscule quantities imaginable, but even so, Ahmed assures me, "All the night gymnastic, by morning's man's dead."

A visit to a Berber pharmacy is as much ceremony as shopping. With a grin they will offer you a glass of 'Berber Whisky' – mint tea – while they discuss what ails you, let you sample a little of this, smell a *soupcon* of that, before mixing your potion, overcharging you and then try to sell you something else. But it's all part of the game.

When I first visited Ahmed almost ten years ago I bought three small blocks of concentrated ambergris, jasmine flower, and musk, which still perfume my home and never seem to fade or reduce in size. But after setting fire to a piece of gourd and inhaling the smoke to try and cure a headache, the stench was so bad that I decided that perhaps modern-day pharmacology does have something to offer – and swallowed a paracetamol instead.

The Gentle Art of Buying a Moroccan Carpet
Marrakech Medina

There seems to be two main ways people buy Moroccan carpets.

The first is to carefully mull. Will the colour clash with the furnishings in the living room? Will it get too much wear in the hall? Is that orangey one better value than the greeney one?

The second way it to simply have the smiling vendor throw half a dozen down on the floor, take off your shoes and squish your toes in the pile to see which feels good.

I like the second way.

And don't think the salesman is taking the mickey when he grins and says, 'You only pay for the front, the back is free,' because in the High Atlas Mountains, where some of the looser pile carpets come from, the shaggy side is for winter warmth while the smoother reverse is for summer wear. And speaking of wear, some rugs actually *are* worn as a winter wrap or used as bed covers. Welcome to the slightly unusual world of Moroccan carpets.

Every carpet tells a story – quite literally, although you may not be able to decipher its meaning. Each tribe has its own particular repertoire of imagery, which differs by village and region, but there is no such thing as a pattern or design. Every weave and weft is learned at the feet of a mother and grandmother - and a carpet weaver is always a woman.

The designs tell of the grand ceremonies and minor happenings of the village, but the essence of a carpet is the story of the weaver, the rhythm of her daily life. Her trials and tribulations, her small joys and larger happinesses are woven into her carpet, just as a painter puts his emotions on canvas by the subtlety of his brush.

Wander Marrakech's higgledy-piggledy souks and carpets will find you everywhere; piled, rolled, unfolded and folded, spread on floors or cascading from hooks and balconies, casually thrown or elegantly presented like a perfect pearl in a Bond Street jewellers. Technicolor existed in the shades and subtleties of colour in Moroccan carpets long before the idea hit the silver screen. Subtle or screamingly outrageous – they are all there.

But buying a carpet is a serious business, a special moment to be savoured, accompanied by mint tea sweetened with cardiac-arrest levels of sugar. It is expected that the buyer will haggle, think they have cut a fine deal, but the wise buyer keeps in mind the Moroccan saying, "You eat, I eat, we all eat," when negotiating.

'There is no need to rush, madam.' 'No hurry, no worry.' 'This price is special only to you so please don't tell your friends.' 'If only I could to give you a better price, sir, but anything less and my children won't eat today.' 'Do you have a credit card?'

A Tuk-tuk Too Far
Fez

I've always been beguiled by tuk-tuks, those strange little workhorses, half motor-bike, half mini-pic-up that in one form or another can be found almost anywhere in the world. These marvellous little beasties go by various names, trishaw, autorickshaw, autorick, *bajaj*, mototaxi, baby taxi, depending where you are, and as the names imply, are a motorized

version of the traditional pulled rickshaw or cycle rickshaw. But the tuk-tuks in Morocco are monsters in comparison to their Asian brethren, with big 'don't-mess-with-me' motorbike front ends that would sneer at the whimpish eastern model based on the design of the Vespa motor-scooter.

I struggle to photograph one that seems to be blossoming with plants as we drive into Fez, but the bumpy road jostles me around too much to get a decent shot. A small conifer, a young hydrangea, deep red and yellow marigolds, zinnias, if I'm not mistaken, which I probably am given that I can't get a good view as we're bouncing along; a bougainvillea climbing a cane, broad leaves and skinny leaves in various shades of green. Plant identification has never been my strong point, which probably accounts for the weird horticultural miss-match that I call my garden.

The basic tuk-tuk model is open to the elements, both the back-end and the driver, who can get pretty chilly with nothing to protect him against winter winds other than a thick *djellaba* and a woolly hat. These are used mainly for deliveries into the periphery of the Medina, creating a bit of competition for the muleteers, but getting their comeuppance with narrow alleyways and steep stepped inclines where the languidly plodding mules come into their own.

The more upmarket versions will have roll-up plastic sides and an awning to protect the driver from the worst of sun and rain, with some of them even having a full windshield to save streaming eyes from the chill-factor of driving into biting wind in the winter and burning dust in the summer. Invariably, when the rider has a crash-helmet it will be hung on a hook somewhere and not sat on his head as nature intended, while to guard against the constant thrub of the engine against a chap's private parts, and as minor solace to a bum pounded by bumpy roads, the rider will almost always be sat on a thick cushion or folded rug.

The fancier tuk-tuks have padded benches running the length of the trailer interior, and serve as competition to the *petit taxis* and *grande taxis* that hustle the streets for passengers. The petit taxis are supposedly for use within a city and the grande taxis for longer distances, with the tuk-tuk getting in where the others can't reach, careering around loaded with kids sitting on wooden crates – in fact, anybody sitting on wooden crates – who can't afford the price of a bus ticket or a place crushed in a taxi. The padded benches are merely an approximation of how many people they can carry, working on the principle that when the seats are jammed sardine-like and no-one else can sit in the mini-gap on the floor between legs (they are too low for standing) there is still space for a couple of lightweights to hang onto the frame beside the driver.

The tuk-tuks seem to have taken this packing style from the grande taxis, whose seating plan of driver and four adults went out of the

window long ago. I once saw one in Fez that was so jam-packed, passengers in the rear seats were trying to hold the doors closed with their arms out the windows and with two kids sat on top of stuffed sacks in the trunk with the lid up. It took off in a cloud of smoke and the exhaust sparking as it dragged along the road.

Hard-working things they may be, but even the best of machines can go wrong. As my ride pulls up a slight rise at a set of traffic lights, cars nearest the side of the road are trying to push in front of others to get past a semi-stationary tuk-tuk loaded with boxes. The driver is almost bent double, trying to push his vehicle up the hill but not quite making it. Each time he stops to take a breather his tuk-tuk rolls back a little, like Sisyphus in Greek mythology, forever rolling an enormous boulder uphill only to see it rolling back down again.

The Last Hand-made Football Maker in Morocco
Marrakech Medina

Anyone who plays football these days can think themselves lucky that when they head the lightweight plastic ball into the corner of the net they don't have half a kilo of stiff leather pounding their skull. And if you were unlucky enough to connect with the flat leather lace that held the ball closed over the inflated pigs bladder inside you would be left with a nice striped pattern on the skin for the next couple of hours. And imagine how heavy it would be when the game was played on a rain-soaked pitch in the middle of winter.

To buy a real handmade leather football is almost impossible, unless you go to a tiny workshop, barely bigger than a couple of kitchen cupboards, deep in the souks of Marrakech Medina, where Kamal Boukentar spends his days hand-sewing footballs and rugby balls made from original patterns dating as far back as 1900. He's the only handmade leather football maker in Morocco, and one of only a handful left in Europe.

"Mohamed Boukentar, my father, started the shop in 1965, and was one of about twenty makers in the Medina at the time. During the seventies my mother, Lalla Aicha, worked with him, and is the only woman ever to have hand-sewn leather footballs in Morocco. I began in 1984, when I was twelve, and it took me a week to make my first ball." It may well be a coincidence, but that ball was bought by Michele Platini, who played for the French national team when they won the European Championship in the same year.

When we meet, Kamal is working on a model from the 1930s with eighteen panels. Most people probably just assume that a football is made from one basic design, which is exactly what I thought – which goes to

show how most people, including me, are completely wrong. Most modern footballs are made up of thirty-two panels. (For the 2006 World Cup, FIFA introduced a 14-panel football, a style that will be used until 2014.) An original football can be made up of ten different numbers of pieces from four to thirty-four, and each of those will have three or four different designs, around thirty different patterns in all. On a shelf about his counter is the ultimate in the fine art of football making, a ball of seventy-two pieces, probably one of only two in the world, one made by Kamal, the other laboriously sewn by his father many years ago.

"I can make an eighteen-piece football in one day," says Kamal, "but that one took me ten days of solid work. It's purely for display, to show just how intricate a ball can be, and there is no price in the world that would get me to part with it."

Kamal sits on a wood and rush chair outside his workshop, *La Clinique du Ballon*, where his father started sewing footballs more than half a century ago, (there's barely enough room inside his workshop to turn around, never mind work), painstakingly sewing three panels together with an exactness of stitch that makes you think it has been sewn by machine. Occasionally he stops to spray the seam he is working on with water, to soften the leather and make it easier to sew.

"I buy my leather from a friend who works in the tannery in the Medina. I need special skins, but when I buy them I have to line them with fabric or the needle would split the hide when it was sewn. I usually get about two-and-a-half footballs out of a skin, depending on the pattern, because even though the standard size of a football these days is sixty-nine centimetres in circumference, the older patterns we use are slightly larger, seventy-four centimetres."

As the ball comes together like a complicated inside-out puzzle, it is finally drawn through the split which is later closed with a flat leather lace, after the rubber bladder that inflates the ball has been inserted. Fortunately, Kamal doesn't go as far as using a pig's bladder as they would in the early days of football. In its natural state, the leather is pale beige, but after three carefully rubbed-on coats of olive oil, it attains the rich brown colour and muted sheen of memories of games played by men with short haircuts and knee-length baggy shorts, and who didn't feel the need to kiss and cuddle each other whenever a goal was scored.

Despite being a sporting work of art, Kamal's footballs are never likely to see a football pitch. "Most people buy them for decoration or as gifts. One of my best customers is a friend who owns the restaurant A Moda in Bergamo in Italy. He orders fifty at a time and sells them to his clients. But I like it when an older man buys one because it reminds him of when he played football as a boy. I've got an original pair of 1930s boots on display and sometimes people tell me what it was like playing in them. Heavy and uncomfortable, by the sound of it!"

Map: La Clinique du Ballon

Even The Mules Give Way
Imlil, High Atlas Mountains

In the remote, and sometimes not so remote, villages of the High Atlas Mountains, medical assistance of any kind is rarely close to hand. Because of this, there have been a number of deaths over the years, particularly during childbirth, due to lack of transport to Asni, the nearest town with a maternity clinic, or on to Tahanoute or even Marrakech for more serious cases. One of the most important projects that the Association Bassins d'Imlil has instigated is the provision of an ambulance to reduce these all too avoidable mortalities. The ambulance has been a life-line to many, particularly those in the most remote valleys who might otherwise have to wait many hours for medical assistance. But there is another 'ambulance' that receives scant publicity and fulfils a role that most of us don't want to think too deeply about. It is a hearse, on-call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, just as the regular ambulance is, but, by the nature of its occupants, it fulfils a more discreet service.

The way Abderrahim Ajdaà handles his ambulance as he tackles the hairpin bends of the rough track that zigzags precariously up from Imlil to Armed, the highest and largest of the villages that form the *Association Bassins d'Imlil*, you would think he was still driving a taxi around the roads of Asni, seventeen kilometres away. After eleven years driving over some of the roughest terrain in North Africa's highest mountain range, his confidence is built on experience. As it's my first trip, I spend a fair bit of my time concentrating on the Moroccan flag on its stand, taped to the dashboard, and try to ignore the sheer slope of the mountainside, so close that I can't even see the edge of the road from the passenger seat. Every pedestrian, mule, Jeep and truck gives way as the ambulance climbs the narrow road. After all, it may be someone in *their* family it's on its way to.

We're not on a house call or emergency today, but Abderrahim is demonstrating in a practical way his daily round. The road ends at a flat area of rough ground, where the Reyara River bubbles and sparkles languidly before picking up the pace on its way down into the Imlil Valley below. Across an almost non-existent ford is Armed, a village of almost two thousand souls, and Abderrahim points out the pharmacy, closed for the last twelve years due to lack of funding.

If a helicopter is needed for a mountain rescue, this is where it lands, with the patient being transferred to Abderrahim's ambulance for the onward journey down the mountain to Asni or Marrakech. But 'flat'

doesn't mean 'smooth'; the uneven surface makes for a rocky and tricky landing. When the river is in flood – and people shouldn't be on the mountain anyway – there is nowhere for the helicopter to land, and Abderrahim has to gather a team of villagers to bring the injured down by stretcher.

In more general situations Abderrahim takes the first call. His main work is ferrying expectant mothers to the maternity clinic in Asni, or the hospitals in Tahanoute or Marrakech to give birth. One person is allowed to travel with the patient in the rear of the ambulance. The next most common is attending accidents, mainly motor accidents, where he's often first on the scene, even before the police arrive. Abderrahim has been trained in first aid, but the ambulance has limited equipment and if he thinks the patient needs a nurse or doctor they will be taken to the clinic at Imlil. The resident nurse, Hamid Asbayo, calls the doctor if necessary, and the patient can be treated there. If there are complications, Abderrahim makes the sixty-kilometre drive to the hospital in Marrakech.

When the Association Bassins de Imlil put forward the idea of buying a hearse in 2010, Hassan Bouyenbaden volunteered to be its driver; on-call day-in, day-out, just as Abderrahim is. When Abderrahim is unavailable to drive the regular ambulance, Hassan steps in, but most of his clients are at the opposite end of their life-cycle to those of his fellow driver.

At fatal road accidents, Hassan is required to attend with the police, bagging the body and removing it to the morgue in Marrakech. Fortunately, this kind of situation is quite rare, and the majority of the people he transports have died of natural causes. For those from the villages of the valley who die in Marrakech, Hassan collects the body from the hospital so that the deceased can be buried in his or her home village.

Most of the inhabitants of the locality are strict Muslims, which means that no male outside the family, other than medical personnel, may touch a woman. Dispensation is also given to Hassan, as he is required to handle the body in order to put it in his ambulance. Sometimes family members are too distraught to deal with the death, and Hassan has to quietly seek help from others for the removal, without overstepping the bounds of propriety. What helps in this situation is that he has lived in the valley all his life, and many of the people he is called to attend were his friends.

"At first it used to upset me, seeing my friends dead, but eventually I came to realise that we all die, and surely it's better to have a friend attend to you than a stranger. It's no problem for me now."

Women will be returned to the home to be ritually washed by their female family and friends, before being enshrouded in white cotton or

linen cloth; men will go straight to the mosque, where their male family performs a similar service. Sharia law calls for the burial of the body, usually within twenty-four hours. After prayers at the mosque, the deceased will be taken to a cemetery, although not one with headstones and mausoleums a westerner might recognise. In Imlil it is simply a square plot, only distinguished from the rest of the bare hillside by a fence to keep out wandering goats.

The Vegetable Imam
April 1, 2012 (not an April Fool's joke!)

Imam Abdelbari Zemzemi from Casablanca has dipped his toe in the confusing sexual mores of the Islamic state by issuing a *fatwa* (a religious edict) saying that adult women who are divorced, widows, or women who have never had sexual relations with a man and have lost all hope that they ever will, are allowed to relieve their sexual frustrations with an assortment of ingredients usually found in a tajine.

"A woman can get much benefit from these vegetables and other elongated objects," said the cleric, and went on to list an assortment of veg that the ladies could use, although delicacy prohibits me from elucidating.

The Imam, an expert in Islamic jurisprudence, added that it was better for women to use these methods to relieve the pressure of sexual needs than to 'fall into sin', by which, one assumes, he means by taking a lover outside of marriage, strictly forbidden by Islamic law.

Zemzemi is also a supporter of sex shops and sex toys, and said that the reason a 23-year old man was jailed in Morocco recently for trying to sell sex toys on the internet was that he didn't have the correct papers and that in fact the sale of this type of products isn't prohibited in the country.

This Imam of the Suni Maliki sect raised eyebrows a year ago when he issued a fatwa saying it was okay for a man to have sexual relations with the corpse of his wife, as they would be "reunited in paradise." Known as necrophilia elsewhere, he didn't say how long you could keep the 'very dearly departed' for to let off steam.

Don't Believe Your Ears
Marrakech Medina

On a warm, sunny morning, although still a little cool in the shade of the narrow souk streets, I wandered off to the outskirts of the Medina, away from the early tourist bustle of Jemaa el Fnaa. There's nothing quite like sitting and gawping at the passing parade, and as I sat outside a

crowded café having a *cafe au laite* – you need to take a break from mint tea sometime – an English voice asked if they could take the empty seat at my table. After years of living in Spain, I was a bit startled; you don't do that sort of thing here, a table in a cafe or restaurant is the gastronomical equivalent of an Englishman's castle. But this being in the Arab world, I politely acquiesced.

Inevitably, my coffee companion and I got into conversation. The chat followed the usual lines of where are you from, been here before, are you on holiday, etc. but it was his answer to the last question that brought me up short. My answer had been simple; a bit of a break and to see somewhere new, but Tom (as was his name) was in Marrakech to record his feet. I kid you not, but to be fair, it was the sound of his feet that was being recorded, not his feet themselves. He was a Foley artist, which to me didn't mean a thing, but if Tom and his fellow artists didn't exist, almost any movie, radio and TV programme or advert would loose half the impact our ears absorb.

When you see Colin Firth walking across his voice coach's floor in The King's Speech, Meryl Streep beating eggs into a bowl in Julie and Julia, the story of TV cook Julia Child, or the rustle of silken robes just before the heroine of a blood-lust horror movie succumbs to the hacking and slashing of a Freddie Kruger-like character, the actions are theirs, but the sounds are those of an un-named Foley artist. Pages being turned, squeaky doors opening and closing, a cup placed on saucer when The Queen finishes a cup of tea, all those sounds are the work of the Foley artist. Their work helps to create a sense of reality within a scene. Without these crucial background noises, movies feel unnaturally quiet and uncomfortable.

It would be very easy to dismiss the Foley artist as a wannabe actor who never quite cut the mustard, but that's far from the truth, and the top Foley artists are highly regarded specialists in their field.

It began in 1927, when Jack Foley, who had been working for Universal Studios since 1914, the heyday of silent movies, was asked to be part of the sound crew of *Show Boat*, Universal's answer to *The Jazz Singer*, the first 'talkie' ever made. The microphones of the time could only pick up dialogue, so Foley and his crew projected the film onto a screen and recorded a second audio track of the actions to capture the live sounds. Their timing had to be perfect so that footsteps and closing doors would sync with the actors' motions in the film.

My new-found friend Tom was recording the sound of a man walking through Arab streets for a film about Egypt (as with many productions, a scene is never quite where you think it is), and it was a lot cheaper to send him and a crew to Marrakech than to Cairo.

So when you watch *Sex in the City* or any other movie purporting to be either about or filmed in Morocco, don't assume that the sounds of

jangling bracelets or swishing curtains you hear are being made by Sarah Jessica Parker or Kim Catrall. They could be a colleague of Tom's shut away in a dark studio somewhere in downtown L.A.

MISCELLANY

The Murky History of Table Football
How did the tabletop game get from parlor halls in 19th-century Europe to the basements of American homes?

In the best tradition of skulduggery, claim and counterclaim, foosball (or table football), that simple game of bouncing little wooden soccer players back and forth on springy metal bars across something that looks like a mini pool table, has the roots of its conception mired in confusion.

Some say that in a sort of spontaneous combustion of ideas, the game erupted in various parts of Europe simultaneously sometime during the 1880s or '90s as a parlor game. Others say that it was the brainchild of Lucien Rosengart, a dabbler in the inventive and engineering arts who had various patents, including ones for railway parts, bicycle parts, the seat belt and a rocket that allowed artillery shells to be exploded while airborne. Rosengart claimed to have come up with the game toward the end of the 1930s to keep his grandchildren entertained during the winter. Eventually his children's pastime appeared in cafés throughout France, where the miniature players wore red, white and blue to remind everyone that this was the result of the inventiveness of the superior French mind.

There again, though, Alexandre de Finesterre has many followers, who claim that he came up with the idea, being bored in a hospital in the Basque region of Spain with injuries sustained from a bombing raid during the Spanish Civil War. He talked a local carpenter, Francisco Javier Altuna, into building the first table, inspired by the concept of table tennis. Alexandre patented his design for *fútbolin* in 1937, the story goes, but the paperwork was lost during a storm when he had to do a runner to France after the fascist coup d'état of General Franco. (Finesterre would also become a notable footnote in history as one of the first airplane hijackers ever.)

While it's debatable whether Señor Finisterre actually did invent table football, the indisputable fact is the first-ever patent for a game using little men on poles was granted in Britain, to Harold Searles Thornton, an indefatigable Tottenham Hotspur supporter, on November 1, 1923. His uncle, Louis P. Thornton, a resident of Portland, Oregon, visited Harold

and took the idea back to the United States and patented it in 1927. But Louis had little success with table football; the patent expired and the game descended into obscurity, no one ever realising the dizzying heights it would scale decades later.

The world would have been a much quieter place if the game had stayed as just a children's plaything, but it spread like a prairie fire. The first league was established in 1950 by the Belgians, and in 1976, the European Table Soccer Union was formed. Although how they called it a 'union' when the tables were different sizes, the figures had different shapes, none of the handles were the same design and even the balls were made of different compositions is a valid question. Not a unified item amongst them.

The game still doesn't even have a single set of rules – or one name. You've got *langirt* in Turkey, *jouer au baby-foot* in France, *csocso* in Hungary, *cadureguel-schulchan* in Israel, plain old table football in the UK, and a world encyclopedia of ridiculous names elsewhere around the globe. The American "foosball" (where a player is called a "fooser") borrowed its name from the German version, "*fußball*", from whence it arrived in the United States. (And, really, you can't not love a game where they have a table with two teams made up only of Barbie dolls, or that is played in tournaments with such wonderful names as the 10th Annual $12,000 Bart O'Hearn Celebration Foosball Tournament, held in Austin, Texas, in 2009.)

Foosball re-arrived on American shores thanks to Lawrence Patterson, who was stationed in West Germany with the U.S. military in the early 1960s. Seeing that table football was very popular in Europe, Patterson seized the opportunity and contracted a manufacturer in Bavaria to construct a machine to his specification to export to the US. The first table landed on American soil in 1962, and Patterson immediately trademarked the name "Foosball" in America and Canada, giving the name "Foosball Match" to his table.

Patterson originally marketed his machines through the "coin" industry, where they would be used mainly as arcade games. Foosball became outrageously popular, and by the late '80s, Patterson was selling franchises, which allowed partners to buy the machines and pay a monthly fee to be guaranteed a specific geographical area where only they could place them in bars and other locations. Patterson sold his Foosball Match table through full-page ads in such prestigious national publications as Life, Esquire, and The Wall Street Journal, where they would appear alongside other booming franchise-based businesses such as Kentucky Fried Chicken. But it wasn't until 1970 that the U.S. had its own home-grown table, when two Bobs, Hayes and Furr, got together to design and build the first all-American-made foosball table.

From the perspective of the third decade of the third millennium, with ever more sophisticated video games, digital technology and plasma televisions, it's difficult to imagine the impact that foosball had on the American psyche. During the 1970s, the game became a national phenomenon.

Sports Illustrated and "60 Minutes" covered tournaments where avid and addicted players, both amateur and professional, traveled the length and breadth of America following big bucks prizes, with the occasional Porsche or Corvette thrown in as an added incentive. One of the biggest was the Quarter-Million Dollar Professional Foosball Tour, created by bar owner and foosball enthusiast E. Lee Peppard of Missoula, Montana. Peppard promoted his own brand of table, the Tournament Soccer Table, and hosted events in 32 cities nationwide with prizes of up to $20,000. The International Tournament Soccer Championships (ITSC), with a final held on Labor Day weekend in Denver, reached the peak of prize money in 1978, with $1 million as the glimmering star for America's top professionals to reach out for.

The crash of American foosball was even more rapid than its rise. Pac-man, that snappy little cartoon character, along with other early arcade games, were instrumental in the demise of the foosball phenomenon. The estimated 1000 tables a month that were selling around the end of the '70s crashed to 100, and in 1981, the ITSC filed for bankruptcy. But the game didn't die altogether; in 2003, the U.S. became part of the International Table Soccer Federation, which hosts the Multi-Table World Championships each January in Nantes, France.

But it's still nice to know that even in a globalized world of ever more uniformity, table football, foosball, csosco, lagirt, or whatever you want to call it still has no absolutely fixed idea of what really does constitute the core of the game. The American/Texas Style is called "Hard Court" and is known for its speed and power style of play. It combines a hard man with a hard rolling ball and a hard, flat surface. The European/French Style, "Clay Court" is exactly the opposite of the American style. It features heavy (non-balanced) men, and a very light and soft cork ball. Add to that a soft linoleum surface and you have a feel best described as sticky. In the middle is European/German Style, "Grass Court," characterized by its "enhanced ball control achieved by softening of components that make up the important man/ball/surface interaction." And even the World Championships use five different styles of table, with another 11 distinct styles being used in various other international competitions.

Until recently this dilettante approach to the tables and rulebooks also applied to the competitions. Up until a few years ago, Punta Umbrí in Huelva, Spain, hosted the World Table Football Cup Championship in August each year. Well, sort of. It was played on a Spanish-style table

and, according to Kathy Brainard, co-author with Johnny Loft of The Complete Book of Foosball and past president of the United States Table Soccer Federation, "If the tournament is run on a Spanish-made table and has the best players from wherever that table can be found, then it could honestly be called the World Championship of Foosball, on that specific table." A bit of diplomatic looking down the nose there.

Brainard went on to say that the real championship, called the World Championship of Table Soccer, was played in Dallas on a U.S.-made table and offered $130,000 in prize money. Although, admittedly, that was before 2003, at which time the American associations had to accept the ignominy of being part of a truly international World Championship, and not simply be able to hold their own table football version of the baseball World Series.

In the general roly-poly of life, table football is mainly something that people play for fun in a smoky bar—at least they did before cigarettes were banned.

While British "foosers" might not be able to look forward to winning such large prizes as American players, they still take the game seriously. Oxford University is one of the top table football venues in England, with many highly thought of players on the national scene. Thirty college teams and one pub team play regularly on Garlando brand tables against other top pub and university sides.

Dave Trease is captain of Catz I (St. Catherine's College, Oxford) who says his position as captain hangs on the fact that he has the only "brush shot" in the university.

"A brush shot is where you have the ball stationary and then you have to flick it very hard at an angle. To be honest, I think it's more luck than anything, but it looks good when it works." And he admits that his skills on the Garlando don't travel.

"I'm rubbish on anything else! I've found something I'm good at, where I can have a laugh and not take it all too seriously. And you don't get any table football hooligans either, although you've got to keep an eye on people greasing the ball or jamming the table."

Ruth Eastwood, captain of Catz II, beat all her female opponents (all five of them anyway) to win the women's event, ranking her fourth nationally. But having won the tournament, does she see big contracts being offered?

"I don't think it's likely, particularly when you take into account that my prize money was only £15 and the prizes for the whole competition were only £300. I don't think we're in the same league as the World Championships, but at least I can say I was women's champion, even if there were only five other women!"

It's probably stretching the imagination just that bit too far to think that table football will ever become an Olympic sport, but they probably

thought the same about beach volleyball at one time. Sadly, the small figures that populate the field during playing time won't be able to collect the medals themselves. That will have to be left to the flick-wristed humans who control their every move.

Talk To The Hand

A Five-finguered wave might get you a smack in the teeth

A couple of years ago I was with a friend in the Medina in Marrakech. She'd successfully bartered her way to ownership of a very attractive rug and was feeling pretty pleased with herself. The salesman was all smiles and compliments until my friend made a gesture which, to you and I would indicate that, "Great, everything's fine, we done good!" She smiled and put her thumb up. Instantly the salesman's jaw dropped and his eyes glared wide. He bundled the rug at her and sharply turned his back, much to the distress of my friend, who realised she'd done something wrong, but for the life of her didn't know what.

Imagine you'd stuck your middle finger up to an American; basically you are saying, 'screw you', 'up yours' or, as a Brit might say, 'sit on that and wiggle'. That's exactly what my friend had said, albeit unwittingly, to the carpet salesman. So, far from showing her pleasure at a deal well done, she was telling him to stick his business where the sun don't shine. Best not to do it in Latin America and West Africa, as well as Greece, Russia, Sardinia**,** the south of Italy, either.

Travel certainly broadens the mind and can provide a fund of uplifting experiences. Interacting with people is the best way to understand different cultures, societies and ways of life, but if you visit non-English-speaking countries and you don't understand their language, you have to fall back on body-language and gestures. The problem is that some gestures have a completely different meaning in one country than they do in another. Not only could your intended message get lost in translation, you could actually end up offending someone or getting yourself into a difficult situation. Some simple everyday gestures that we take for granted can get you into big trouble elsewhere in the world.

Years ago I was working in Athens at a time of an England-Greece match in the city. England won 5-0, the Greeks got hammered. That night hoards of England supporters roamed the Athenian streets chanting, 'Five-nil, five-nil', and thrusting their hand, with the palm open and the fingers extended to represent the number five, in the face of any male Greek they could find. When the Greeks started battering hell out of the visiting team's supporters, the Brits thought they were just very bad losers. They might well have been, but the one thing you

never do to a Greek male, whether you've just won a football match or not, is stick an open palm with fingers extended in his face. It's known as a *moutza*, and is one of their most traditional insults, telling the recipient to 'eat shit'. The gesture comes from Byzantine times when people would smear excreta on the faces of prisoners as they were dragged through the streets.

Another gesture that doesn't go down well in the Arab world is the A-okay sign, making a circle with the thumb and forefinger and extending the other fingers outwards. Like the thumbs up, we mean it to imply that everything is good, fine, okay, and is used to communicate between sub-aqua divers, when shouting, "Yes I'm fine, thanks," isn't really an underwater option. But what's good for the goose isn't always good for the gander, as a friend in Fez found out when she wanted to show the workmen restoring her riad that all was going great. She made the A-okay sign and was surprised when the men showed obvious shock and not the smiles she expected. Without realising it she'd told them they were a set of arseholes, or, in the worst-case scenario, they were all homosexual. The circular shape of the gesture is seen to represent the anus, with all the connotations it brings to mind. And you would never, ever use the sign in Brazil, Germany and a number of Mediterranean and Arab countries. There is the apocryphal story of President Richard Nixon arriving on an official visit to Brazil, which received an enormous amount of media coverage. As he stood at the top of the airplane gangway, he put both his hand in the air and made a double A-okay sign. While my Fazi friend only offended a handful of chaps, Nixon told the whole of Brazil that they were a set of arseholes and poofters. History doesn't record how successful his talks were. It's also an insult in France, although not quite such a serious one, as it signifies something or someone as being worthless. Not a good way to show your appreciation after a delightful dinner.

The *corna* (making a fist and extending the fore- and little fingers) may be the thing to do at heavy rock concerts, but in Spain, Portugal, Greece, Colombia, Brazil, Albania, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, it's seen as telling a man he's a cuckold and his wife is cheating on him – although residents of these countries seem happy enough to use it at football referees. Curling your finger toward you as a "come here" sign is perceived as derogatory in many southeast Asian countries. This gesture is commonly used for dogs in the Philippines so when used for a person, you would be implying that you see them as something inferior. What's worse, this gesture could get you arrested, and it's said that in the past, to prevent you from using it again, the authorities could break your finger.

Perhaps there might be a new guide book here. It's unlikely we need another guide to The Seven Best Croissants in Bogota and their ilk, or a phrasebook that tells you everything you will ever need to know about

asking for a postage stamp in Swahili. A picture book of offensive hand gestures might just save you getting your head kicked in Athens.

Dedicated Followers of Fashion
When in Rome…or elsewhere

I was reading a letter in a local newspaper a while ago about the Brit's appalling inability to deal with fashion, whether it's a Hawaiian shirt at a cocktail party or Speedo swimming trunks that barely contain anything other than the family jewels. And I'm not keen either, on seeing a pair calf length cotton-mix socks showing below the straps of sandals, but, you see, in this tasty little fashion style we Brits are just dedicated followers of fashion.

The letter ended by asking, in a rhetorical way, if anyone in the history of fashion has ever pulled off the sandal sock combo. Yes, they have, although it was more through necessity than any thought of what was *a la mode* at the time. And who's to blame.....? Those terrible fashion fops, the Italians. Or at least in the days when they were known as Romans. Apparently the northern winters were too severe for their poor southern tootsies, so they wore socks with their open-toed hobnailed sandals. We know this partly because of a tablet found at Vindolanda on the Roman Wall in the north of England, which has a message, presumably from some mum or wife, far away in the sun, saying, "*I have sent you ... pairs of socks from Sattua, two pairs of sandals and two pairs of underpants*."

It's nice to know the ladies weren't just concerned about keeping the tootsies warm. What would we do without them?

The Perfectly Pointless Poinsettia
How a pompous American beaureaucrat gave the world its favourite Christmas plant

If a competition were to be held to decide upon the most pointless piece of Christmas naffery it would be by the greatest of bad luck if the poinsettia, with its gaudy scarlet leaves that look like they've been cut from tissue paper, didn't take the gold medal. Like that equally garish example of festive falsety, the rotund be-whiskered Father Christmas, the gaudy houseplant, considered by some to be the horticultural equivalent of the garden gnome, came from the wrong side of the Atlantic.

At least Coca-Cola was being flagrantly commercial when they created the jovial image of the red-suited Santa Claus in the early 1940s, but Joel Roberts Poinsett has a lot to answer for. Appointed in 1825 as the first U.S. envoy to Mexico, Joe proved something of a disaster as a diplomat, offending his hosts so much by his high-handed attitude that they coined the word '*poinsettismo*' to mean a bullying manner.

Relations with the locals became strained, so Joe was hauled back to the US, but not before digging up a few samples of the local flora to take home. Among these was a tall plant that developed brightly coloured red bracts in mid-winter (somewhere between leaves and petals), the Mexican Christmas flower, *flor de la Noche Buena*.

Legend has it the plant was created in answer to the prayer of a young girl who had no red flower to place on the altar on Christmas Eve. An angel told her to pluck some weeds from the roadside, and when she put them on the alter they were transformed into poinsettias, although in the opinion of some people, the weeds would probably have been better.

Its botanical name is *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, meaning most beautiful, and it became such a popular greenhouse plant that in Poinsett's honour, horticulturists gave it the now-familiar name, Poinsettia.

Around thirty-five million of the dwarf version of the plant are sold in the US each year, said to be around one-quarter of all potted plants sold, with a wholesale value of $170, and in the UK four million poinsettias are sold each year with anywhere from £3 to £10 each, depending on size, will changing hands as people deck their halls with sprigs of holly and garish pot plants.

It may seem that the poinsettia has been around forever, but its invasion of our sitting rooms each December only started in the 1960s when Jim Mikkelsen, a Chicago nurseryman, produced a hardy dwarf strain that did not take up to much space and was equipped to withstand the variation in temperature of domestic heating systems.

Until then they had been the preserve of the rich. In the early years of the 20th century, the society hostess, Lady Astor, would insist that her house in London's St James's Square was decorated overall with perfect specimens, exactly 6 ft tall, grown in the hothouses of her country estate at Cliveden.

Mikkelsen's breakthrough ensured that shrunken poinsettias quickly overtook cyclamen, cacti and rubber plants as the world's favourite Yuletide house guests. Other growers bred new varieties, with white bracts, followed by pink, purple and a mottled red-and-white that became known as Jingle Bells.

Over the years the poinsettia has survived several scare stories, including a rumour that they are poisonous if eaten. They aren't, but if you crush a leaf or a stem, the sap can bring some people out in a rash. Until recently, Mexicans used it to remove unwanted body hair.

If you really want your plant to last more than one season, the secret is to cut the leaves right back in the spring, re-pot and feed and place in a darkened room, away from draughts during October and November. If it survives it will revert to its non-dwarf size.

Hiding a poinsettia in a darkened room is quite possibly the best thing you can do with it.

Underneath The Arches

The gentle sport of extreme croquet

A warm summer's afternoon with a neatly trimmed green sward stretching away towards the shimmering haze of a genteel English landscape. The subdued 'clop' of wooden mallet against ball as it sends the missile through arched hoops, as uppesr-class observers sup tea from china cups, little fingers keeked at a dilettante angle, and nibble ever so delicately on cucumber sandwiches (crusts trimmed of course). The epitome of an English afternoon on the croquet lawn, as idealistically portrayed by that American master of English country house restraint, James Ivory, who uses the image of such croquetfests in *A Room with a View, Howard's End* and *The Remains of the Day.* Obviously never been to Connecticut has Mr Ivory.

Connecticut, home to forested hills, white-steepled colonial churches, historic village greens – and the Connecticut eXtreme Croquet Society. Extreme croquet is to the polite meander around a well-trimmed green what a bar-room brawl using reversed cues is to a quiet game of snooker in a gentlemen's club. Dipping a metal-capped toe into the turbulent waters of the extreme croquet rulebook ripples up a miasma of weird and wonderful regulations. For example:

Roqueting a live ball(s).

> *Should a player roquet (striking one's own ball into one or more opponent's balls) any number of live balls (see 5.00 deadness), that player will have his/her choice (unless the player is poison, since poison can never have ball-choice) of which of the involved balls to play (either the original roqueting ball or any of the live roqueted balls, but only balls roqueted by the player's original ball).*

Fairly straightforward I'd say.

The nearest the Brits got to a bit of extreme in the croquet sense was when the Queen of Hearts walloped around a few curled up hedgehogs with an up-ended flamingo in Lewis Carrol's Alice tales. But it's a bit iffy

as to why Albion should be considered the home of this elegant, upper-crust pastime. The game we know as croquet was introduced into England in the 1850's from Ireland, where a game called crooky was played in Portarlington, County Clare. Villagers used mallets made by inserting broom handles into pieces of hardwood, but a certain Mr. Jacques came cross a set of croquet equipment and began manufacturing the games paraphernalia. He's considered to be the person who brought croquet to widespread notice, and the Jacques family is still the leading manufacturer today.

Croquet's popularity grew in England in the 1860's, and in the following decade it was introduced into the United States. At first it was played only by high society in New York, but it eventually became the most popular lawn sport in America. In the 1890's, however the game lost much of its popularity, partly due to its association with gambling, drinking, and generally unsavoury behaviour. It was banned in Boston. The game fought back though, and at the turn of the century, while on the wane in Britain, the popularity of croquet in America increased. Some of its most noted proponents include Groucho Marx, Dorothy Parker, and Darryl Zanuck, and in Russia, Tolstoy apparently had a croquet lawn in his Moscow garden. But it was in Scandinavia that extreme croquet was born.

On Wednesday April 9, 1975, Bernt 'Mulle' Fredriksson, Anders 'P-son' Wilen and eight other like-minded lunatics, all students of the Linköping University of Technology in Sweden, decided to create a more sophisticated and cruel form of croquet (with the added incentive that it seemed a good reason to get together for a beer or two). The Krocketklubben R.Å.S.O.P. was born and practised a form of croquet they called "terrängkrocket"(cross-country croquet). "There are no runner-ups, third places or similar in our game." says Anders Wilen, the last of the original ten still playing in the annual championship, "The winner takes all!" A match, which typically takes about five to seven hours to play, becomes a mallet and ball obstacle race. "One year we put a hoop one metre up a tree trunk, thinking it would be a difficult shot. It was actually quite easy because there was a stone at the bottom of the tree and we found we could ricochet the ball off it up through the hoop." Although ruthless during a game, the players of R.Å.S.O.P. (the meaning of the initials of the club is a closely guarded secret imparted, only once, to each new member) are very cultivated people and devote themselves to a mid-twentieth century nostalgia, which is shown in their clothing. "When we first played, one of the club members knew of a shop which had an attic full of original 40's and 50's clothing still in their boxes. We bought the lot, and have continued to dress that way ever since." But only for the competition Anders hastens to add. A cassette or CD player

filled with evergreens from the period always accompanies a game, but as far as the ladies are concerned, R.Å.S.O.P. is a final foothold of male chauvinism in socially conscious Scandinavia. “The can watch and cook, but they can’t play.”

For extremists though, the first true example of the sport appeared in the 1920's, when Herbert Swope, publisher of the New York World, built a new course on his Sands Point, Long Island estate. The course was so large that players had to shout to one another. It had sand traps, bunkers, rough, and Long Island Sound waiting in the distance.

Connecticut eXtreme Croquet Society (motto: Dedicated to enjoying eXtreme croquet, nature and the near-death experience.) was founded in 1984 in West Hartford, Connecticut, and over the years the CeCS rules have become the ‘de facto’ standard for those who prefer an intensely aggressive game, where the phrase ‘safe shot’ has no meaning. (Although their supposed supremacy might be disputed by their archrivals Lakeside Croquet Club - motto: ‘Mallets plus morons equals mayhem’). “Those guys in Sweden are real cool,” says Bob Warseck, founding father of Connecticut eXtreme, “But as far as we’re concerned, when you’re playing you can do anything you like that doesn’t include physical violence.” (This from a mature fifty-two year-old head-hunter in the health care world. Lord knows what he head-hunts *with*!) But the club does have rules. Rules that are a complex ever-changing feast, usually legislated by Bob who, strangely enough, usually wins.

Not for Connecticutters the manicured lawn; their extreme croquet is croquet on steroids, best played where the natural lay of the land provides an extremely difficult terrain. To be a real aficionado, you have to take to the woods, where the gullies, rocks and chiggers provide the crucible for champions. They prefer very difficult playing courses such as woodland areas, lowland marshes, and sites with varied ground cover, their favourite being drainage basins, stream beds and uncharted jungle. For a bit of variation they’ll climb nearby Mount Lamentation to whack a few balls around, or play at the ‘The Pit’, a twelve-foot high cliff, where, according to Bob, “You try and knock the other guys off as much as possible.” Their balls - not them personally.

If the Swedes are quaintly costumed for their game, the Connecticutters would suggest an ensemble of hard hat and Kevlar. “If you’re dumb enough to get in the way of your ball that’s your problem.” Bob comments in a less than sympathetic manner. Tell that to Dan Thoene, a sportscaster who made a programme for local TV station, WTNH. Determined to get a good shot, he place his $80,000 camera in line with the ball. The shot was perfect – right up to the point the ball connected with the lens! “We told him….” shrugs Bob. Fortunately the $50 lens cover took the brunt of the damage.

The CeCS point out that the popularity of their sport has lead to an increase in club membership by 600% from the day it came into being. As they had only five members in the first place, an average increase of two a year doesn't exactly proclaim a sport of Olympian status. (Although the namby-pamby unextreme version did feature in the 1900 Olympics, before being eclipsed by the Johnny-come-lately game of tennis.)

You don't just pick up your ordinary household croquet set to play extreme; extreme croquet demands heavy-duty equipment. The mallets used in ordinary lawn croquet are too flimsy, and are easily broken or shattered. It's not even uncommon to shatter a ball in extreme croquet. The Connecticut eXtremists have even developed their own mallet, the Wedge-Face, which has the appearance of some sort of medieval implement of execution. It has a wedge-face built into one end of the mallet head for lifting the ball off the ground, and into the air and allows the player to shoot the ball over most obstructions.

And obstruction is the name of the game in extreme. If there isn't something in the way of the hoop or wicket they'll put it there. And you're not likely to get a hole (or hoop) in one either, unless the ball's trajectory includes rebounding off a tree and executing a boomerang turn before skimming across a pond like a stone. None has ever been reported, and even it was there'd probably be a rule against it in 'Dr Bob's Most Belligerent Directory of Mallet and Ball Pastimes' – third edition. No, the book doesn't exist, but in the idiosyncratic world of extreme croquet there's probably something like it lurking on some croquet anorak's bookshelf, and he won't be slow in letting you know about the sporting infringement.

The more delicate form of croquet has made a comeback over the last two decades, particularly among the young, and is now played competitively in over twenty countries. But it's unlikely that you'll hear comments about first poison, post assassination, suicide or lap death, the everyday terminology of extreme croquet, whispered across the neatly-trimmed turf of the World Croquet Federation Championships. You probably won't see the Wedge Face in action either, and there'll be a conspicuous lack of tree stumps and drainage ditches. A shame really, it doesn't sound half as much fun.

GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

I've always had a thing about graveyards, or more precisely gravestones and the weird and wonderful things people inscribe on them. I remember seeing a marvelously kitsch example in a village graveyard somewhere in the Lake District in the north of England that was dedicated to someone who'd spent his life obsessively following cricket, which, in itself, is pretty weird to me. The marble slab was decorated with carved balls, crossed bats, caps and other cricketing impedimenta, and inscribed with all the obvious cricketing references; '*He's played his last ball*', '*His stumps have finally been pulled*', although it didn't say when it was that he '*Bowled his last maiden over*'.

The following stories aren't all specifically about graveyards, although they do get a few mentions, but are more a random meandering around the periphery of religion, dipping the toe into the occasionally more bizarre – but hopefully not offensive – side of belief.

It's hardly surprising that I start in Thailand, where a tree can be ordained as a monk, gardens are filled with terrifying monsters to show what awaits you in the fiery Buddhist hell of the hereafter if you don't behave yourself in the here-and-now, and where settling yourself into a coffin is a sure sign of bringing good fortune. No worse than hanging a horseshoe over the front door, I suppose, and that lucky rabbit's foot wasn't so lucky for the rabbit, was it?

THAILAND

Gone But Not Forgotten

Chiang Mai

Every culture has its own way of respecting their dearly departed, from the extravagance of the Chinese who send up in flames great wads of money, sporty cars, the latest in chi-chi fashion or the grandest of stately homes – all fake of course, made of paper – to provide for a comfortable afterlife for those who have just left this one. In contrast, for a Muslim funeral the body is ritually washed and wrapped in three layers of white cloth, laid in a grave with perhaps a few prayers being said, and the mortal form completely forgotten, remembered by little more than a grave marker and memories.

If you can't take it with you…

Just north of Chiang Mai's Superhighway is the Chinese Cemetery, a place of undulating greenery, the grass cut as trim as an English bowling green, with mounds of graves that look like rows of terraced houses in Hobbitsville.

Step through the small side gate on Anusawaree Singha, and the first tomb to strike your eye is a beautiful miniature blue-tiled pagoda, the epitome of historic Chinese architecture. This sanctum is the only one in this style, a mildly humerous touch of singularity in the repetition of every other tomb following the same format of decorative panels placed on the front. As with many elements of life, death is used as a way of showing off the affluence of the deceased; if they can't take it with them at least an ostentatious burial place can show how well-off they were in life.

Decorating many of the tombs are painted urns full of flowers, fish and animals, bucolic scenes of mountains and lakes, stands of bamboo and branches of cherry blossom, to remind the deceased of their ancient homeland; glorious exemplars of calligraphic art, dragons of ever fearsome visage and demeanor. A small statue of an angel stands in front of a simple tombstone, devoid of any other ornamentation, possibly the last resting place of a Chinese Christian who wanted to spend eternity surrounded by his fellow countrymen.

Most of the tombs have moderately simple facades free of any decoration save the occupant's name and a brief note of their existence. Rows of council-house terracing for the dead. Filter away from the celestial homes of the hoi-polloi to the 'suburbs, the outer edges of the graveyard, and like the gated communities of the earthly-bound wishing to isolate themselves from the common herd, the palatial residences of

the well-to-do become more ornate, celebrating the wealth of the owner and their position in society. Gilded Foo Lions (known as Foo Dogs in the west) stand eternal guard, the side panels painted on the cement of the middle classes become elegant 3D carvings of cranes in flight and other imagery symbolising the resident's ancestry.

An occasional unfinished structure looks like an abandoned house on a fancy estate, unfinished because the owner ran out of money, but judging by the vases of wilted flowers in front of some of them, the owner took up residence anyway.

Map: Khuang Sing Chinese Cemetery

Simplicity and a short goodbye

In total contrast to the ornamentation of the Chinese Cemetery, the Muslim burial ground looks like an old graveyard that has been forgotten about and left to go to seed. In a way, that's true, because in the Muslim tradition once the body is interred the mortal remains are simply left, with nothing to show for their being there other than a small marker with the deceased's name, birth and death dates. As ever, this sometimes varies slightly with modest embellishment, something frowned up by the Islamic faith.

On my second visit to the Muslim Cemetery on Padad Road, I see a grave being dug, so stand at a respectful distance watching workers at their labours. A leathery-skinned man as skinny as a rake sports the long beard without moustache typical of the Arab Muslim, although I find out later he's Burmese. He grins with a mouthful of rotted teeth and waves me over.

I am greeted by Mr. Saphret, a fourth-generation Thai of Chinese descent who speaks excellent English, courtesy of a Catholic education at Montfort Academy. On my first visit it had seemed incongruous that there are headstones written in Chinese until Mr. Saphret tells me that sixty percent of Muslims in Chiang Mai are of Chinese descent. He points out the grave of his grandparents, in a graveyard that is over two hundred years old, one of three around the city.

According to Islamic shariah law, the body should be buried as soon as possible after death, and the eight men assembled to dig the grave are all volunteers brought together by a phone call to tell them there is a body to be interred and help is needed. They may not know the deceased or the people they will be working with, but bring their own adzes, hoes, and buckets for the digging and planks of wood to take their weight without disturbing the soil as they go about their work, which they do with enthusiasm. Burmese, Chinese, a Buddhist who converted to Islam when he married, each taking his turn wielding the sharp-bladed hoe, and while my toothless Burmese friend may be skinny he's as tough and

wiry as they come. When he takes his turn to dig everyone stands back and watches with admiration at the speed he lugs his hoe.

It's like a day out at a garden, laughing and working with a group of friends, but this isn't a garden of remembrance because once the prayers have been said the plants and flowers that have been placed in the mound of soil covering the coffin are left to wither and return to the earth from whence they came. As I leave, lunch arrives in flat takeaway cartons, the meal paid for by a volunteer out of his own pocket.
Map: Muslim Cemetery, Padad Road

A corner of a foreign field

'If I should die think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England'
Rupert Brooke, *The Soldier*.

The Chiang Mai Foreign Cemetery sits in a triangular plot of land on the old Chiang Mai to Lamphun Road, sharing a boundary with the Chiengmai Gymkhana Club. Note the word 'Foreign', not 'Christian', as when the Royal Deed of Gift for the land was granted by H.S.M. King Chulalongkorn, Rama V, on 4th July 1898 it was explicit that the cemetery may be used 'for the burial of the bodies only of foreigners'. This creates a problem for Thai spouses, as they can't be buried with their partner, even if they have converted to Christianity unless they have acquired foreign nationality.

Unlike the poet Brooke's corner of a foreign field being England, the Foreign Cemetery is the last resting place of multiple nationalities, mainly European and American. Its carefully laid-out plots with crosses and tombstones could be anywhere, but it is the markers themselves that tell the stories of those who ended their days in Chiang Mai or wanted the city to be their last resting place. Some are simple, literally a marker – 'Felix Fert, French', who died in 2008, six months short of his sixtieth birthday; a white-painted cross with the hand-lettered name of Helen Myers Morse in black, weathered with age, although the ornate marble headstone of another Morse directly behind that of Helen, in this case, one Betty Sue Merriweather Morse, is so effusive in its claims to BettySue's near-sainthood that you almost expect to see 'continued overleaf.' inscribed on the bottom.

In keeping with their stiff upper lip image, the British tend to be tongue-in-cheek and succinct in their memorials. Tony Ball 'Adventurer, Englishman, Ornithologist', Dacre F.A.

Raikes 'Teak Wallah 1951-1956', or Richard Willoughby-Wood MC, 1926-2002, who is simply described as 'An Asian Legend', which indeed

he was, now resting peacefully just over the fence from the Gymkhana Club, of which his father, W.W. Wood had been a founder member in 1898, and where 'Dick' visited daily until peacefully passing away at Rajawej Hospital on Monday, 2nd December 2002.

Some markers are sad, such as those of 'Infant of AB Case d.1930', or that of Jenna Dawn Kellerer, 21st July 1994, both still-born but whose short existence still merited recognition, as indeed it should. But who can resist a smile at 'Happy Happy Sachiko' – Sachiko Sato, 1937-2005, born in Osaka, who died at the age of sixty-seven, only a year after coming to live in Chiang Mai, her greatest interest at the time of her death being, apparently, computer graphics.

Whether we like it or not, inadvertent humour is inescapable in cemeteries. On the gravestone of New Yorker Arlon Arthur 'Artie' Waite it seems the person responsible for lettering his marker wasn't English-speaking, as instead of simply recording that 'Artie' was a 'Farmer and Teacher' they also copied the instructions, writing 'Headstone Read 'Farmer and Teacher'', while the epitaph of Sgt G.B. Cross USMC, which reads 'Old soldiers never die, they just fade away' is an apt sentiment, given that the wooden cross that bears the words is slowly disintegrating.

It's comforting to know that when we turn up our toes there's somewhere we can rest in peace, wrapped in our faith, whatever that faith may be, and whether our final destination is a grassy mound, an abandoned hole in the ground, or a carefully laid out plot is immaterial, so long as in the heart of at least one person, we are 'gone but not forgotten'.

Map: Chiang Mai Foreign Cemetery

Devil's Delight

Wat Mae Kaet Noi, a garden where retribution isn't always devine

With my eye to the viewfinder of my camera, photographing two horny-headed demons sawing a woman in half with a devilishy fierce two-man felling saw, I sense a *frisson* of terror shiver through me at the thought that the two-metre high chap with blood dripping from his fangs overseeing the job might be eyeing me up from behind, weighing up whether I should even be allowed to get as far as the book where my life's deeds and misdeeds are recorded, or suffer his painful caress immediately. I move on rapidly, passing a man with an engorged penis that looks like a baby whale in the middle of a blood-bath, not wishing to know what he got up to in his earthly life – just in case I'd done the same!

Wat Mae Kaet Noi, north of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand, is one of twenty hell gardens in the country, and the 'surreal tapestry of pain'

conjured up here will give you more heebie-jeebies than all the other nineteen put together.

The hell garden's role is as a visual guide to the benefits of morality, and while some illustrate the terrors awaiting you in *Naraka*, the 136 fiery pits of Buddhist hell, in the mildly prosaic manner of having boiling oil poured down your throat if you were an alcoholic, or your tongue hacked vertically for lying, Wat Mae Kaet Noi brings modern technology into portraying the whole infernal hog of the terrifying treatment that awaits you for your earthly indiscretions.

Did you peddle drugs in the here and now, or more strictly speaking, the there and then? If so expect to be ridden over by a Hell's Devil with a horse's head, a fan on his motorbike like the wheel on Boadicea's chariot gouging out your innards. Not nice to animals and argued a lot with your parents? Getting mashed between mechanical rollers is just too good for you m'lad.

You may have thought that Buddhism was all saffron-robed monks and chanting, as far from the hellfire-and-damnation of Christianity as you could get, but even Buddha himself was pretty graphic about the lesser joys of hell in his teachings in the *Devaduta Sutta*.

> *The hell-wardens lay him down and slice him with axes. Then they hold him feet up and head down and slice him with adzes. Then they harness him to a chariot and drive him back and forth over ground that is burning, blazing, and glowing. Then they make him climb up and down a vast mountain of embers that is burning, blazing, and glowing. Then they hold him feet up and head down and plunge him into a red-hot copper cauldron… and as he is boiling there with bubbles foaming … he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings.*

Not surprising, really, that he feels painful, racking and piercing feelings given the moderately less than tender treatment he's just been put through.

I continue my Dantean stroll, flicking through the memory to see if I've committed any of the sins that will entitle me to have my hands removed by a three-metre saw driven by tractor engine (many of the retributions seem to involve saws of some kind) or boiled in a vat along with a dozen other miscreants (easy to keep at boiling temperature given we're in Hell, I suppose). I notice that some of the devils have red light bulbs for eyes. A sign invites you to drop a ten baht coin into a slot to get the full *son et lumiere*, which I do, and I'm entertained by the screams of the punished as they are forced into the bubbling cauldrons. Wat Mae Kaet Noi must he a helluva place at night when the light bulb eyes glow with pleasure, illuminating the ghastly punishments the grinning

horned demons inflict on the wicked, accompanied by their terrified screams.

I glance into a bamboo hut, and through the glow I see a montage of a woman giving birth, the whole graphic scene being very carefully spot-lit. It also seems to be the place to store severed heads, old brooms and empty paint pots. I pass on that particular sound and light show.

As if in illustration of the events that led up to the lady's condition, next to the hut is a statue that sends a shudder all men will relate to. Severing a penis in retribution for its wandering is relatively commonplace these days, but having it cleaved vertically by a woman with an enormous tongue that transmutes itself into a cobra's head is enough to keep the trouser snake firmly tucked away.

I'm curious as to why six naked beauties caressing a single man can be considered as Hell, but the deep red of his genitalia convinces me that this is one cat that won't be killed by curiosity, and move one.

Having worked my way through Hell I arrive at Heaven's Gate, where smiley-faced kids in school uniform listen enraptured to a pair of instructors in khaki. But before I get too complacent, I see behind them a group of colleagues who strayed from the righteous path and are hoisted on enormous hooks, their blood and gore glowing brightly on their bright white shirts.

At the Buddhist version of the Pearly Gates, instead of appearing before the benignly-bearded St. Peter, the newly-departed have to face the fiery-red Phya Yom, the Death King. It is Phya Yom's decision, made after careful consideration of your good deeds, neatly inscribed on a gold plate, against your badduns, scribbled on a scrap of dog skin, an animal which, in this case definitely isn't a man's best friend! If the dog skin gets the vote, off you go to the fiery pits of Naraka to atone for your deeds, accompanied by a demon who might have the head of a pig if he wallowed in corruption in life – which adds another connotation to the phrase 'pigs at a trough' and seems a perfect image for most politicians, a duck's if you were always starting fights, a rabbit if you were the jealous type, and any number of other animalistic forms depending on what your dubious lifestyle had been.

Eventually, though, I'm in Heaven, a peaceful garden of reclining maids with babes suckling contentedly on the breast, gilded Buddhas nestled in cascading deep pink bougainvillea, nymphet priestesses, and smiling couples united in heavenly happiness.

At least you can bear in mind as you suffer the excoriations of a demonic thrashing machine while it flays skin from bone, that, unlike in the Christian tradition, where Hell is for eternity, Naraka is only for doing your penance and sorting out your Kama for the next life. Even if you do come back as a cockroach, to be stomped on as you peacefully stroll across a kitchen floor, and it takes lives as a lizard, a goat, and a

braying mule to get back to human form, you at least have the chance of working your way to enlightenment, at which point you are safe for eternity from a revisit to the fiery furnaces – even though it's probably taken you a fair bit of that eternity to get you there.
Map: Wat Si Don Chai Pa Tung Ngam (Wat Mae Kaet Noi)

The Capital of Kitsch
Chiang Rai

The Thai way of life can be described in two words (or more strictly speaking, three), *sabai sabai*, meaning relax, enjoy yourself, have a good time, and *sanuk*, fun. This easy going acceptance of most things spreads to many aspects of Thai culture, even seeping into the decoration of their temples. Fat laughing ladies, Mickey Mouse clocks, miniature farms of the phantasmagorical sit happily alongside gilded effigies of Buddha in any one of his hundred-plus personifications. To a western mind it can appear to be verging on the kitsch at times, but if it is then it's kitsch with feeling, a sense of joyfulness.

White Kitsch

Wat Rong Khun, The White Temple, the ultimate wedding cake architecture with outrageous sculptures covering every square inch and internal murals that feature such unquestionably religious figures as Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson, a panoply of superheroes, the New York skyline, rockets coiled in the tentacles of enormous monsters and robots galore. At various times a few Buddhist traditionalists have voiced their displeasure at the sacrilege but everyone else regards it with a bemused smile.
Map: Wat Rong Khun, The White Temple

Black Kitsch

As counterpoint to the lightness and spirituality of the White Temple, the Black House (Baan Dam) is said to represent the darkness inside man, and the preponderance of cow and buffalo skulls, horns and bones, many made into uncomfortable-looking chairs draped in snake skins and leopard pelts, makes it pretty clear that Thawan Duchanee, another nationally renowned artist who conceived of the museum, had a fairly dour nature tucked away inside.

Darkness aside, the park is a rambling array of lovely wooden buildings with the appearance of traditional homes built around a shady village green. They are filled with an eclectic collection of *object d'art*, ninety-five per cent of it in wood; enormous plank tables, African masks, huge ceremonial drums on wooden-wheeled carts, dug-out canoes, intricately woven bamboo and basket ware, with not a single label to

explain why, what or where from. It is a movie-makers dream emporium for gothic set dressing.
Map: Black House (Baan Dam)

Colourful Kitsch

One of the lesser known temples of Chiang Mai but to my mind probably the most gaudily delightful, Wat Huay Sai Khao is a twenty-kilometre drive south of the city but worth driving very one of them for its sheer visual delight. It may seem like a Disneyesque playground in Burmese, Hindu and Islamic styles, but this is also a functioning temple, designed to illustrate that all religions can peacefully co-exist, open to everyone to celebrate their individual faith. But where many religious edifices demand dignity and solemnity, Wat Huay Sai Khao draws out the playful, the joyful, the sense of *sanuk*.

Bright and colourful, with a gigantic statue of Dvarapala bearing his fearsome scowl guarding the entrance, gawping sheep with welcome signs hung around their necks to counter the guardian's grimace, gods on rockets, axe-waving hunters on buffalo – children have a wonderful time here, treating it as a large playground more than a religious edifice – and no-one minds at all.
Map: Wat Huay Sai Khao

Clock Kitsch

Whatever else you do in Chiang Rai you must get yourself to the golden clock tower at the junction of Jet Yot and Baanpa Pragarn streets at seven, eight or nine on any evening. *Hoh Nalika Chalerm Prakiat*, to give it its formal name, was designed by Chalermchai Kositpipat, he of the White Temple fame, and the ornate structure has all the curlicues and embellishments to be found on said temple. But as impressive as the clock might be, it's the nightly *son et lumière* that brings on the smile.

As the hour strikes the clock tower begins to change colour, washing through red, blue, yellow, pink and purple light accompanied by Thai orchestral music. After five minutes a moment of stillness occurs before suddenly bursting into life once more with a rousing solo from a full-voiced lady, with the lights continuing their colourful cascade. The whole show lasts for ten minutes, which makes you think that some of the locals would much prefer the traditional bong, bong, bong to chime the passing hours.
Map: Hoh Nalika Chalerm Prakiat

Enter the Dragon
Kuan Im Chokchai, Chiang Mai

Known as the Goddess of Mercy, Kuan Im, variously known as Guan Yin, Guanyim, Kuan Yim, or Kuan Yin Guanyin, meaning 'Observing the cries of the world', is one of the most important deities of the Chinese Buddhist pantheon. She is goddess of fecundity and mercy, comforts the troubled, the sick, the lost, the senile and the unfortunate and is regarded as the protector of seafarers, farmers, and travellers. She cares for souls in the underworld and is invoked during post-burial rituals to free the soul of the deceased from the torments of purgatory. In other words, an all-round good egg. (Create a triumvirate of the Hindu Ganesh, god of education, knowledge, wisdom and wealth, the destroyer of vanity, selfishness and pride, and the Christian Saint Jude, Patron Saint of hope and impossible causes, and you would probably have all your bets covered in both this world and the next.)

Kuan Im is to be found in most Chinese temples in Thailand, but in Chiang Mai, with supposedly three hundred temples existing in the city, one of the most playful is Kuan Im Chokchai, also known as Kuan Yin Bodhisattava's Hall. It isn't the imagery of the lady herself that is the curiosity here, but a twenty-metre-long dragon that sinuously weaves its way across the temple garden. Enter its gaping jaws and you begin a journey illustrating the life of Buddha, beautifully painted on the curved and undulating walls, from birth through mustachioed young prince to enlightenment sat under a bodhi tree. When you leave the dragon, you return via the inside of a ferocious tiger, with a shorter version of illustrated innards entered by its bum.

The temple was founded by Abbess Bhiksuni Shi Kuang Seng, formerly Mrs. Varaporn Lertrangsi, a Thai-born lady, who decided to devote her life to work for the highest benefits of Buddhism and humanity, especially for children and ladies, who received her ordination at Mount Pu Tuo in China in 1991. The hall features many of the gods worshipped according to Chinese beliefs.

Followers of Kwan Yin are vegetarian, on the premise that her goal is to free all sentient beings from suffering and to help all beings on earth to attain enlightenment before entering the bliss of nirvana. Those who eat any kind of animal are warned that they might be consuming their relatives from a previous life. Cannibalism in spiritual form.

In a nod to your future prosperity, the open-air temple above the dragon and tiger have models of the twelve Chinese zodiac animals. Pick the one governing the month and year of your birth, drop a coin in the donation box below it, and hope for the best. To get an edge on mere hope, and to see what your future holds, look around for a tube containing a set of numbered sticks called, appropriately enough, fortune sticks. Sit with your legs folded under you and gently shake the tube until a stick falls out, (if more than one fall, take the one that hit the ground first). Nearby are a series of fortune cards; compare the number

on your stick to the number on the cared and voila! that's your fortune told, although as the cards are only written in Chinese you might well have problems actually discovering what the future holds for you. Back to hoping, and waiting and seeing.

Even for those sated with the overly ornate grandeur of most temples, Kuan Im Chokchai, is a pleasant spot that combines Disneyland with deity and comes out winning.

Map: Kuan Im Chochai

Thailand's Last Public Beheading

Boonpeng Heep Lek

For someone who was beheaded for matricide, Boonpeng Heep Lek has certainly been elevated from his station is life as a common criminal to a minor deity, worshiped by people looking for good luck, which seems a bit weird, considering he had his head lopped off.

On 19th August 1919, Thailand conducted its last public beheading, in the grounds of the Wat Phasi in Bangkok, Boonpeng Heep Lek being the main feature. Simply saying 'he was beheaded' lacks the drama of the entertainment, given that most forms of execution have their rituals and guidelines. At the time of his execution in the reign of King Rama V, these were as follows.

1. After a prisoner had been sentenced to death by the court, his case will be presented to the King for a final approval.

2. Before the execution, the prisoner will be whipped for three rounds with 30 strokes for each round.

3. On the way to the execution place, the prisoner might be punished with the five instruments of restraint; leg chain, handcuffs, neck chain, hard wooden stocks and waist chain.

4. A last meal will be provided for the prisoner, after which a monk will be invited to preach to him.

5. The prisoner has to sit down with both his legs stretched forward, and his body fastened to a wooden cross.

6. The prisoner's ears and mouth will be filled with clay, and the base of his neck which is going to be cut off, also marked with clay, after which, the second executioner will continually dance with his sword in front of the prisoner. As soon as it is believed that the prisoner's mind is calm, the first executioner will behead him from behind.

7. After the prisoner had been executed, both of his feet will be cut off at the ankles in order to take the leg chain off. After that, his flesh will be sliced and his body chopped into pieces then given to the vultures and crows.

8. His head will be placed on a sharp stick and displayed for everyone to see.

Nothing left to chance, it would seem. Thirteen years later, the Penal Code of 1932 abolished beheading.

(A similar list relating to execution by machine gun, once displayed in the now-closed Prison Museum in Bangkok, had as the tenth and final rule,

'*When the execution is over the fingerprints of the deceased shall be taken to ensure the correct person was executed.*'

A bit like closing the door after the horse has bolted, and not a lot of help to the poor deceased.)

A century after Boonpeng Heep Lek's gruesome demise, his gold curtain-draped shrine at Wat Phasi displays a widely different version of a cold-hearted kill. His gold-leafed visage is that of a professor, his peaceful features, enhanced by a pair of glasses someone has perched precariously on his nose, the arms of which stick upward at an acute angle, and centre-parted black hair. His once naked body, other than for a red (sculptured) loin cloth is now decorously draped in a faded red cotton shirt and short-sleeved blue labourer's jacket. Behind his hands, placed together in prayer, garlanded by loops of marigolds, is a sheathed sword that crosses his chest. It doesn't look to be a part of the original sculpture and, given his shrine's reverence, it's unlikely to have been placed there by someone as a bit of a cruel joke.

Wat Phrasi itself is an extraordinary place. More shrines than you can shake an incense stick at; every deity catered for, bevies of beautiful Hindu ladies, Ganesh in all his gilded elephant-headed glory, getting an on-going, gilded going-over with gold leaf. Unlike when gilding a picture frame, which is finally burnished, here gold leaf is loosely applied so that it flutters in the breeze, creating a mildly hallucinatory effect of movement.

Architecture is eclectic to say the least. Traditional Thai wooden structures with sweeping peaks on roof gables share ground space with Chinese pagodas The main building, five storeys high, looks like the architect built a cement block shell and then simply cladded on all sorts of ornamental fripperies; a few half pillars, some fancy fenestration, and a couple of domes. The painted ceiling in the stairwell warns of life in the hereafter if you don't behave yourself in the here and now.

I watch a lady in a blouse the pattern of which resembles a modern stained glass window of angular panels in pink, red, turquoise blue and pale gray, doing a round of prayer at each of the shrines. You'd need a full afternoon to complete the circuit, there are so many of them, each with

its own collection box, bowl, slot and jar to receive donations. My favourite is between a fat, Chinese style Buddha with a slot where his belly button should be, and a glass tank half-filled with water, in which sit four deities in bowls. The trick is to drop a coin through to slit in the glass top and hope that it gently settles in one of the bowls. I assume it brings more merit if it does. Judging by the amount of coins that have missed, the odds are about as good as those fairground machines where you try to time a dropped coin to push others below over a lip and into your pocket. In other words…not very good at all.

Lord of Success, Destroyer of Evil.
Ganesh Himal Museum, Chiang Mai

He may have an elephant's head with a curved trunk, big ears, and the huge pot-bellied body of a human, but despite his physical curiosities, Ganesh is the Lord of success and destroyer of evils and obstacles. He is also worshipped as the god of education, knowledge, wisdom and wealth, the destroyer of vanity, selfishness and pride, the personification of the material universe in all its various magnificent manifestations. I particularly like the 'magnificent manifestations.'

Set amongst rice paddies and the longan orchards in what might seem a patch of land way out in the sticks, 35km from Chiang Mai, the site for the Ganesh Himal Museum was specifically chosen by its owner, Pandara Theerakanond. Doi Ithanon, the mountain in whose shadow the museum sits, is the final tip of the Himalayan range that connects to India, linking the place of worship and education to the country where the elephant-headed god is one of the best-known and most worshipped deities in the Hindu pantheon.

You enter the complex through a narrow gate, welcomed by the smell of incense wafting through the air and the occasional melodious 'bongggg' of a deep-toned bell. The busily attractive courtyard, with its worshiping hall, shrines, pools and gardens, is a *melange* of Asian architectural styles; Mogul from the north of India, Lanna from northern Thailand, Apsara wall reliefs from Hindu mythology, outside of which is a whole building devoted to the ornate architecture of Islam. For many people it is a place of worship, for others it's a chance to see effigies of the most famous Hindu god in all of his thirty-two combinations, each with a different significance.

The onset of Mr. Theerakanond's obsession with all things Ganesh began when his father made him a gift of a small statue of the god – a curious gift for a 19-year old you might think. Thirty-six years later his collection now stands at around two thousand pieces, with half the

collection on display in two buildings just outside the main devotional complex. Images of the god in all shapes and sizes crowd the space, from one of the rarest in private hands, Ganesh with a female body, full bosomed with nipped-in waist, worshiped by ladies praying for a baby, to the whimsically cheap, chubbily cheerful pottery versions in gaudy colours, the likes of which would have been given away as prizes at an Indian country fair. Masks, puppets with hinged hands, head, feet and trunk, porcelain figurines, bronze castings, elegantly carved wood sculptures. Saying the collection is diverse and extensive is something of an understatement.

Each combination of one to five heads and between two and sixteen arms has a different meaning, and is worshipped by a different strata of society, need or occupation. In many representations each hand will carry a weapon, which probably accounts for the sixteen-armed version being the idol of choice of soldiers and policemen, while his masculine image sat on a lion is worshipped by those who wish to wield power over their many subordinates. The most popular form is with five heads and ten arms, although at one time only people of the highest rank could own one.

As interesting and attractive as the courtyard and buildings are, it is the newly-built, two-storey annex in peach and ochre that provides the entertainment value. Just inside the entrance is a small café and a larger gift shop, outside of which, one of the better quality wax models of a monk sits. Totally realistic, including the mug of tea on the bench beside him, the only obviously noticeable discrepancy between fact and fiction is that his feet hover an inch above the fake grass his bench rests on.

The kitschiness begins with a pool with the goddess Lakshmi as its focal point (painted blue, as are a number of Hindu deities, apparently to indicate all-inclusiveness). A recorded loop tells us that “Lakshmi is the angel of prosperity, riches and happiness; she emerges from the mouth of Vishnu who has transformed himself into a turtle to allow her to stand on water.” And she does indeed have a turtle as a water-borne platform.

Circulating languidly around the goddess, gold plastic plates with a candle in the centre of a circle of lotus blossoms, carry prayers and wishes in much the same way a *krathong* carries away your troubles during the Loi Krathong festival. Light the candle, place the plate on two golden hands, offer up a prayer, and then put the plate in the water (which circulates thanks to a pump in the corner of the pool), carrying the plate/candle/flowers in a clockwise direction, some to continue their loop indefinitely, others to arrive at the feet of Lakshmi.

An external walkway takes you to a room above with a different version of Lakshmi, once again standing in a pool with blossoms circulating around her, but it’s the smaller space at the rear of the

building that attracts the ladies. It's here, for the princely donation of 20baht, that they can drape themselves in beautifully coloured saris and jewelled accoutrement, prior to mounting the elegantly curved stairway, stopping halfway to be photographed under the stained glass window before arriving at the spacious upper floor where Indian dance music fills the air, and the sari-clad maids twirl in imitation of Bollywood actresses, occasionally accompanied by young men in turbans and long coats decorated in gilded embroidery, as they snap selfies to their heart's content.

What appear to be elegantly ornate, hand-painted arches are actually covered in wallpaper, an updated version of the flock wallpaper seen in every Indian restaurant of the mid-20th century. Displayed in this large, open space is an almost life-size waxworks of the marriage of Ganesh to Riddhi (representing prosperity) and Siddhi (intellectual and spiritual power), two maids created by Lord Brahma to cheer Ganesh up because he couldn't find an inamorata who didn't care for his trunk, and was causing major disruptions at the wedding of demi-gods because of it. The unhappy demi-gods complained to Lord Brahma who agreed to help them, giving Ganesh his own pair of life's partners. The guests have the appearance of a jolly crowd looking for a good time, decked out in all their party finery; bearded brahmas, multi-coloured, multi-headed and multiple-limbed major and minor deities, male and female alike looking at you from provocative kohl-highlighted eyes.
Map: Ganesh Himal Museum, Chiang Mai

Grandmother Faeng and the Prostitues Temple
Wat Kanika Phon, Bankok

I enter the temple as a young monk is chanting over gifts provided by a young couple and an elderly gentleman who pray along with him. When the chanting ends I hear a gentle easternly tinkling music calming the already peaceful ambiance. I subconsciously begin to sing along; 'Time goes by so slowly, and time can do so much' the lyrics of Unchained Melody, the 1955 hit by the Righteous Brothers – less Buddhist than best seller.

Originally, there was no official name for the temple, simply known as Wat Mai Yai Faeng, (Madam Faeng's Temple), but Wat Kanikopol carries its current name (roughly translated as 'the temple built from the earnings of prostitution', thanks to the lady who raised the readies to build it, one Madam Faeng (later to become better known as Grandmother Faeng), being the owner of a brothel in Tao Alley off

Yaowarat Road in China Town, known as Madam Faeng's Station. Despite the naughtiness of her chosen profession, Madam Faeng was a devout Buddhist of the Maha Nikaya sect and raised funds from the prostitutes in her brothel to build the temple in 1833, probably as some form of 'making merit', the Buddhist tradition of paying up to do good works in this life for a bit of an easier one in the next,

To celebrate the temple's opening, Madam Faeng invited Abbot To, a monk on the rise through the ecclesiastical ranks, to deliver a sermon, hoping that he would praise her contribution. Obviously a paragon of virtue, the monk said that the monies gained from prostitution spent in building the temple were considered 'sinful money', and that, for one baht of contribution, Madam Faeng would gain only ten satang of merit, one-tenth of the value of her offering. A bit of a putdown, really, given that the girlies had put their backs into raising the dosh, in some cases quite literally, and which just goes to show that being sanctimonious in religion while still taking the cash isn't anything new.

To add insult to injury, a life-size statue of the hard-nut abbot who gave her a bad time sits in a courtyard at the entrance, while poor old Grandmother Faeng, tucked away in a small niche behind the temple, only gets a half-body model.

The bust shows her in later years, although her distracted look of serenity and shaven skull, have led some wags to claim that it's the bust of a monk, re-purposed for the occasion, and in all fairness, you would be hard pushed to discount their claims. A be-jeweled headpiece has been placed upon her shaven pate, a style that could well have bedecked a chi-chi girlie of the gigglesome 1920s in gay Paree. On close inspection, Grandma's out-of-sync eyes give more an impression of been slightly relaxed on something that might well be illegal in Thailand these days.

In front of her are displayed three dancing girls, a pink Ganesh, the usual offering of marigolds, a couple of multi-coloured, dragony, peacocktail-ish decorations, a tray of lipsticks and perfumes, and three plastic disposable cigarette lighters, presumably to light her way in the never, never.

Years later, as the temple began to show its age, Grandma Faeng's descendants decided it needed renovating and petitioned King Rama IV (Mongkut) to provide a name, which he did, blessing it with the insalubrious name of Wat Khanika Phon, 'the Temple which was built from the profits of the prostitute'. Outside Thailand, Mongut is best known as the king in the 1951 musical and 1956 film *The King and I*, based on an earlier novel, *Anna and the King of Siam* by Margaret Landon, an American missionary, in turn based on the fictionalized diaries of Anna Leonowens, an Anglo-Indian woman who claimed to be British and became governess in the Royal Court of Siam from 1862 to 1867. (Both the book and the film are totally banned in Thailand and covered by the

punitive law of lese majeste, which gives prison terms of up to fifteen years to anyone insulting the royal family.)

Behind the temple a gong strikes, adding low and mellow 'good, good, good vibrations' to the air. A scraggy cream dog walks by with eyebrows that appear have been painted on with a blue felt-tip pen, apparently, according to a young monk 'to make him look beautiful'. (Thai women have a thing about having elegantly arched eyebrows tattooed on their faces.) Sadly, on this occasion at least, nature would have been better left alone.

Beside the entrance to the temple, two the plain wooden coffins are liberally covered with slips of paper that give the name of the person who has paid nine hundred baht to provide one for a poor person without the means to exit this earthly domain with dignity, and, yet again, earning the giver merit for their own next life.

My companion for the day, Natasha from Jo'burg, South Africa, wants her future told by the fortune teller at the gate of the Wat. In her thirty-three years reading the cards, Madam Amphon, whose table she has chosen, is unlikely to have come across anyone like Natasha, who, despite asking the same question in three different ways – i.e. will the person she recently met become a lover – she refuses to accept that the ace of spades turning up in each reading, despite eight shuffles per reading and the selection of twelve cards from a pack of fifty-two each time, the cards don't bode well for the immediate future. (When she tells me her relationship history later I can only think that Madam Amphon is pretty close to the mark.)

A fourth reading for her financial future throws up the dreaded ace again (This girl is really out of luck and reminds me of the lyrics from Born under a bad sign written by Booker T Jones, 'If it wasn't for bad luck I wouldn't have no luck at all') which Madam explains in this context means she has to be especially careful about money and travel over the next year. Not the best of news given that she has three separate flights to get her home the next day and, with a job as a financial advisor, it might not bode well for her clients.

God bless the girl, though, she only sees the positive side of everything, but what are the odds of the ace of spades turning up every time in four readings with eight shuffles and a selection of twelve cards each time. Nonetheless, it was one of the most entertaining ninety-nine baht I've seen spent in a long time, and even Madam Amphon found the whole thing amusing, probably at the occidental lack of faith in the spirits who are only, after all, trying to guide her.

Map: Wat Kanika Phon, Bankok

Lying in a Coffin for Good Luck

Other than Count Dracula and fetishists who get their rocks off by having sex in a coffin – and they do exist – spending time in a wooden box probably isn't a pastime most people would care to indulge in. In Thailand –where else! – it isn't seen as anything particularly unusual, although to be fair, 'coffin time' is pretty short, and done as a way to ensure Lady Luck smiles on your future.

Dressed in white, the traditional colour of attendees at Buddhist ceremonies, Thanathorn Jampakra, a lady in her mid-forties, takes the bunch of flowers offered by a monk in saffron robes in her closed hands as she recites a prayer, thanks him with a traditional *wei*, hands placed together in front of her face, raised almost to forehead level, and climbs into a coffin. She will lie there, her coffin draped with a pink cloth, for approximately one minute as monks chant. Guided by the monk overseeing the ritual, she first faces west, the direction her body would be buried, then turns to face the opposite cardinal direction, symbolising rebirth, changing her current bad fortune to good. The cloth is removed, Thanathorn climbs out of her temporary bed, having nicely warmed it for the next devotee. The ritual has cost her 100 baht, a little over £2.50, which includes the flowers, candles, and clothing that are part of the New Year ceremony.

"I've had a pretty terrible year. Both my brother and I lost our jobs because of Covid-19, a cousin was diagnosed with severe asthma, and I've been feeling completely stressed out for months. That's why I'm here today because I wanted to feel better. After the ceremony I felt like I was reborn, came back to life again and became a new person."

Not a bad £2.50s worth, then, particularly in a country like Thailand, where nothing is ever what it seems and there are always more than two sides to everything. If in years to come, Thanathorn once more experiences a run of bad luck, stress or simple downheartedness, she can always come back and have another lie down in the coffin to reverse her bad spirits.

The ritual, known as *Sadaokhrao*, meaning 'to get rid of bad luck', took part at Wat Bangna Nai temple in Bangkok, and draws more than one hundre people a day who hope it can improve their fortunes or give them a new beginning, although many temples in Thailand hold similar ceremonies all year round. While the ritual receives some criticism, it also reminds people that life is finite, we'll all die someday, so best be careful about how we live the life we have right now. Karma and reincarnation can come later.

The reasons for taking part in the ritual are a numerous as those that visit. Seventy-two-year-old Somjit 'Kai' Saetang, who had travelled from Kanchanaburi Province, two hours to the west of Bangkok, said that he had been suffering from severe stomach pains that hadn't responded to

any medication, and hoped the ritual would heal him; Suttida Thumuaypol, a nineteen-year-old student, was concerned about her university course. “I’m working really hard, but I don’t seem to be getting the grades I would like, I’m hoping I can do better over the coming year by taking part in this ceremony.”

Placing faith in the ritual goes even beyond personal difficulties. In June 2011, five members of the Pheu Thai party lay in coffins at Takien Temple in Nonthaburi Province ahead of the national election the next month, believing that it would bring them good luck and protect them from any violence during the election campaign. They also asked for amulets to protect them during the campaign. Chalong Riewrang, one of the prospective MPs, said in an interview that making merit can get rid of ill-fortune and provides candidates with moral support.

Not all Thai people believe in the power of the ritual; many Buddhists believe it is a bad omen for a living person to lie down in a coffin. The ceremony was the inspiration behind the 2008 Thai horror movie, *The Coffin*, a convoluted tale where, following the Thai custom to cheat death and rid oneself of bad luck, a man lies in a coffin for an evening and subsequently experiences a series of terrifying incidents.

Phrakru Samusangob Kittiyano, head abbot at Wat Ta Kien temple, around an hour from Bangkok, has a philosophical viewpoint. “The ceremony aims to rid participants of bad karma and help reconcile them to the inevitability of death. People cannot escape from being born, getting old, getting ill, and dying, so this is like practicing dying before you die for real – as when you die, your body has to be put in a coffin anyway.

Flight of Fancy

Appeasing Malevolent Spirits

When a Thai Airways International Airbus carrying more than 280 people skidded off the runway while landing at Bangkok’s Suvarnabhumi Airport on September 8th, 2013, injuring fourteen passengers, the cause was officially attributed to a crack in the airplane’s right bogie beam, which connects the wheels on an aircraft’s landing gear horizontally, causing the plane’s right landing gear to collapse on landing.

But in a country where the everyday lives happily alongside the supernatural, the Managing Director of Thai Airways, Mr. Sorajak Kasemsuvan, was taking no chances. He said his company would conduct a major ceremony to appease the malevolent spirits said to be haunting the airport. The ceremony would also thank the spirits for assisting with the successful operation to salvage the plane from the

runway, that latter possibly based on the idea put forward by Thai Rath, one of the country's best-selling newspapers, that reported a ghost in 'traditional costume' (which by chance just happened to strongly resemble the uniform Thai Airways flight attendants wear) helped evacuate the passengers from the aircraft shortly after it slid off the runway.

At the ceremony to unveil the airport in 2006, an official in charge of searching for explosive materials had fallen into a trance, claiming that he was being possessed by a 'grandfather ghost' who demanded a shrine be built on the airport compound to ward off evil spirits. In short order, eight shrines were built, including one dedicated to the Naga (a large, holy snake in Buddhist mythology, seen slithering up the steps to almost every temple; potentially dangerous but often beneficial to humans) which was presumably angered by the construction of the airport on what was once a swamp inhabited by snakes. Thai Rath reported the curses of the residing ghosts as the main reason the construction of the airport had been delayed for decades, although most Thai would site a more common reason, the corruption endemic in Thailand that plagued the project before its finalization in late 2005.

Dr. Smith Thammasaroj, former director of Suvarnnabhumi Airport, told Thai Rath he was convinced of the existence of supernatural entities around the airport even though he admitted he had never encountered any particular case personally. The scientist, who once headed Thailand's Meteorological Department, said he had invited so many psychics to conduct ceremonies, and constructed so many shrines that he'd lost count. "We even had to build a condominium for the ghosts to reside in," he said, because there were so many spirits that individual spirit houses wouldn't be enough.

The Thai Airways incident is only one of many transport accidents, such as minivan crashes, train derailments, boat crashes, said Transport Minister Chatchart Sitthipan, including a train headed from Malaysia to Bangkok's Hua Lamphong Station that derailed in the capital the day before the Thai Airways accident. The blame was put on a painting at Hua Lamphong Station that depicted a small obstacle on the rail track, which less-than-perfectly explains the frequent derailments – more than fifteen incidents that year alone – but is about as good an excuse for poor maintenance of both track and rolling stock as any in a country that finds it easier to blame malign spirits than managerial corruption and incompetence.

"There have been more deaths than usual," commented the Minister. "Many have suggested that the Ministry of Transport needs a large-scale merit-making ceremony."

Giants Versus Monkeys
Chiang Mai

Born in a traditional wooden river-side house in Nokhon Pathom Province, thirty kilometres west of Bangkok, Mr. Kem looked forward to living in a similar residence when he retired. With this in mind, for over twenty-five years he collected teak logs, eventually assembling one hundred and thirty pieces, many of them with the square hole cut in the flat log where a chain was passed through for an elephant to drag it out of the forest.

In preparation for his grand design, at the cusp of the millennium he travelled Thailand for a year, photographing the beautiful artwork of temple doors. The criteria for his photographs was simple; classic and beautiful; art and beauty predominated over religion. It was the artwork of the central areas of the country that attracted him most, with their use of imagery of Hindu gods, such as Braham and Indra, and a range of characters that even Mr. Kem can't identify.

A polite and charming man in his late sixties, you will know Mr. Kem is at Baan Devalai if you see his old, purple and white VW Beetle, decorated with posters of revolutionaries from the twentieth century; Che Guevara, Mao Tse Tung, Mahatma Gandhi, and more. In his youth, Mr. Kem was leader of the student revolutionary group at Chiang Mai University, and spent four years in the mountains of northern Thailand, fighting government forces.

In 2002, Mr. Kem began construction on his dream home at the foot of Doi Suthep, on which sits the wat of the same name, the most famous temple in the area. A team of five artists painted the beautiful doors and interiors made from his stock of teak, based on his collection of photographs. So beautiful was it, and with so many sacred images, that when a group of religious scholars visited a few years later, they told him that he couldn't live there, it was now the residence of gods. Possibly not the thing you most want to hear when you've put your heart and soul, and most of your savings, into a future home. But Mr. Kem accepted his fate and the fate of his once-upon-a-time home and acquiesced to the deities. The building now became Roitawarabarn Baandhawalai, a complicated translation, that became simplified to Baan Devalai, 'House of the Gods'.

While work on the Gods' House continued with a constant stream of artists, Mr. Kem bought a piece of land near Mae Rim, to the north of Chiang Mai, to try again to build his retirement home. Digging out a culvert during landscaping, the digger bucket hit a tree trunk under the mud, and the jaw dislocated. Repair done, they tried again – and dislocated it again. After five dislocations the driver prayed to the spirits of the tree and apologised for disturbing the 8.5mtr length of wood,

inviting it out of its resting place. Once safely lifted, it was left for six months to dry.

The legend of the tree spirit

Every passionate enterprise deserves to have a legend attached to it, and such is the case with Mr. Kem's discovery. What no one knew while they were busy dislocating digger jaws, was that they had uncovered a length of ironwood, a generic name for a range of species of very hard wood, perfect for carving, known in Thailand as Ta-khian wood (*Hopea odorata*), made even more important in this case because it was estimated by experts to be around 1,200 years old, and had lain undisturbed for almost a century.

In Thai folklore, Nang Ta-khian is a female forest spirit who inhabits a Ta-khian tree, sometimes appearing as a beautiful young woman wearing *chut Thai*, traditional Thai costume. Nang Ta-khian takes great care of the area surrounding her tree and travels with it should it become the beams, stilts, or pillars of a temple. The righteous have nothing to fear, but woe betide the wicked or immoral should they cross her path.

The Ta-khian tree is almost never felled for lumber, other than for use in a Buddhist temple, where the merit of the monks is considered sufficient to render the spirit harmless. But if a piece is presented to you as a gift, what's a person to do, given the rarity of such a prize? Mr. Kem was about to find out.

"As the wood was drying, I thought about what I could do with this gift. I had intended to have a statue of Buddha carved, but about two months after we found it, I had a dream. Ganesh presented himself to me, and I knew that I must use the precious wood for him."

The decision made, Mr. Kem had to decide which of the thirty-two forms in which Ganesh appears would make the most of his find.

"I didn't want to waste wood. If I had decided on a sitting position we would have had to cut the tree trunk. I didn't want to do that. If I chose a five-head option it would have ten arms, which would have made it too wide; one head and two arms would be smaller than the wood and would have wasted a lot. Finally, I chose three heads with six arms, which meant small wastage."

Thailand's best woodcarvers

Fortunately for Mr. Kem, two of the top wood-carving teams in Thailand are based near Chiang Mai, one in San Kamphaeng, famous for its hot-water springs, the other in San Pa Tong, home of the weekly buffalo market. The precious ten-ton cargo was hauled to San Pa Tong, where a team of five carvers laboured for two years to create the largest sculpture of Ganesh in the world carved from a single piece of wood. On

11th June 2013, Ganesh was set in place at Baan Devalai, at a spot dictated by a halo of moon in another of Mr. Kem's dreams.

In 2014, Mr. Kem gave up trying to build himself a home, and moved to a condominium on the edge of Chaing Mai, converting his dreamed-of home into an art gallery and God pavilion.

Meanwhile, work continued on Baan Devalai with a team of eight artists, their paintings and carvings covering almost every inch, including ceilings and eaves, with the invitation 'Please Touch' posted everywhere. The grand images are glorious, but it is the small, almost unnoticed detail that defines the beauty and quality of the building as much as the more overwhelming murals and portraiture.

Take the eleven square pillars on the middle floor supporting the roof, for example, each around four metres tall. Three artists, working independently, will spend around six weeks creating designs on each side, six months per pillar. Each design is different, the detail delicately picked out with ultra-fine brushes, with large areas covered in pure gold and silver leaf.

While most of the teamwork on the main building, one young man works alone on what will eventually become the apogee of Mr. Kem's dreams.

Epic art

The Night Watch, Rembrandt's most ambitious painting, measuring 3.5 by 4.5mtrs, featuring thirty-four figures, took three years to complete; Michelangelo lay on his back decorating the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel with heavenly hosts for a year longer. At Baan Devalai, Porndai Sopit has spent six years slowly working his way along a curved panel 2.5mtrs high by ten long, made from six hundred pieces of teak, 20cm square, tongue and grooved for strength, and to create the curve. By the time it is finished in 2024, he will have painted fifty thousand individual warriors, fifty chariots and enough animals to fill a pretty respectable zoo, depicting the battle of the Giant and the Monkey, a story taken from the *Ramayna*, one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India.

The attention to detail is superb, which may seem a bit wasted, given that it will form the ceiling of the domed roof of Mr. Kem's most adventurous project to date, a twenty-year mission to create a theatre and art gallery in the shape of the Monkey-God Hanuman, son of the God of the Wind, twelve metres high, fourteen wide, with enough space to sit one hundred people, using 250 tons of copper costing 2,000 million baht ($61million). At sixty-seven, Mr. Kem isn't sure he will be around for the opening, but his Buddhist faith supports him in the hope that his children will continue his work.

Map: Baan Devalai

Meeting the Abbot,
Chiang Mai,

By the side of the highway from Chiang Mai to Mae Rim, a lady with a huge sun hat sells slices of freshly peeled pineapple from the back of a pick-up truck. I buy one but don't want to eat it by the roadside so look for somewhere else to sit. I see a temple in the distance, so turn off the road, park my bike, and slip around the back of the building.

I sit on a cement bench moulded to look like planks of hewn wood – not very successful – and take out my plastic packet of four slices of pineapple, with a short wooden skewer closing the packet, used to delicately hold the slice. As I'm opening the packet, two elegantly dressed ladies walk by and smile at me. I offer them a slice. One raises an eyebrow as if I've contravened some etiquette law, while the other smiles even more, rubs her stomach, and says, 'Full'.

I bite into my second slice and see a monk locking a door to what looks like an office. He walks over to me with a polite smile, his arms and shoulders tattooed with designs that supposedly ward off evil. An arc from ear to ear across where his hairline would be shows a thin line of tattooed script, faded with the years. I feel as if I'm about to get a ticking off for eating in the temple grounds, so I *wai*.

'You speak Thai?' he asks, his polite smile broadening, and staying that way even when I admit I don't. Pointing at his chest he informs me, 'I'm abbot.' I wai again, this time deeper and with my hands higher on my forehead to show greater respect. He points at me, 'How many years?'

'Sixty-nine,' I admit, although I'm being a bit previous because my birthday isn't until next week.

With a big grin he slaps his palm on his chest gives a thumbs up and says, 'Sixty-five!' as if he's just trumped me.

He goes into the back door of the temple. I finish my pineapple and ride on.

Wat Chaloem Phrakiat Worawihan
Bangkok

At the pier at Nonthaburi, Station N60 of the Chao Phraya river bus in Bangkok, I pick up a ride on a long-tail boat across the river, my destination Wat Chaloem Phrakiat Worawihan, supposedly one of the places Bangkokese go for a bit of R&R. In front of me as I leave the pier on

the west side of the Chao Phraya is a wide street of shops that don't sell necklaces, flip-flops, postcards of the Grand Palace or other tourist-attracting tat; back to the real world of hardware stores and motorbike repair shops, short side streets of relatively new houses, each with a balcony above a carport, most of which are used as open-air kitchens, living rooms or clutter spaces, and almost all of them have plants growing in large pots. One owner has created an almost secret entrance, guarded by a black ornate wrought iron gate almost obscured by an overflowing of floribunda.

I stop at a roadside café whose walls and roof are of plastic sheeting, hanging to just above a picket fence. Plastic cloths of gaudily coloured fruit brighten the tables. Despite the pictures of prawn, chicken, and squid dishes, the chef's menu is take-it-or-leave-it, minimalistic in the extreme; a pan of pork in sauce, a pedestrianised version of *khao ka moo*, the wonderful Thai stewed pork dish, to which he adds noodles, bean sprouts and a few chopped leaves and spices, all served with a bowl of rice. On each table is a bottle of water and another bottle I take, without my glasses, for iced tea. I try to twist the top off but the chef takes it from me and flips the lid open. It's then I realise I'd just been about to take a mouthful of fish sauce. People call by for take-aways in small plastic bags, others take a bowl and move on. The pace is so slow that I hadn't realised that as I watched the world go by at the front, the diner had been slowly filling up behind me until almost every table was taken.

Chaloem Phrakiat Worawihan is a total delight after the hyper grandeur and ornamentation of the better-known temples of Bangkok. A rubbed-around-the-edges, Disneyesque affair, where the devotional flowers have seen far better days, a few candles are melted into globules of yellow wax, the grass around the trees and shrubs is in need of a good trim, paintwork peeling and showing damp patches, roof tiles lacking the lustre of many of its more famous counterparts, but it is completely and utterly charming.

Once inside its walls, the approach to the main door of the temple is lined by small plaster figures – fat little smiling monks, sailor boys saluting, beautiful maids with diamonds in their navels waiing, long-necked pink flamingos nibbling at the grass – two by two like Noah's animals entering the Ark.

At 1.15 on a Monday afternoon, I'm the only person there, other than a cleaner swishing her broom around, who gives me a glorious smile when she spots me, and a couple with a young girl of around two who, at the behest of her father, give me a pretty wai. I reply in kind. Cocks crow, birds chirrup and all else is silence, as a squirrel skitters along a cable passing through trees to get from one to another.

Mine is the solitary pair of shoes outside the door of the shrine temple. A monk in saffron robe dozes on a folding bed tucked down the side of the main altar. He rolls over, sees me, and then rolls back again.

I sit peacefully, enjoying the quiet. The silence is broken by the ring of a mobile phone, and the monk uncurls from his robe to answer his smartphone. A few moments later the Westminster chime of a mother of pearl inlaid long-case clock behind me brings me back to the 21st century.

The Chaloem Golden Jubilee Park, just behind the Wat, is everything a park should be; a lake with a pagoda in the middle, humped-backed bridges over rivulets, a playground for kids, open-air gymnasium for adults, similar to the one I used regularly when I lived in Valencia, Spain, although mine didn't carry quotations attached to the machines as this one does.

'*Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage*.' Anais Nin.

'*A positive attitude may not solve all your problems, but it will annoy enough people to make it worth the effort.*' Herm Albright.

'*The secret of staying young is to live honestly, eat slowly, and lie about your age*.' Lucile Ball.

God bless Lucille Ball.

Map: Wat Chaloem Phrakiat Worawihan

SPAIN

Valencia's Cementario Municipal

A couple of times a year I would take a bike to Valencia's Cementario Municipal, for no reason other than I like the ride and the place has some wonderfully kitsch memorials. Normally it's quite quiet, but I was taken by surprise on a recent visit to see a crowd of mainly elderly people milling around. It turned out they were there for the departure of the *Virgen de los Desamparados*, the patron saint of the Valencian Community, who had spent the night in the chapel as part of her brief annual holiday away from the Basilica in the centre of Valencia. Of course, we're talking about a statue, here, but it seems she doesn't get out of the city much, so I suppose even a night in a cemetery is a change of scenery.

Just as I arrived, the bearers that carry her hefted her platform onto their shoulders and, swaying ever so gently, followed by a group of adoring, singing sycophants, began to carry her out of the cemetery – in reverse, possibly so she could get a last view of her home-away-from-home until next year's hols in May. As they approached the arched main gate they gingerly dipped to make sure the Sainted Lady's crown didn't clip the low metalwork of the arch. A group of young people busily gathering in the folding chairs used for the service were laying side bets as to whether she'd make a clean getaway. The hushed crowd watched nervously as their lady bobbed under the archway, then the grand candelabra in the entrance foyer, applauding each successful dip, ending with a tremendous ovation as she cleared the third and final obstacle, and once more emerged into unobstructed sunshine.

The cemetery is huge, and at almost every intersection there's a map of the layout. While it falls short of actually having a 'You Are Here' arrow, at least you can work out where you are by the numbered aisles. As far as the map tells you, it has both an Islamic and British cemetery, the former, marked by a crescent moon, tucked as far to the back as you can get without actually climbing over the perimeter wall, but of the other, I couldn't find any sign other than the union flag at the bottom of the panel to tell me it exists. I set off in the direction of the *Cementario Islámico* interested to find out how different their form of burial was.

You walk through seemingly never-ending rows of niches, spreading off in all directions, like rows of cottages in a mining village, but with too many windows and not enough doors. The departed of the rich and famous sleep in better homes than some of the living people I know, their sepulchres ornately outlandish in a sort of 'wedding cake' style of architecture.

While some of the mausoleums and headstones give a nod in the direction of modernity, and not always a polite nod, as in the case of the particularly ugly erection of the Familia Cortes Muñoz, that stands like a two-storey homage to insipid pink marble and uninspired coloured leaded glass, most are decorated in the traditional manner; angels, crucified Christ, figures of the Virgen de los Desamparados and the like. Most have oval photos of the deceased, faded to sepia over time – although if I'm going to have a picture of me on public display for decades to come, I'd rather it was something of me in my prime, even if I'm not sure I ever had one. Many are decked out as forever spring in garlands of gaudy plastic flowers, the colours of which would never be found in nature. Scattered here and there are the niches of those who didn't have the readies for a permanent memorial, such as Manolita Serra, who shrugged her mortal coil on 18-X-1988, and possibly her relative Maria Luise Serra, who joined her in heaven on 16-VII-1999, who

had to settle for having their names and dates of departure simply scraped in the drying plaster with a stick.

Suddenly a siren as eyrie as a war-time bomb alert rents the air, warning that the cemetery will close in fifteen minutes. I still haven't found the Islamic cemetery and, as much as I like the architecture and tranquil surroundings, I don't fancy spending the night here. I make a dash to where the sign told me it should be, only to find it locked up. Apparently I should have asked for the key.

I ask the attendant where the British Cemetery is and he points over the road to a small building, the British Protestant Cemetery, padlocked and chained, that looks drab and colourless compared to the Technicolor funereal theme park behind me. It would seem that the followers of Muhammad are deemed closer to God than the Protestant infidels because at least they are allowed inside the Catholic domain of the Cementario Municipal.

As I leave, an elderly lady, not long from her niche, leans on her walking stick and carefully picks up some of the rose petals previously scattered at the feet of the Virgin. Across the street the florists put away their buckets of blooms and ornate arrangements, before hosing down the pavement, possibly hoping that there will be a decent crowd tomorrow to clear the shop before all they've got left are a collection of fading blossoms.

Map: Cementario Municipal

Death on a Bright Winter's Day

Valencia Cathedral

At 2.15 pm on Monday 22 January 2003, a 32-year-old woman, identified only as M.S.C. leapt from the bell tower of Valencia Cathedral La Miguelete. Her father, who had been with her moments before her death, had to be heavily sedated but confirmed that she had been receiving treatment for depression.

The Cathedral of St. Vincent the Martyr, in the centre of Valencia, is a hotchpotch of architectural styles. Like many of the oldest buildings in the city, it has been added to and subtracted from as succeeding conquerors strove to display their might and subjugation of the city.

As a 'must-see' on any tourist itinerary you can guarantee that crowds of sightseers will be gawking at its monumental form at almost any time of the day. As the central place of worship in the city, on 22nd January each year Valencianos gather at a special mass to pay tribute to San Vicente, the patron saint of Valencia, attended by brilliantly costumed Dames of Honour, the Mayor and dignitaries in formal dress.

As with any fiesta day in the city, the wide pavements in front of the Cathedral were lined with tented stalls selling local produce and souvenirs.

For two architectural historian friends it was to be the high point of their visit to Spain, but being conscious that one person's tourist venue is another person's place of worship, we sat outside on the stone benches and ate our ham and cheese sandwiches, waiting for the Mass to end. As Mass's have a tendency to do, this one went on for longer than expected, so we took a walk around the outside of the building to marvel at this stunning monument to Christianity. During the ten minutes it took for our short amble, a young woman climbed onto the parapet of the bell-tower, two hundred and seventy stairs up, seventy meters high, had taken her last look at the meandering humanity below - and stepped off into oblivion.

It's the stuff of American detective stories; the 'jumper' who hovers on the edge of a forty-storey office building while a caring, sensitive cop tries to talk him back into the safety of his arms and the bosom of his family. If he fails, his hard-bitten partner, stoically chewing his cigar, signs it off in the 'been there, seen it all, ticked it off' file and tells the gathering rubber-neckers to 'go on home, there's nothing more to see here.' But to turn a corner, where a few minutes earlier you had been enjoying a picnic in the sun, listening to the town band playing for fun while they waited for the parade to begin again, and see a pair of legs sticking out from beneath a blanket is a curious sensation. You know immediately what it is and you know exactly what has happened.

If there had been shouting or any other signs of intense activity as we arrived back in the square we may have been forewarned of something serious having occurred. But there wasn't. We'd watched the puppeteer at the back of the cathedral tell his story with a couple of characters made from zips and sacking; we'd photographed the pigeons fighting and defecating on the reclining statue in the centre of the Fuente del Tribunal de las Aguas. All the while, fifty meters away, a young girl had decided that enough was enough, and while the puppeteer took his bow and collected his pesetas, a life was passing by the Romanesque statuary of sainthood to end abruptly in the path of visiting worshipers.

It's said by those who understand these things that a fall of forty feet will almost inevitably end in death. Imagine the impact from five times that height, from the top of a twenty-storey building. The bones disintegrate and internal organs explode. The amazing resilience of the skin can hold this mush together, just as a sheep's bladder will retain the animal's intestines while it is cooked to produce the Haggis for a Burn's Night feast.

By the time we arrived back in the square, the body had been covered, first by a piece of ragged plastic sheeting taken by the police from a

balloon seller who had been standing close to where the woman landed. Over the plastic was laid a brilliantly striped coloured blanket. From beneath this, at one end, projected a pair of bright red trousers and black boots, twisted at an awkward angle as if the puppeteer at the rear of the building had had an accomplice working the front, whose puppet's strings had become detached and the marionette thrown aside. From the other end of the gaudy fabric a deeper red spread through the ragged plastic fringe and across the flagged footpath.

A police van, used to bring the extra staff needed to monitor the procession to the cathedral, was waiting only metres away from where the scene took place. The stock of the balloon seller had been pushed inside, while the poor man sat on a stone bench in a state of shock. From the windows of the van the grinning cartoon faces of Goofy, Mickey Mouse, Dumbo, and their Disneyworld friends, stared blankly at the human drama taking place before them.

Around the now quiet square, young women, the same age as the recently dead, sat in café chairs sobbing as their equally stunned mothers comforted them; men in Sunday and Saint's Day best held their shaking wives in their arms, and others could do nothing more than stare in shocked disbelief.

'I saw it happen,' said a quivering American voice from behind me, 'It's the worst thing I've seen in seventy years on this earth.'

Linden Fellows was part of a tour from a cruise ship spending the day in Valencia. Slim and well mannered, his seventy years hung on him as if he had only just turned fifty. At about the time that my friends and I had been finishing our ham and cheese, Linden's wife and two fellow traveller's had decided they'd had enough foot slogging for the day; they were more interested in shopping, and as there's little open on a fiesta day in Spain, they'd decided to take a taxi back to the ship for a late lunch. Linden, though, wanted to make the most of his first trip to the country and decided to hike the steep flight of stairs to get a panoramic view of the city. It was worth it - no one at the top of the bell-tower other than a father with two small children, a middle-aged woman, an older man, and a young girl with long dark hair dressed in bright red trousers, sitting quietly by herself.

He admired the view for a while before retracing his steps down to the square in front of the cathedral. He'd just begun to mooch around the stalls set up for the saint's day market when he heard shouts of alarm. By the time he'd turned and followed the eye-line of the people filling the square, the tumbling figure had travelled two-thirds of the way in its descent to the unforgiving stone paving.

His immediate thought was that it was a dummy, one of the obscure rites which often form part of Spanish fiestas. He didn't connect the twisting flash of red he saw plummeting downwards with the red

trousers he'd seen at the top of the tower; he didn't even recall any particular sound as it hit the ground but, being near the front of the crowd when he stepped forward to see what the next stage of the performance would be, he recognised the dark hair and red trousers of the girl he'd seen sitting quietly by herself five minutes earlier.

'You just don't register these things,' he said, 'They are just vague people moving around admiring the view, the same as you are doing, and then a few minutes later one of them is dead.' A sudden and spectacular death, on a bright winter's day, in front of the largest crowd to gather in front the cathedral on the busiest day of the year.

'It was strange though, seeing how she landed. Her legs were twisted at an unreal angle, but her hands lay together across her chest as if she'd put them there herself, and her eyes stared upward, almost to the point where she'd jumped. Her face looked really peaceful.'

As the ambulance arrived to remove the body, the crowds began to drift away. Business picked up again at the market stalls and, after a fifteen-minute delay, the celebratory procession, led by two mounted soldiers in full regalia, left the cathedral, carefully avoiding the dark stain in front of the ornate entrance.

A Night of Fire and Fairies

Celebrating the summer solstice in Spain

Anyone acquainted with the giddy Shakespearean eros of A Midsummer Night's Dream will be aware of the high jinks that Bottom and his pals got up to under the influence of the fairies during the night of the summer solstice. The solstice begins the moment the sun enters the sign of Cancer (usually on June 21) and in the northern hemisphere marks the middle of summer, when the sun reaches its most northerly position in the sky at its furthest point from the celestial equator. It's the time when the northern hemisphere experiences the longest day and the shortest night, and has been celebrated by many cultures throughout the ages. Many of the ancient celebrations held in different parts of the world to mark this event show a remarkable similarity in their ritual. The word 'solstice is Latin', meaning 'sun stands still', reflecting the impression that the sun appears to rise and set in exactly the same place at this time of year.

Customarily, fires were lit on mountaintops, beside rivers and streams, and in the market places and streets of towns. Fertility rites were performed to ensure a bountiful harvest in the coming year and no crops were gathered until the first fruits were blessed on the day. The bonfires were believed to symbolise the sun's power, and to help it to renew its energy as it began its downward course across the horizon.

These celebrations have continued to this day, thanks to the Catholic Church who chose midsummer to celebrate the birth of John the Baptist. They incorporated the ancient summer solstice festival into Saint John's Day, and told the people that their fires should represent him rather than the sun; but, apart from the shift of emphasis, the actual ritual has changed little down the ages.

Midsummer Eve was apparently second only to Halloween in its significance to the wee folk — fairies, sprites and pixies. In order to see them you gathered fern seed at the stroke of midnight and rubbed it on your eyelids. But take note: To avoid being enchanted as Titania and Bottom did, you had to carry rue in your pocket or turn your jacket inside out. Young women picked Saint-John's-wort to attract a lover and children left food in their gardens for the fairies.

In Spain, fires are still lit for San Juan, continuing this age-old rite performed by their ancestors, in an unbroken chain throughout the centuries. Through the towns and cities of Valencia, the burning of the Hogueras, those fantastical statues that originated from the 'spring clean' held by joiners' workshops, are the more obvious symbols of the coming of summer. But in the small villages in the mountains the celebrations go on much as they have for generations.

Beniaya is a tiny pueblo high in the mountains of the Sierra Fordada, north of Alicante, where on Nit de Sant Joan (the Valenciano version of San Juan), the village square will be filled with long tables as villagers bring food to share.

"For us it is a village fiesta, where people can come and join in our celebrations of this special night, *la nit més profana*," (the most profane night). "The street has no owners." says Irma Fortaleza, who has lived most of her life in the village.

The celebrations begin at about eight in the evening, when everyone gathers to build the bonfires and make garlands of verbena, which everyone, man, woman and child, will wear. A mound of the white-flowering plant will be placed in the square and, after demonstrations of how to weave the solstice coronet, everyone gets to make their own and those for friends and loved ones. Small fires will be lit throughout the pueblo, which will ultimately be brought together at midnight when dancing, singing, fireworks and general roisterous merriment will continue until dawn, the coming of a new day and new life.

As the fingers weave and the fires burn, groups of wandering minstrels, stilt walkers and dancers wearing ornate masks wander through the festivities, and if you've a mind to join them, everyone is welcome to bring along drums, guitars, flutes, or even old pans from the kitchen to help make music. Couples hold hands as they jump the fire to secure their love for the next year – but only when it has died low enough not to self-imolate! Everyone is invited to bring a small token of the

passing year and, as the symbolic fires burn, throw it into the flames, to carry away last year's bad news. For future benevolence the verbena crown joins the token in the fire, taking a wish with it.

The (Temporary) Monastic Life
Gilet, Valencia

Since the dark days of the middle-ages weary pilgrims have knocked on the doors of Spain's monasteries and convents, seeking a place of sanctuary or sometimes just a meal and night's sleep. Other than the four routes of the famous Camino de Santiago there are few long distance pilgrimages these days, although more and more people are seeking places of peace and tranquillity – a different form of sanctuary.

As times change, many of the country's monasteries have opened their doors to a different type of traveller, and now more than two hundred offer accommodation throughout Spain and its islands. Some act as small hotels with almost no contact with those living there under religious orders, but many act as places of retreat, with simple rules asking visitors to respect the peace of their surroundings and mealtimes. They will usually be made welcome at religious services, but it will not be forced upon them.

The range of monastery accommodation is enormous, with some offering modern en-suite rooms, while others provide beds that make you feel as if sleeping in them is part of a penance you have to pay for putting a toe into monastic life. But one of the main attractions – apart from the contemplative quiet – is the low price, from as little as €20 per night, sometimes including full-board, which will often as not be made from vegetables grown by the monks and nuns themselves, and will be good hearty regional recipes.

People travel many miles in search of monastic tranquillity, but my trip to peacefulness was a mere twenty minutes from my home in the centre of Valencia.

I first came across the Monasterio de Santo Espiritu de Monte, in Gilet, when I was walking in the Valle de Toliu, part of the Sierra Calderona, a range of mountains that skirts the village. The only part of the monastery accessible to the public is a small garden, with the stages of the cross marked out around the walls on tiled plaques housed in small recesses topped with glistening blue-tiled rooves, and where I sat for a while, drinking in the sunshine and quiet.

When I went back a second time it was as a *visitante*, someone who is there seeking a place of calm and quiet, a place to think – or just to let go of the stresses outside the monastery walls.

When I arrive I sit in the public café for ten minutes. I'm not sure what I'm expecting, but I feel the need to prepare myself with a contemplative coffee. Imagine a throwback to the 70s, and here you have it, but this isn't retro in any sense of the word other than it never got fancied-up in the first place. Even though I'm the only person in the place, other than the old chap tending the long chrome-topped bar, the radio is turned up full blast, as if preparing me for the next couple of days of quiet, like a smoker having his last fag before quitting.

I leave the café and walk through the garden to the monastery's entrance. Above an ancient and blackened wooden door is a tiled image of St. Francis of Assisi, denoting the orders patron. I pull on a rope dangling from a brass bar, expecting to hear the boom of deep-toned bell. I'm a bit let down when I hear a tinkle more in tune to summoning a maid for tea than a jovial monk, but I spot a buzzer at the side, which seems the way that the modern pilgrim gains entry. While I wait I look at the various religious *objects d'art*, the usual assortment of key rings, book markers, postcards, medallions, and I'm tickled to see a Zippo lighter imprinted with the image of the Mother and Child – perhaps a reminder from above to the quitting smoker as he tries to sneak another 'last' cigarette.

As well as being a *visitante*, I'm here to meet the *Guardián*, the brother who supervises the other brothers. I hadn't really expected to meet a Friar Tuck-like figure, roundly filling out his habit, with a tonsure shaved at the crown of his head, but I'm faintly surprised when José Luis walks towards me in a reserved sort of way – probably he's a little nervous, as I doubt if the Franciscan order gives much in the way of media training for interviews – but he's the image of modernism; shirt hanging out over his jeans, spiky hair and closely trimmed beard, and closer to forty than the venerable age I was expecting. But a charming and delightful chap, completely at ease with his life and his surroundings.

We sit in the cloister, with the sun shining on the statue of St. Francis in the pretty little garden, almost as if spot-lit from heaven.

"People get confused because even though we are called a *Monestario* we are actually a *convento*, because in a *monestario* the monks live a contemplative life, whereas we are *frailes*, friars, and we live an active life, working within the community. In the Franciscan Order we are known as *hermanos menores*, brothers who work with ordinary people, as distinct from during the times of St. Francis when the nobility were known as the *mayors*."

The monastery dates from 1404, and was established by Doña María de Luna, wife of the Valencian king, Martín IV, *el Humano*. The land came under the stewardship of a body of Franciscans called the *Observadores*, who looked for places of tranquillity in which to build their monasteries,

in the belief that being close to nature allowed them greater communion with God. They chose well with Santo Espiritu, because the forests and mountains that surround the building not only provide a great natural beauty, but are also a major draw for those seeking a peaceful and contemplative stay.s Since 1744 there has been an *hospederia*, a place where people could rest in tranquillity and, if they wish, talk with the brothers. And so it continues today.

The accommodation is separated into two parts, the home of the frailes, and the *casa de spiritualidad*, where the visitantes stay and where the friars hold their courses. As José Luis and I walk along a passageway in the casa de spiritualidad a robed figure emerges from one of the rooms, the epitome of the cartoon nun, as round as she is tall and with a beneficent smile. She holds the door open as a gaggle of fresh-faced novices follow her out, all laughing and giggling like any group of schoolgirls. I'm surprised at how young they are, but José Luis tells me that there are still quite a lot of young people entering the church, even if the general idea of monks and nuns is one of aged folk, slowly fading away in their cloistered life.

I'm shown to my room, a small simple affair, with a bed, a desk and chair, and a private bathroom, all newly restored and modernised, with lots of natural pine. The only religious item is a small cross on the wall. The communal areas are equally simple, and everyone eats together – *comida casero*, good home cooking, and the same as the monks themselves eat.

"Some monasteries only admit men or women, not both sexes together, but we are open here. All we ask is that people respect the times for meals and the peace that others are here to enjoy. Visitors are welcome to join us in prayer, but it isn't obligatory."

There's little to disturb the quiet, other than the twittering of the birds and the tolling of the bells. Too much tranquillity might get rather boring, but most people spend a considerable amount of their time walking in the surrounding mountains, almost exhausting themselves in the process.

"In these days more and more people, both men and women, are searching for places of peace and quiet, somewhere they can relax and think about their problems. There is so much more stress and tension in the world, depression and difficulty in human relations that people get overwhelmed, so they go out in the mountains and walk, and walk, and walk, physically tiring themselves out. Much of the tiredness we feel these days is psychological tiredness, not physical tiredness and when the walking tires you physically and you sleep well, this helps a great deal. It's *muy, muy bueno*."

And so it is. For my short stay I walk and walk, experiencing the peacefulness of the mountains while letting my thoughts roam. I eat well

and sleep well, and even though I can't say I leave as a new person, I certainly feel more peaceful than when I arrived. But could I not have achieved the same by taking a few trips from home or staying in a *casa rural*?

"I think we need more places like this. These places of silence and contact with nature are absolutely necessary and fundamental in a society where there is so much stress and tension. People need contact with nature – it's free and it's a gift. They need contact with simplicity and to learn what few things they really need to live. Far less than we think. It helps them to question the type of life they are living."

Map: Monasterio de Santo Espiritu de Monte

From Flamboyant to Solemn

Semana Santa – Easter celebrations in Spain

Semana Santa is the biggest national fiesta in Spain, with parades that feature solemnity and gaudiness in equal measure. The most glamorous are held in Andalucia, in Malaga and Seville especially, although aficionados of these things claim that the true Semana Santa, in other words, the more sombre celebrations, are held in the towns of Castille, such as Zagora, which has documentary evidence of Holy Week celebrations going back as far as 1179, (although equal rights didn't get a look in for over 800 years until the *Hermandad de las Siete Palabras* became the first *cofradía* to permit women dressed in the traditional flowing robes and pointed hoods to march in the parades) and Valladolid, which is only second to Zamora in age and the beauty of its floats.

Semana Santa is officially from Palm Sunday (*Domingo de Ramos*) to Easter Sunday (*Domingo de Resurreccion*), and while the UK celebrates Good Friday, in Spain you have *Lunes Santo*, *Martes Santo*, (Holy Monday, Holy Tuesday), and the same throughout the week, so every day is Good and Holy.

Whether in village or city, Semana Santa has basically the same format; extravagant parades of biblical scenes carried around on platforms (*tronos* – thrones) by extravagantly costumed supporters – quite literally, in the case of those who actually carry these monumental effigies.

The processions are led by *hermandades* and *confradía*, religious brotherhoods and fraternities dressed in the *nazareno*, the penitential robe over which a cape is draped, topped off by a conical pointed hood with eye holes cut in it, the *capirote*. They may be penitents, but their robes are usually of bright, rich fabrics. The hoods were a medieval form of concealment so the penitent could make his penance without his

identity being known – and it is said that it was with this in mind that the Klu Klux Klan picked up the idea of their hood from the Semana Santa parades, as they saw it as a good way to conceal their faces when committing their nefarious deeds.

The brotherhoods also carry the Holy Week floats, that feature sculptures and models of biblical scenes. The throne bearers are known as *costaleros*, taken from the small cushion, known as a *costal*, to protect them from getting sores from the wood rubbing against their skin during the long processions. The suffering experienced is likened to that experienced by Christ as he carried his cross, and the men consider it a great honour to carry the float, despite (and possibly, because of) the pain involved.

One of the most emotional parades of the whole of Semana Santa is the *Procesión del Silencio*, the Silent Procession, held on *Jueves Santo* to commemorate Christ's crucifixion and death on the cross, and is regarded by some as a form of funeral procession. There are only two images in this parade, that of Christ crucified and *la Virgen de los Dolores*, Our Lady of Sorrows, the representation of the Virgin Mary in mourning.

The procession moves silently through darkened streets, lit only by the candles on the floats and those carried by the penitents. Other than the beat of a single drum and the shuffling of penitential feet, many of them unshod, the only sound is the occasional chime of a small bell. The procession halts but holds the rhythm with their moving feet. A second group of *hermanos* take the precious weight on their shoulders, while the first steps aside. The bell chimes again and the procession continues its slow, stately pace, without a word being spoken or a beat missed.

If you really want to see Semana Santa in all its pomp and glory – and crowds, and pushing and shoving to get a good view – then you head for Seville. But if you want something equally stupendous but barely known outside of Spain, Málaga's the place to be.

Málaga

Holy Week in Málaga has been one of the city's most celebrated fiestas for more than half a millennium. Unlike most of the other Semana Santa celebrations elsewhere in Spain, during Passion Week Málaga is noise, happiness and people having a good time. Here the *saetas*, the spontaneous flamenco verses sung during the processions, are often the real thing, and not a secretly organised but supposedly spontaneous outbreak of emotion to give the penitents a break in their parading that occur elsewhere.

The Baroque showiness of biblically ostentatious tronos gives the proceedings a brightness and occasional gaiety – despite the obviously deeply religious intent of the affair. Some of the thrones weigh more than five tons and take two hundred and fifty hefty bearers to carry

them on their swaying journeys. The aromas of incense and flowers fills the air, while the lights from thousands of candles carried in the hands of penitents sparkle off their robes and the gilded carving of the thrones. Trumpets and drums carry the rhythm, and mournful saetas are sung, dedicated to the floats. The dense crowds lining the streets boisterously applaud their favourite tronos as they pass by.

Palm Parade, Elche

Elche's Palm Parade, held, not surprisingly, on Palm Sunday, is an absolute one-off, as the city's palm grove, the largest in Europe, is the biggest producer of blanched palm leaves in the world, and exports this unique product to the entire Catholic world.

The procession commemorates the triumphant entry of Christ into Jerusalem and dates back to at least 1371, which records the *Consell de la Vila*, the Town Council, taking part in the celebrations and distributing alms. The trade in blanched palm leaves goes back almost as long, at least to 1492. The focal point of the parade are the intricately woven palm leaves, small – and not so small, as some of them are a couple of metres high – works of art that depict complex figures related to the events of Holy Week or Elche's monuments and traditions. Examples are made especially for the Spanish royal family and the Pope and are shipped off to Madrid and Rome a few days before Palm Sunday.

Lorca

Lorca, the Fortress of the Sun, a title not invented by some marketing moron in the same office as he who came up with *Costa Calida*, the Hot Coast, but a name given by the Romans, although they pronounced it *Eliocroca*. One of the cities on the Via Augusta, the ancient road from Rome to Cadiz and the longest in the Roman Empire, Lorca was for four centuries the borderline between Moorish and Christian kingdoms, and its customs and architecture have a foot in either camp.

Holy Week in Lorca is special mainly for the horses and enormous chariots that take place in the processions. But it isn't just the animals or wheeled transport that are particularly impressive, it's the gloriously ornate embroidery that is worn by the horses and members of the *confradía.*

Two main groups vie for importance and embroidery dominance, the Whites, (*Paso Blanco* or, to give its full Spanish mouthful, '*Muy Illustre Cabildo de Nuestra Señora de la Virgen de la Amargura en la Muy Real e Ilustre Orden Archicofradia de Nuestra Señora del Rosario, Paso Blanco*') and the Blues, (*Poso Azul*, or the more crisp '*Hermandad de Labradores, Paso Azul*'). Both have their own chapel, but such is the life-long commitment to a colour that if a White wants to marry a Blue they have to find a neutral church to do it in. Both also have their own museums

where you can see displayed some of the gorgeous examples of needlework art. Almost €1million may seem expensive for something the size of a single bed cover, but each one takes twenty professional embroiderers about eighteen months to make and lasts up to thirty years.

Valencia

Most Semana Santa celebrations will have an image or two of Christ, usually crucified but also carrying his cross or other majestic moments. The Semana Santa Marinera in Cabañal, one of the *pueblos maritimos* that run along Valencia City's beach is one of the few that actually has the real thing, or at least someone acting the part of the real thing, who hauls his cross through the streets of Cabañal wearing the traditional crown of thorns while vicious Roman soldiers whip him. It is supposedly an honour to be chosen for the part and be so admonished in public.

Leon

While the whole thrust of Semana Santa is of religious intent, it's wonderful to know that there is at least one secular procession, the *Entierro de San Genarín*, the Burial of Saint Genarín. On Holy Thursday night in 1929, a poor alcoholic by the name of Genaro Blanco was run over by the first rubbish truck in León. The procession consists of a march through the city bearing a bottle of *orujo*, the tongue-numbing liquor made from grape skins, at the head of the procession. At the spot by the city walls where poor Genaro met his end, cheese, a bottle of orujo and two oranges are left in commemoration. A more economical memoriam than gilded statues or ornately embroidered capes.

Going Underground

Santuario Cueva Santa, Altura, Valencia

Twenty metres underground, the Santuario Cueva Santa, in Altura in eastern Valencia, is dedicated to the Virgin of the Holy Cave, known as the White Dove, and, unsurprisingly, she is the patron saint of Spanish speleologists (cavers).

The Santuario is built, both spiritually and structurally, around a small bas-relief stucco image twenty centimetres high, that is housed in a lovely Doric-style temple built in the cave, where the image now sits, surrounded by jade and gold. The stairs down into the cave are lined with tile votive plaques giving thanks for prayers answered and ailments miraculously cured.

Being a cave, it's pretty damp, but it's said that if a drop of water lands on you from the ceiling and you rub it over the part of your body that's ailing, you

will be cured. Drops taken from the puddles on the floor will also work but without the same efficacy. You'll also be cured if you hear the tinkling of a bell when visiting the cave by night, which will be a bit difficult as it's only open during daylight hours.
My arrival is one of those remarkable moments of miss-timing. I've driven there specifically to take photos, and not another living soul or a car on the car park is to be seen. But just as I begin to go down the stairs the cleaner arrives to do the weekly full dust and polish.
I sit on a cold and damp metal bench waiting for her to have a quick flick around with the duster, but no…she's going to do a proper job. All the bouquets in their vases are taken out, altar cloths removed, and candles taken down from the holders. I sit patiently in my shorts and T-shirt, listening to the drips hitting the puddles at my feet as the chill raises goosebumps on my arms. After fifteen minutes of watching Mrs. Mop do a thorough top-to-bottom of the whole fancy chapel, giving a little nod of adulation to the Virgin each time she passes, I decide I'll not bother. Nothing had changed since my last visit couple of years ago, and I sincerely doubt anything will change at any time in the near future.
I put my damp camera back into its bag and re-enter the land of the living and a beautifully sunny day.
Map: Santuario Cueva Santa

Sad Grey Tombs Decked With Cockle Shells
The English Cemetery, Malaga

> *I wandered in a little paradise, this charming garden. Here were myrtle hedges, covered with flowers sufficient for a thousand bridal wreaths.*
> Written by Hans Cristian Andersen after a visit to Malaga in 1862, where he 'fell under the spell of the cemetery's romantic melancholy'.

Alongside the busy road to Velez, just as you leave Málaga, under the watchful glare of the Alcazar, the Muslim palace-fortress on the side of the Gibralfaro Mountain, a pair of lions, each with a paw resting on a globe, stand guard over the entrance to a little piece of England. Whilst the noise of the jubilant crowd from the bullring opposite almost drowns out the cacaphony of Spanish life going on in the surrounding apartments, the English Cemetery remains a peaceful oasis in Málaga's city centre.

The brainchild of William Mark, who, in 1824 became British Consul to the Kingdom of Granada, with residence in Málaga, the English Cemetery was the first in Spain. Prior to its establishment, Protestants in the country were accorded no burial rights in sanctified ground. Their bodies were not permitted to be interred by day, but had to be taken to

the sea-shore at night by torch-light and buried in an upright position in the sand. As if the humiliation of being torn to pieces by dogs or washed out to sea was not enough, the local inhabitants dumped every sort of refuse and odour in the vicinity of their 'resting-place.' When the British ambassador's secretary died at Santander in 1622 he was not allowed to be buried at all. The corpse was thrown into the sea, but the moment the ambassador left the scene, local fisherman, terrified that the body of a heretic lying in their fishing ground might affect their catch, dragged it up again and threw it back on to the land.

It was almost thirty years later that Oliver Cromwell's envoy, Anthony Ascham, was assassinated and buried without rites. Cromwell insisted that a treaty be prepared to remedy this unseemly state of affairs, and in 1667 a treaty of friendship and commerce was made between England and Spain, and article thirty five provided that 'a decent and convenient burial-place shall be granted and appointed to bury the bodies of subjects of the King of Great Britain who shall die within the dominions of the King of Spain'. But more than 160 years were to pass from the signing of the treaty before the first British national was to be laid to rest in the hallowed ground of the English cemetery, that of George Stephens, owner of the brig *Cicero* who had accidentally drowned in the harbour.

William Mark came from a large, poor family from Berwick-on-Tweed and began his working life in the textile business. After years of struggling to make a living travelling between Paisley, Glasgow and London he finally enlisted in the Navy as an ordinary seaman. With his knowledge of penmanship and accountancy he soon became assistant to the captain's clerk and after only three years had risen to such dizzy heights that he was invited to have dinner with Nelson, eventually serving under him on board HMS Victory.

After the surrender of Napoleon in 1815, friends of Mark's recommended him for the post of British Consul to the Kingdom of Granada, and although he went to live in Málaga in 1816, it wasn't until 8 years later, in 1824, that he became officially appointed as Consul.

It was during these years that he began to look 'with great grief and disgust' on the way in which the burial of protestants was conducted. He resolved that if he were ever to become Consul he would remedy the situation, and immediately on his appointment looked for a piece of land to serve as an English cemetery.

When Mark finally established the cemetery he spent the next few years embellishing the three acres of waste land that surrounded it by creating a botanical garden so that the people of Málaga would have a pleasant retreat when they went walking in the afternoon. He terraced the ground and planted the terraces with geraniums from Gibraltar, making a brilliant flight of steps that led up from the sea.

It was always intended that the cemetery should be for British subjects only, but soon after its opening Mark received applications from many of his fellow Consuls to permit the remains of their countrymen to be buried there. Due to lack of space he had to refuse, but in 1836 a Prussian merchant named Luis Schmidt was 'found dead at the back of the Cemetery with an unloaded pistol in his hand' and Mark gave permission for him to be buried there. From then on Mark's humanitarian feelings allowed him to relax his rule and you can now find names from many nationalities as well as British subjects in the Burial Register. On the western side of the cemetery is a monument to sixty-two officers and men of the Imperial German Navy who perished in the wreck of the training-ship *Gneisenau* when she sank outside Málaga harbour on December 16th 1900, and who were buried in a common grave.

Originally a small walled plot, the cemetery grew in stages as separate sections were added to accommodate different nationalities and religious beliefs. These days it has the air of a slightly overgrown country graveyard, but with the Mediterranean sun dappling the headstones.

Around the walls of the original inner sanctum are set carved marble headstones marking the last resting-place of British residents or those passing through.

Underneath are deposited
the remains of
Capt. William McGowan
of the
Schooner Black Dog of Liverpool
who departed this life on the
24th September 1841

Tiny shell-covered graves, many without names, speak of the high rate of infant mortality, while others do nothing to convey the heartache of parents whose children were torn from them with barely time to register their appearance on earth.

Julia and William Simpson
Children of
James and Ann
Born at Malaga October 11 1859
Julia died December 3 1859
William died September 6 1860

Yet more tell of the distance travelled, far from their birth-place, almost in a need to identify their homeland while resting in foreign soil.

Frederick Heap of Manchester, England; Jessie Coloquoun Hutchins, born in Buenos Aires; others from Toronto, Canada; Tenby, Wales; Catonsville, USA. But some occupants are content to rest their bones under the Mediterranean sun, such as William Foster from Bedford, England who entered the cemetery for the final time in May 1962.

Regret not me; beneath this sunny tree I lie
uncaring, slumbering peacefully

Perhaps the two most famous 'residents' of the English Cemetery are the writer Gerald Brennan and his poet wife, Gamel Woolsey, their graves marked with two simple white marble headstones. '*Fear no more the heat of the sun*' says the American poet's, while Brennan is remembered as '*Escritor Ingles, Amigo de España*'.

These days very few of the people who land at Málaga airport venture anywhere near the city, and only a minute number of those who do actually take up residence there. As a result the congregation of St George's, the cemetery's chapel, has suffered from considerable shrinkage, but with the help of a number of bequests and the support and work of the Friends of St George's and the British Cemetery its future seems secure.

As with much of British society the cemetery delights in its little moments of quirkiness. In a small glass case fixed to the wall of St. George's are two hand-written notices. '*Lady of mature age living in Malaga looking for intelligent company and friendship. Please see Robert if you can help.*' says one, and the other, '*For sale Nepalese carpet in mint condition, unmarked and with original bills.*' William Mark might not have approved of Mamon in his last resting place, but it's nice to know that life still goes on amid the calm and quiet of the English Cemetery.

The title of this article is taken from a sonnet by American poet, Gamel Woolsey, composed after wandering among the shell-covered graves of the English Cemetery.

Map: English Cemetery, Malaga

José and the Rosary Mafia

This story is based on a real event, the death of a friend's father in Benidorm, Spain, and the convoluted arrangements to get a mass said at his funeral. It was written to help her deal with her father's death – although

admittedly I didn't give her it until a few weeks after his funeral. Fortunately, she saw the funny side of it.

'In death, as in life, he troubled no-one.' An epitaph that José would gladly have had inscribed on his tombstone to vouchsafe a life well-lived. Unfortunately, when he finally parted this vale of tears he did so in such a way as to cause, admittedly totally unintentionally, a bucketful of headaches for his saddened and suffering family. Perhaps his inscription should have read 'In death, unlike as in life, he was a trouble to absolutely bloody everybody!'

His snuffing it didn't come as a complete surprise. His health had been up and down like a fiddler's elbow one way and another for ages. No, it wasn't that they weren't unprepared for his going, it was the *way* in which he did it that they found so unsettling.

Family routine dictated that each Saturday José would have lunch with his children, Enrique and Marie Elena. On this occasion the *salad mixte* and *entremeses* had been dealt with and the bottle of *tinto* was disappearing nicely. The *paella de mariscos* had just been served, and the trio was discussing the usual family trivia, particularly the fact that cousin Rosa had been seen with that Pepe again, and wasn't it about time someone gave him a good talking too because he was a married man and it would do no good at all talking to Rosa because as soon as you mentioned his name she jumped up and stormed out the room slamming the door behind her, and she was in a bad temper all day, which meant that poor aunt Manuela had to do the house herself and you know how difficult it is for her these days what with her funny hip and all. Enrique was just about to top up the wine glasses when José gave a little strangulated cough, looked across the table at his son, and flopped face forward onto the table. Now *that* would have put me *right* off my paella!

Picture the scene.

Having just watched his father respond to the trumpet call of the heavenly hosts, Enrique tries every resuscitation method he knows. He pummels the chest, gives mouth-to-mouth - but nothing happens. Poor José has heaved the biggest sigh of all; whether of relief or frustration, no-one's ever likely to know. Meanwhile, Marie Elena is on the phone with *Cruz Roja* trying to get an ambulance.

"An ambulance you want señora. Well – I've got a bit of a problem there."

"*You've* got a problem! *You've* got a problem! My dad's flat out on the parquet staring at the ceiling with not very life-like eyes, and you're telling me *you've* got a problem!"

"Well, shall I say *we've* got a problem?"

"Oh, it's *we've* got a problem now, is it? So what's this little problem that *we've* got?"

"Well, the ambulance is a bit poorly at the moment."

"Poorly – *POORLY!!!*"
'Sorry señora, just my little joke. Possibly not in the best of taste all things considered. What I mean is that the ambulance is broken down."
"*BROKEN DOWN!* You've got one sodding ambulance and it's *broken down!*"
'I'm afraid so señora, but we've got a very good deal with the local taxi service for situations such as this.'
A heavy, stony silence.
'Can I assume then señora that you will not be requiring the phone number of the taxi company, and if this is the case can I offer you an invitation to our next fund rai……."

And so it was that José began his last journey on earth in the back of Enrique's battered and unwashed Peugeot 501 as it transported his body to the crematorium.

We move forward in time in the best cinematic traditions; mists swirl, leaves fall, and the pages of a diary flicker rapidly before our eyes. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes, and into the tomb old José dashes, consigned to oblivion in what in Northern European eyes would be considered a tad sharpish, but in a country where it's possible to wash a shirt, stick it out in the sun, and wear it twenty minutes later, a long viewing period is not recommended. Twenty-six hours between head down in the main course and getting slipped into the marble overcoat. Carking it in such an undignified manner and being chauffeured to the cemetery in the back of an old banger was bad enough, but even when the door had been slammed shut on his ten-year resting place, poor José's problems still weren't over.

José has spent most of his adult years in the same one-horse-town, and even though it had developed to such an extent that the horse now had a carriage and heavy investment in alfalfa futures, the locals had retained much of their narrow-mindedness as concerns arrivals, hitchings, and departures, more commonly known as births, deaths, and marriages. To call them parochial would be to imbue them with a heady frivolity that was far beyond their staid existence. As expected, a mass was to be held, but in addition, local custom demanded that a rosary must be sung. This point only came to the fore when Enrique and Marie Elena met with Father Tomás to discuss the ecclesiastical proceedings.
A quizzical look in the direction of Marie Elena.
"Sorry Father, I'm afraid it's been a bit of a while….you know…."
A sideways glance at Enrique.
"Don't look at me!"
"I'll leave it with you then shall I?" Known for his understanding of backsliders is Father Tomás.

A huddled discussion agreed that a visit to Aunt Estofana was called for. Not something undertaken lightly. Hardly tall enough to look over

the top of the counter of the small *cafeteria* she presided over, Aunt Estofana was still big enough to terrorise clients and family alike. If she said 'Sit', standing was not an option. Our duo approached her, not in the hope that she could rattle the beads herself because, unusual in a Spanish matriarch of her age, she had disowned religiosity in all its forms. But when all else failed, Aunt Estofana 'knew a man who can'. In this case she knew a few who could. The 'Rosary Mafia'.

Now, you wouldn't walk up to Don Corleone and say 'Don, old son, any chance of a quick knee-capping next Friday week?' nows would you? *Consigliaris* have to be approached and polite enquiries made as to the going rate for the removal of a few bendable bits. Delicacy in all matters.

So it is when engaging the services of the Rosary Mafia. Polite inquiries are made of the standing of the supplicant; are they one of the 'old' families and thus to be accorded due respect or are they some new off-comer who would act disgracefully by offering the 'gift' in public? (Such a case happened recently – the family were advised to turn to Protestantism.) Subtlety in all things. And what level of pomp was to be displayed, was it a simple one person reciting or would the twelve voices of the inner sanctum to be heard raised in choral harmony? This would of course reflect the level of 'benevolence' required. It was rumoured that the last time the bundles of beads were seen *en mass* the 'modest emolument' required left the poor bereaved even more of both – considerably poorer and a damned sight more bereaved.

At last the *Capa de Rosaria* agreed that nothing was too much for the family of Don José, a man of such compassion, such consideration. 'Such a load of *cojones* more like!' mumbled Estofana.

"And would you like the full ensemble or merely my lowly self?" enquired Señora *de Capa.*

"José was such a simple soul that the single beauty of your eloquence would be more than he could ever hope for'" replied Estofana, bearing in mind that the family would like to inherit something, which would be highly unlikely if the Rosary Mafia got together.

The day arrived sufficiently gloomy, and the publicity had been such to ensure a pretty good turn-out for the evening mass. On her way to the *cafeteria* Estofana called in to collect her bread from Amalia, the local baker. Deaf as a post was Amalia, but nothing happened around her neck of the woods that she didn't know all the why's and wherefore's of within fifteen minutes.

"Bad sign earlier on.'" said Amalia, with that sucking in of air over the lips that proceeds most bad news. Like most people in the neighbourhood, Estofana long ago realised that when Amalia had something to say it was best to let her get on with it, as questions were a complete waste of time and anyway, she just stopped talking while you

were having your go and started up again exactly where she finished when you interrupted her.
"She was in this morning." continued Amalia. "Señora *de Capa*. Bought three of those fancy pastries. Expensive they are as well. Said she had to visit some friends who were ill. Heard that one before."

A faint curdling sensation manifested itself in Estofana's stomach.
"Supposed to be saying the rosary that day as well." went on Amalia. 'Never turned up though.'
"Oh God!" thought Estofana, "What if she doesn't turn up tonight!"
"I wouldn't hold your breath hoping she'll turn up tonight." said Amalia.
"And I don't know anyone else who can read the rosary," shouted Estofana's turmoiled brain.
"And I suppose you can't think of anyone else to read the rosary either."
"But who can I ask?" her thoughts screamed.
"And I don't suppose you ever thought of asking me if I could do it."
"But you're stone deaf." thought Estofana, "And besides. How the hell do you know that I'm thinking!"
"Now, I can't read your mind, and as you know I'm as deaf as a post, but I've said the rosary every night since I was a little girl and I doubt if even Señora *de Capa* and the Hallelujah Chorus know it as well as I do."

And so, one of those minor miracles occurred. With surreptitious signals from Estofana, her friend Amalia lead the congregation in the saying of the rosary, as José's soul was delivered unto ever lasting peace.

In life, as in death, he troubled no-one.

Cojones!

ELSEWHERE

Chatting With the Other Side
Antalya Cemetery, Turkey. April 2019

I sit in the company of Halit Bergan and Fatma Kaya in the dappled shade of pine trees, contemplating what got me here. To be honest, they aren't adding a great deal to the contemplation, mainly because the former, having been born in 1939, and the latter seven years later, both 'passed', as Americans euphemistically call it, in 2003. On closer inspection of Fatma's headstone I see that she was born in 1339, which means that she led an exceedingly long life of 664 years – and a happy one I hope – or the stonemason got his numbers jumbled up. (Apropos of nothing, other than American euphemisms, I can't bring myself to utter

the American term ‘restroom’, meaning ‘toilet’, an insipid throwback to the Victorian age when piano legs would be covered over with fabric ‘sleeves’ for decorum’s sake.)

In the enormous cemetery that is Antalya’s Andızlı Mezarlığı, I end up sat on a rickety old bench with my back against a high, cement-rendered wall. I have no idea what’s on the other side – of the wall, I mean, not the great hereafter. I’m sure Halit and Fatma could bring me up to speed on that, but as our mutual contemplation is of the silent order, I suppose I’ll just have to wait until I ‘pass’ to find out. (See prev. Amer. insip.)

The graves aren’t holes in the ground as I’ve seen in other Muslim cemeteries but more like small marble tombs set above the ground where, presumably, the body is interred – an above ground tombette if you will – with a soil space for small plants. It seems to be the Turkish style, and while most of them only have a token greenery, Halit’s tombette is rather jolly, with alternate rows of red and white peonies (although they may be some other breed; I’m not big on floribunda) and set in a space between the shade of two tall trees, so that her gardinette is lit by a celestial sunny spotlight.

I return to my contemplation without much movement toward a resolution. My new friends aren’t much help either; how could they be, they’ve only known me ten minutes. As my Turkish is limited to none, I doubt they could pass on advice in any language we mutually understand – or does the hereafter have some sort of Douglas Adams’ Babel fish or Google translate, where all languages are simultaneously translated, no need to speak into a mobile slab or misspell your message because your fingers are too big for the tiny keyboard? That’s usually my problem.

I think I’ll give up on rumination for today; just sit on my bench in the sun and rest in my peace, as I hope Halit and Fatma are resting in theirs.

Addendum. For some strange reason I’m drawn to cemeteries and have written about a few, but I’m always quite sad when I see the grave of a child that barely had an opportunity to experience life. One I saw today was particularly poignant. Hanging from a marble vase at the foot of a memorial to a child who had only been on earth for twenty-four days was a small decorated dummy on a beaded loop. One wonders how you deal with such sadness and the years of unfulfilled memories.
Map: Antalya Cemetery

Catching up with friends.
Antalya Cemetery, Sunday 23rd May, 2021

With weekend curfew still in place, thanks to Mr Covid and his various off-spring, the streets of Antalya are deserted. I still have a month left of my tourist visa, which allows me the freedom to roam, something the Turkish people themselves aren't allowed to do during curfew hours. I decide to reacquaint myself with Halit Burgan and Fatma Kaya, the two people I met with in Antalya Cemetery two years ago and who both died in 2003, although since then I have discovered that Halit is no lady, but a chap, whose name is the Turkish spelling of the Arabic name Khalid, meaning eternal, everlasting, immortal. (When we met, I offered my apologies to him, and as there was no reply I can only hope they were accepted.)

In the tens of thousands of graves in the cemetery, I find my friends, although to be honest it wasn't that difficult, I just nosed in the direction of the big cement wall, stepping between the graves. Fortunately, the bench I sat on last time was still there; its companion five metres away had succumbed to age and weather and now lay tilted like a drunken seaman leaning against a wall. (I wonder why they are always referred to as 'drunken seaman'? Don't other groups get drunk?)

There's a breeze blowing, rushing through the boughs of the cypress trees – almost a forest – that provides dappled shade for the graves, and me on my ancient bench. The susurration isn't just from the trees, but more from the traffic rushing along the six-lane road a couple of hundred metres away, even though private cars aren't supposed to be on the streets either during these pandemic-curfewed weekends. But at least I can pretend it's the wind stirring the branches, the only sound other than the raucous caw of ravens.

Fatma and Halit's gardenettes have been well maintained; less colour on Fatima's than previously, more perennials than annuals, and Halit has a nice yellow rose and some sort of daisy to brighten his time in the afterlife. (My knowledge of horticulture hasn't improved in the intervening two years.) Their neighbour on the right, Ercan Yüksel (a chap) who also died in 2003, obviously has someone caring for his garden as recent planting of a pleasant selection of mixed blooms show. Sadly, Haci Zehra (another chap, I'm being very careful here) who only quit his mortal coil in 2017, has nothing but a patch of rough brownish-grey earth to cover his head.

I return to my friends, and even though we never had a proper conversation last time I sat here in quiet contemplation, I'm tempted to ask their advice anyway. "What the bloody hell am I doing here?" are the words I would use.

So, Halit and Fatma, with your experience of the here and the hereafter, "What the bloody hell am I doing here?" (hoping they will forgive the bad language.)

I don't expect an answer and nor do I get one, but despite the traffic roar and a sudden blast of noisy activity from the ravens, it's pleasant sitting here, but I have something more important to do. As the sound of the *adhan*, the call to prayer, breaks from the minaret of one of the many mosques in the city, I say my goodbyes, assuring them of a return visit, by which time either they or I might have come up with an answer to my quandary, and go in search of a toilet.

Betwixt God, Politics, and Mamon
Izmir, Turkey. April 2019

On the corner of the street where I have my temporary home in Izmir sits the charming little Anglican/Episcopal church of St. John the Evangelist (Holy Eucharist, Sundays at 10.00). A pretty little place, resonant with the image of a small English village, where the church shares the village green with the pub; handy to pop into for a jar after service while ma gets the kids home and prepares Sunday lunch.

Next to it is the equally pleasing British Consulate, four-square and sturdy in a slightly Mediterranean sort of way (even if we are on the Aegean), but compact and no-nonsense, as befits the representatives of Albion. The street behind me is the hooker street, where *dames de la noche* stroll in the darker hours, some with the large hands and deep voices that give a bit of an indication that the *dames* may not be *dames* through-and-thorough. But at least you can't say that we Brits don't know how to organise ourselves when on foreign soil.

I'm not saying that whichever governmental body chooses the sites for their consular properties and ecclesiastical buildings were aware of the nocturnal activities two streets away when they chose the spot, but as the buildings are situated near a railways station and in spitting distance of a small dockyard, I'll look on the bright side and assume they wanted to be close enough to minister to the religious needs of the locals but also be on hand for any rambunctiousness caused by hairy-arsed seamen who may cause political embarrassment. Hence, I find myself set between God and Politics on the one side and Mamon on the other. Given the dubious characters historically associated with the former, I'd sooner trust the latter any day.

Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'
From *Henry V*, spoken by King Henry, by William Shakespeare

Good old Saint George, slayer of dragons, savior of pretty wenches, patron saint of England, and Georgia and Serbia, Greece, Portugal, Beirut, Malta, Ethiopia, Lithuania and Palestine, Catalonia and Aragon in Spain, Moscow in Russia, and Genoa and Milan in Italy. An all-round good egg.

But 18th-century writer, Edward Gibbon, best known as the author of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, first published in 1787, tells a different story.

According to Gibbon, the real George was a rather different character from the paragon of Christian fiction we are given to believe, an 'odious priest', a crook from Cappadocia in central Turkey, who by 'assiduous flattery' and other unscrupulous means acquired the contract to supply the Roman army with bacon, a staple of the legionnaires' diet when on the move.

"His employment was mean; he rendered it infamous. He accumulated wealth by the basest arts of fraud and corruption; but his malversations were so notorious, that George was compelled to escape from the pursuits of justice," a polite way of saying he did a runner to Egypt, where he joined a growing branch of Christianity called Arianism.

Ever the man on the make, George used the lever of Arianism to get himself appointed as Archbishop of Alexandria but began a vicious reign of "cruelty and avarice".

"After Easter week," says Athanasius, the Archbishop driven out of Alexandria by George, "virgins were imprisoned, bishops led away in chains, attacks made on houses." It was reported at the time that he "inflicted imprisonment and scourges on men and women after the fashion of a tyrant"; while towards everyone alike, "he wielded his authority with more violence than belonged to the episcopal rank and character." He was "hated by the magistrates for his supercilious demeanor, by the people for his tyranny".

Eventually, George was imprisoned for his tyrannical ways, along with two of his cohort, Diodorus and Dracontius, and shortly thereafter, the three were dragged out of their cell by the pagans George had so outrageously used and kicked to death. "They flung the mangled body of George on a camel, which they led through every part of the city, dragging the two other corpses along with ropes, and eventually burned the remains on the shore, casting the ashes into the sea."

Like most religions and governments, Christianity re-wrote history to suit its own ends. After a couple of hundred years, the venality of George's real-life had either been forgotten or merely white-washed. Thanks to the creative scribblers for Christ two hundred years later, his name was attached to a colourful story of piety, fortitude, divine deliverance and – ultimately – a princess and a dragon.

As Gibbon records: "This odious stranger disguising every circumstance of time and place, assumed the mask of a martyr, a saint,

and a Christian hero, and the infamous George of Cappadocia has been transformed into the renowned St. George of England, the patron of arms, of chivalry, and of the Garter."

So how did Gibbon's 'odious priest become patron saint England?

George's fame took off after the Crusades, when news came that he had appeared before the crusaders outside Jerusalem in 1099, spurring their valiant efforts on, leading to his effigy appearing on banners taken into battle. Although never actually having set foot in England itself, not being English worked in his favour because it meant his cult was not associated with any particular part of the country, so when English knights set off to France to fight the Hundred Years War, they could do so in the name of St George without stirring up regional rivalries.

In 1222, the Synod of Oxford declared that St George's Day, April 23, the day of his death in 303, was to be a feast day in England. Needless to say, Gibbon loathed the tradition and tried to kill it off. Far from standing for everything that makes England great (supposedly) – freedom of expression, helping those less fortunate, tolerance of other people's beliefs, kindness, and standing up for what you believe to be right – he associated St. George with what we would now know as jingoism, or the lust for military conquest. Unlike most Christian saints, he was not a man of peace but an armed warrior famous for his ruthlessness in battle.

But while Edward Gibbon's story may have all the hallmarks of an adventurer who got his just desserts, the truth is that he may have confused his George with a man with the same or a similar name, who also came from Cappadocia, a soldier of Cappadocian Greek origins and member of the Praetorian Guard for Roman emperor Diocletian, who was sentenced to death for refusing to recant his Christian faith. And while the remains of tyrannical George of Cappadocia, the venal Archbishop of Alexandria, were last seen drifting off with the Mediterranean, the bones of the more saintly Saint George, Christian hero, are buried in his sarcophagus in the Church of Saint George, Lod, Israel.

Wishing On a Saint

Sofia, Bulgaria. May 2019

I'm not usually one for making wishes, and particularly not asking a religious intermediary, but when given the opportunity of calling on the help of St. Serafim, Archbishop of Bogucharsk, *The Wonderworker of Sofia*, whose relics are housed in the crypt below the beautiful Russian Orthodox Church Sveti Nikolay Mirlikiiski (St. Nicholas Church), on bul. Tsar Osvoboditel in Sofia, how could I possibly refuse?

The petit church is gilded-domed, with a multi-arched and frescoed interior, every inch of it covered with imagery of the life of Christ and his cohorts, a large icon guarding the gilded doors to the main altar. The colours of the frescos are as subdued as the lighting and the gentle murmurings of visitors. A few chairs are set out for worshipers, but in the main, those who want to commune with their God simply genuflect, have a quick word with the Almighty and then leave – a stop on the way to the supermarket.

In the crypt, the walls of the first low-ceilinged chamber are as manifestly frescoed as the church itself. I take a piece of paper from a small box on one of the three tables and join an elderly man and a young man holding a small child on his knee. My two wishes are simple and take no more than six lines, but those of some others cover both sides of the paper, spreading onto a second piece, working on the premise, I suppose, that while you have the Saint's ear you may as well make the most of it.

When the wish is written, the supplicants form an orderly queue to enter a smaller chamber, shuffling slowly forward until he or she stands in front of the casket that contains the remains of the Wonderworker below an icon of Serafim himself before he turned up his toes and headed to his just heavenly rewards. Kneeling before the casket, a moment is allowed for a short prayer, although some aren't as brief as they might be, leading to murmurings of discontent from those waiting behind, perhaps having to get their prayer in before their lunch hour is up.

Having made your case for Serafim's beneficence, the folded paper is then dropped through a slot in the top of another, larger casket, in much the way children are told to drop their Christmas letters into a cardboard box to be read personally by Santa Claus. Neither of the letters is likely to get an answer, although they will quite possibly give those who empty the boxes later a bit of a larf.

The queue is ten deep and barely moves as I write my wishes. I decide to come back when wishes aren't in full flow, clip my wishful paper to my notepad and leave, working on the premise that if St. Seraphim is such a wonderworker he would know I was there anyway and give me a pass on the genuflection.

Map: Orthodox Church Sveti Nikolay Mirlikiiski

Paha Ganj Indian Christian Cemetery
New Delhi, India

Half-way up a narrow alley on Ramdwara Road, close to New Delhi's Nehru Bazar, an arched sign welcomes you to the Indian Christian

Cemetery, Paha Ganj. Through the gates, another sign informs visitors '*This cemetery is full to its capacity. Only family graves (doubling) is allowed.*'

I walk into the graveyard and the first thing I see are rows of crosses close together that mark the last resting places of children, indicating the high infant mortality rate in India; *Baby Nisha Thomas* who lived one day in October 2010; *Justin Raju*, whose short life only lasted eight days in June 1999, and the poignant memory to an un-named 'Baby girl, stillborn 11.11.9….', her exact date unknown because the right arm of the cross is broken off. *D/O* is seen on numerous markers, signifying 'Daughter Of…' followed by the parents' names.

Most graves are quite simple affairs, no more than a white-painted cross with a hand-lettered inscription. Others have a canopy over them, sometimes with a photo of the deceased on a marble headstone. It's almost understandable to see photos of elderly people, but on a bright, sunny day it is sad to see the freshly-garland, smiling photo of Anumol Joseph, who passed away at the youthful age of seventeen. Nearby, a faded photo of baby Rachel John is a poignant reminder that she died aged only eleven months and one day on 16.2.2003.

While many of the crosses bear western names, it is apparent in some cases that whoever carved the inscription wasn't a native English-speaker. On the gravestone of Therese Maria Kanjamala, who lived for eighteen days short of her third birthday in September 2012, a memorial shared with Treesa Jose Punnayil, whose short life lasted only four months and six days in 1998, an inscription reads

Let the little children come me
*And do not **b**inder them*
For such belongs the
Kingdom of Heaven

The shrinking burial space is forcing a change in Christian funerals. Today, there are about three thousand Christians in Delhi, half of them Catholics, many of whom are forced to opt for cremation because of lack of burial space in the city. 'The space for fresh graves ran out long back,' says Arnold James, Chairman of the Cemetery Committee.

The 'Doubling' mentioned in the sign at the entrance refers to a recently introduced option of reusing graves, digging up the existing grave for a second burial, but a facility only allowed after ten years of the first interment, and only offered to people with a family member already buried in the cemetery.

'There are already about nine thousand graves in Paha Ganj cemetery,' comments James. 'Now we are exploring the option of third burial in the same grave, although at funerals, relatives sometimes complain about

having to dig up old graves belonging to other people to bury their dead. This, they feel, takes away the dignity we owe to the dead and also leads to confusion among those coming to pay homage in later years'.

Most people still prefer burial to cremation, so one solution lies in creating *kuchha* (mud) graves rather than *pakka* (concrete) graves in cemeteries. Kuchha graves can be reused in 5-6 years, a bonus being that such graves bring down the cost of a funeral; pakka, at 3,500 rupees, is almost twice the price of kuchka (as publicised by a rates board at the entrance to the cemetery). The Delhi Cemetery Committee is now also promoting the use of niches – small shelves in cemetery walls – for storing the remains of a body after opening the grave. "This will allow other people space to bury the dead. Necessity is the mother of invention," commented one committee member.

Sahil Kerketa and his wife, Reena, a Catholic couple, are concerned about what might happen to the grave of his father, buried in the Indian Christian Cemetery prior to the 'doubling' order being given, and are unsure about where they might be able to pay their respects in future.

'My father was buried in a fresh piece of land, but now there is so much shortage of space that I feel insecure about his grave; who knows when they will dig it up for re-use?' Sahil told me. For practical reasons the couple would prefer the burial of ashes rather than that of the body. 'The eighteen by eighteen-inch needed to place a box, rather than the six by eight feet hole a coffin needs will give space to many more people for a much longer period,' said Reena.

So far the Indian Christian Cemetery has avoided the route taken by the authorities of the St Thomas Christian Cemetery in Tughlakabad, who, in 2012, decided to build a vertical cemetery of three hundred crypts. Completed in 2015 it is Asia's largest vertical cemetery.

Despite the desperate shortage of space, many of the graves are abandoned, but it's nice to see that for others their loved one's memory lingers on. Even though she died in February 2003, the grave and cross of Mrs. Catherine Perdon have been freshly painted fourteen years later, her name carefully picked out above that of Budha Masito, who died almost half a century ago, the pencil lines used to guide the painter's hand still in place.

Like cemeteries world-wide, the Indian Christian Cemetery of New Delhi isn't just a place of death, it's as much a place of colour, vignette, and touches of humour. The grave of five-year-old Arokia Raj is bright blue, that of Baby Kushi bright pink, while sixty-two-year-old Christine Sh.. (her full name obliterated by weather) opted for green, decorated with garlands of yellow marigold.

A couple of boys in their early teens working with a group clearing dead branches spot me taking photos and rush over to strike a pose as if they were picking up a pile of dry grass. Close by, Mr. Pushna chips away

at the old pakka that covers the brickwork he has exposed from an original grave, preparing it for doubling, although as he appears to be only in his mid-forties it's unlikely that he will be the future resident. A family arrives in a red electric tuk-tuk; large mum and small son sit in the shade in the vehicle while dad peers at grave markers as he wanders between aisles, occasionally indicating his lack of success to his family before they move to another sector. A tiny, arch-topped red-stone marker, no more than 6" high has 'Reserved for' etched into it, without saying who the reservation is for, although it was obviously made a long time ago, given its weathering and angle of settlement.

It seems a shame that someone with the delightful name of Twinkle Joseph shouldn't have lived beyond her second year. Imagine the sparkle she could have brought into the lives of others.

Map: Paha Ganj Indian Christian Cemetery

Karma

Imlil, Morocco

My heart and head were heavy with bad, sad thoughts and emotions. I was in a beautiful place, high up in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco, snow glistening on the mountains behind me. My turmoil came from the conflict in a relationship in Thailand, almost seven thousand miles to the east.

The blue of the sky was in contrast to the blues in my soul but it seemed an insult to whoever had created the lovely day and place to spend it just sitting in my hotel room and moping. I've walked this little patch of mountains many times, dipping down behind the hotel to take a back route into Imlil village. The narrow path passes through haphazard groves of ancient walnut trees – the villagers' cash crop and inheritance – dips over a ford in a narrow river that becomes impassable during the heavy spring rains but didn't do much more than dampen my toes at this time of year, a teetering walk along the edge of an irrigation channel before a clamber over rocks to join a narrow path from another village that leads to a slightly less narrow cement bridge across a bubbling river.

A couple of people were standing on the bridge, so I thought I'd deviate from my usual walk and sit on some rocks for a while, hopefully to build on the peacefulness that had managed to dispel some of the buzzing in the brain that for days had been trying to comprehend an incomprehensible situation. I stepped off the track and worked my way down to a sit-able riverside rock. Staring at the water for a while, I looked up to see if the people had gone. It was then I spotted something that I'd missed on many walks along the same path, because without my vantage point on the river bank it was hidden from view.

Below the bridge, painted in irregular brush strokes was the single word KARMA. Not a word found in Islamic tradition, at least as far as I know, but someone had gone to the lengths of climbing down the river bank paint pot and brush in hand, stepping into the river and writing out the word I most needed to see at that moment. I could have understood if it had been written on a wall in public view but tucked away like that from the many who walked the route daily on their way between villages confused me. Who did it? Why choose that particularly semi-inaccessible spot, and what was he or she thinking at the time? But none of it really mattered. It was there when I needed it.

I can't say that it was an epiphany, but it did give me peace for a while, mulling over the word and its meaning in my current situation. The seven-thousand-mile conflict didn't improve much, a few ups but a lot of downs, but I found a moment's respite from it all on the side of a riverbank in the High Atlas Mountains – and sometimes that's all you need to keep you going.

A Game of Thrones
Fez, Morocco

They say that you ain't seen nuttin' until you've seen a Moroccan wedding – and the boys and girls of Fez are there to beat the band!

While it's considered the height of chic at a European-style wedding to change from a voluminous white wedding gown into elegant evening wear to dance the night away, the girlies of Fez go through more changes than you could shake a well-stocked wardrobe at during their all-night partying to celebrate their nuptials. And these aren't just a nice frock or two, they will have three or four complete changes of crowns and gorgeous caftans in different colours, with scarves, shoes, belts – the whole matching kit and caboodle.

At some time during the night the couple will appear formally dressed, she in a *chedda*, the traditional Fassi wedding dress with a crown of vertical strips of burnished gold and long lengths of gold or silver embroidered fabric framing her face, and a voluminous headdress and skirts that allow only the oval of her face to stand out from the sparkling light reflecting off the of ornate gilding of the embroidery. At the end of the celebrations, around four in the morning, modern gels will appear in a traditional white European-style wedding dress. But as if it wasn't enough that the fancy garment industry is on over-time to dress the girls, for each newly-robed entrance the bride has to be born aloft on a different gorgeously decorated wedding chair, preferably one that matches her outfit.

Like a Roman senator doing his rounds in a fancy sedan chair carried by four large slaves, the Fassi bride's wedding chair is an ornate confection of pillars and posts, curlicues and cushions, lace and dangling tassels, hoisted on the shoulders of four stout ladies. The groom has to settle for a seat that is more of a large tray than a chair, and minus the fancy canopy. The couple will be carried the short distance from the door to their throne, a construction of such gloriously over-the-top ridiculousness that you would just die to have one as the centre-piece of your chi-chi glass and pale oak living room at home. Or maybe not.

These fabulous furniture follies may look the part at a celebration where the participants are so extravagantly dressed that they would put a Gay Pride parade to shame, but in the ramshackle back alleyways of the souks, their sudden appearance amongst the carpenter's workshops is akin to discovering a glittering ruby in a bucket of supermarket coleslaw.

After wandering the medina for a couple of hours I see a chap pulling a trolley with what appears to be a couple of strange trays and a fancy top roped on it. Not having anything more pressing, I follow him. He unknowingly leads me into the depths of the souks, where I find myself introduced to the world of wacky wedding chairs.

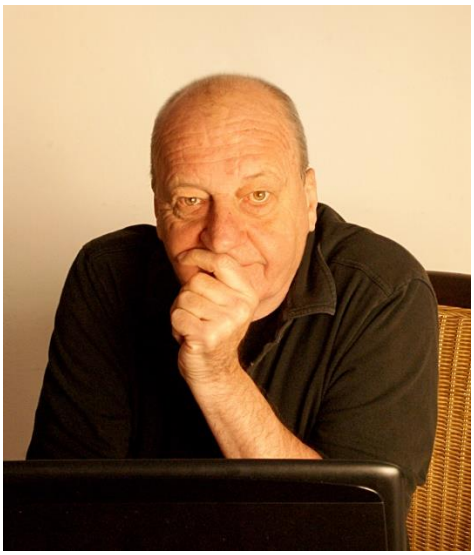
Mr. Nassim has been making these chairs and sofas for almost forty years since he started in the workshop of his uncle as a mere lad of thirteen. Working to designs limited only by his imagination and a stub of pencil to draw on a bit of paper – no 3D design software played with on a computer features in his fantastical creations – fantails and folderols are his stock in trade. I'm torn between a three-tiered double throne of relative simplicity – although 'relative simplicity' in the context of Mr. Nassim's creations is a contradiction in terms – and the full outrageous fluff of curly-whirly backdrop, buttoned cushions, scrolled arms and scrunched up lace. I'm saved from my deliberations by the fact that I have neither a girlfriend nor fiancé with whom I can share a sofa, in the unlikely event they should ever consent to be my wife. Even more unlikely than my buying one of Mr. Nassim's creations to make a centre-piece in my far from chi-chi apartment.

I'm allowed to test drive a sedan chair, and the squeak I hear as I settle into the bright white cushions reminds me that, as extravagant as these furnishings appear, they are almost always made these days of plasticised wipe-down fabrics. Not surprising really, because they, along with the fancy frocks, gorgeous table-ware and most of the accouterments of the big day, are hired by the newly-wed's family, and the pretty penny invested in the making of the happy bride's throne has to be born over a fair number of 'big days'.

In the triumvirate of birth, death and marriage, just opposite Mr. Nassim's showroom that represents one of the happiest moments of life, is a small workshop tending to the necessities of one of the saddest. On

the floor, dappled by sunlight, is a plain yellow-painted box, the shape of a house with a peaked roof, the length of a man. A simple plank coffin, totally lacking the ostentatious ornamentation associated with western funerary. A reminder to make the most of Mr. Nassim's frivolities while we can.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Derek Workman came late to travel writing; he was fifty-two when he landed in Spain at the tail end of the 20th-Century with a computer and a suitcase full of second-hand clothes. Working on the premise that when you live from hand-to-mouth you need to be ambidextrous, in the intervening two decades he has become a self-described 'media

dogsbody'; writer, photographer, book and magazine designer, working with international media such as the Smithsonian Magazine, in-flight magazines for Finnair, easyJet, and others, as well as local media in Spain, Morocco and Thailand, (where he arrived in 2015), plus online travel sites and magazines. In March 2021 he jumped from the frying pan of the Coronavirus in Chiang Mai to the fire of the same in Antalya, Turkey, where he hopes further stories await when the country finally opens up to travel once more.

You can follow him on his website, Better Late Than Never, or keep up to date with stories from The Travelling Life For Me on the Facebook page by the same name.

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