

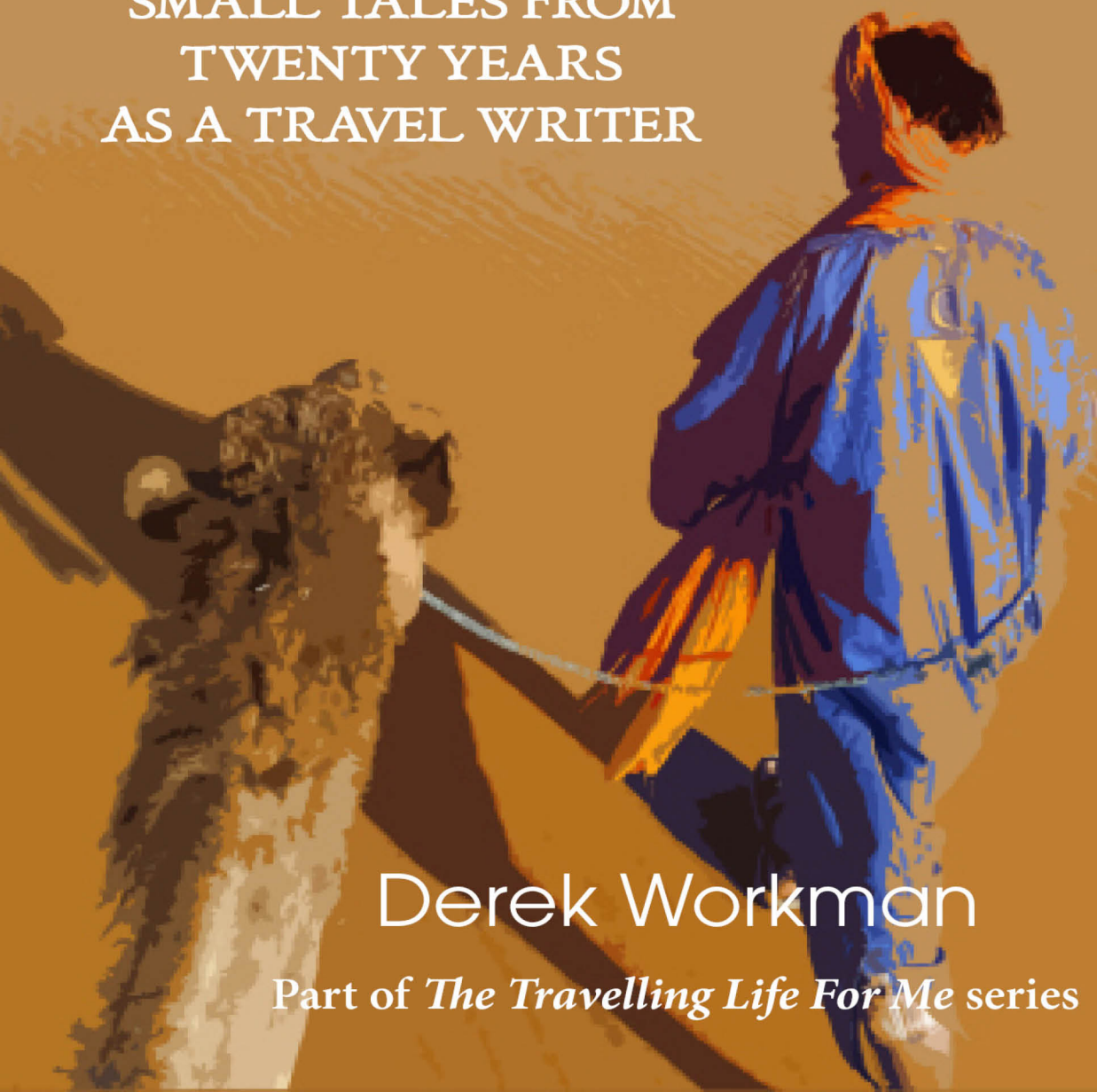
The Travelling Life

For me

SMALL TALES FROM
TWENTY YEARS
AS A TRAVEL WRITER

Derek Workman

Part of *The Travelling Life For Me* series



THE TRAVELLING LIFE FOR ME

**Small Tales from Twenty Years
As A Travel Writer**

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INTRODUCTION

In more than twenty years as a travel writer people never seem to believe me when I tell them it can be a very lonely and sometimes boring job, as almost any professional travel writer will confirm. No sitting around swapping stories with other travellers at the end of the day, no relaxing with a beer by the pool before fine dining in a fancy restaurant – at least until the ‘housekeeping’ is done, backing up the photos and notes, making sure everything is ready for the next day. It is a job, after all, and we have a responsibility to whoever commissioned the work.

As writers, when we are on the road we all have our own way of filling the evening hours. My pastime is writing anecdotes based on the things I’ve seen that day or thoughts that come to mind while I’m relaxing. I’ve been doing it for years. None of them were meant for publication, other than occasionally on my website, as ‘postcards’ to friends, and the odd post on Facebook.

The idea for this book came when I was asked to give a talk to the Chiang Mai Travel Group in January 2019 about being a travel writer,

which I entitled *The Travelling Life For Me*. It was while I was going through hundreds of images and stories to prepare for the talk that I decided to make them into ebooks to show that travel writing isn't all fancy hotels and restaurants. It's been a long process going through two decades of archives, the lethargy and disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic, and moving from Thailand to Turkey just as the latter shot up in the infection ratings and total lockdowns, but I've thoroughly enjoyed it.

The stories in this book are part of a series that will cover my random mental meanderings of twenty years of writing about travel in one form or another, broken down into a series of topics. Not all come from during my travels; some are about the daily life of wherever I was living at that particular time, others just musings over a coffee or, preferably, a glass of brandy. None are about travel *per se*, but without the travel they could never have been written at all.

Derek Workman
Antalya, Turkey
June 2021

The Travelling Life For Me

(With thanks to Jiminy Cricket for the title of the song that made him famous)

Ah! the luxurious life of a travel writer – lounging on a beach beside the azure sea in some exotic location, a chilled glass of champagne always at hand provided by an ever-attentive (but never intrusive) waiter. “Would sir,” (or madam, after all the world of the itinerant writer is open to all), “care for lobster salad for lunch, or may I recommend the bouillabaisse, the chef’s specialty and absolutely divine?” Decisions, decisions!

You’ve bought the book, done the online course, been tantalized by the advert that promises you a life of luxury travelling the globe at someone else’s expense. You sent the emails to the editors of all the top travel magazines outlining your wonderful idea that will be the best, most gut-busting article they’ve ever read (even though the only travel piece you’ve ever written is for your blog that has fourteen views on a good day, usually by your mum and aunty Doris), and your bag is packed and waiting for you by the front door.

Believe me, sweetie, that’s as far as it and you are going to get.

Yep, you can make a few dollars, pounds or euros selling the occasional drib or drab to an online travel site or small magazine, but without a solid journalistic background built on years of getting top-quality copy in on time you will never, *ever*, get the tasty trips that the sellers of these books promise.

Most people’s idea of a travel writer’s life is one long round of first-class travel to exotic destinations, stays in luxury hotels, cruises on the fanciest of liners and sumptuous meals served with superb wines. This may be the case for the Bill Brysons of this world, but for the Derek Workmans, who are around 99.9% of working travel writers, the reality couldn’t be more different.

Unless I’m specifically commissioned for a piece, travelling is usually based on the sale of one – or if I’m lucky, two – articles within reasonable proximity of each other. The fees almost inevitably have to cover all expenses, so unless I can sweet-talk a hotel into a room for the night, I lay my head in places you would walk by with a shudder, and eat elbow-to-elbow in worker’s cafes. And there is no such thing as a lounge by the swimming pool; when I’m not on my feet researching I’m sat on a chair in a café writing up my daily notes on my laptop and uploading photos while having a coffee and a sandwich. This is the real life of a travel writer, although with enough experience under your belt you might occasionally get the luxury trip that others drool over.

My first big free gig was a six-day press trip to the Canary Islands to cover five islands, plus Madeira, and one night on a cruise ship.

Everything top-notch, business-class flight from my home in Valencia, Spain, four-star hotel and three-fork restaurants all the way. The organisers even chartered a private airplane to shuttle us between three of the islands, which slightly lost its gilding when the co-pilot came around just after take-off and handed out a chocolate bar and plastic carton of orange juice each, our in-flight meal.

The dozen journalists were split into three smaller groups; four each of Italian, German, and British. The Italians swanned around all day showing no interest in anything except making sure their summer frocks and cream linen trousers didn't get dirty, and 'why can't we get a decent cup of coffee?'; the Germans acted as if they'd been there, done that, and would have bought the T-shirt if only they had one in gargantuan size; the Brits were badly dressed and the only ones to actually take notes. Each group had its own mini-bus and guide/interpreter, although everyone spoke English, often better than the English themselves.

The islands are stunning and visually the trip was glorious, but get a bad guide and you have a recipe for disaster. On Madeira, the Brit's guide was an opinionated jerk who delivered his talk like a tin-pot, megalomaniac dictator, allowing no room for questions. 'Now you really must remember,' he told us on a visit to Fuchal's glorious Botanical Gardens, 'that you should always write the Latin name of a plant in italics,' and waited while we did just that. (At the end of the tour he even tried to sell us some of his home-made organic pasta.) Apparently the Germans' translator was so shy that he barely spoke the whole time, while the Italian's simply ignored theirs and continued moaning about the coffee.

It might seem trite to say that you can get bored with four-star hotels and three-fork restaurants, but it's true. Sometimes you could die for a slice of pizza, but the organisers, hotels, restaurants *et al* who have stumped up free rooms and meals have to get every drop it's possible to drain out of your time, and it's rare you get a moment to contemplate that beautiful sunrise before you are on the road again. By the last night we were all exhausted (except the Italians) and half-way through a sumptuous dinner in a castle somewhere-or-other (by then I'd given up trying to remember where I was) I had to ask one of our escorts to take me back to my hotel room because I was about to fall asleep face-down in my plate of the local specialty, whatever it was.

On the subject of hotels and restaurants, I was once commissioned by an online travel site to write reviews of forty hotels and forty restaurants in a specific area of Spain, as well as a lot of back-up info such as things to see, car hire etc. When a friend said I must have stayed in some wonderful hotels and eaten in some excellent restaurants she was surprised when I told her that I'd only stayed in two hotels (both owned by friends) and eaten in three restaurants (ditto). If I'd actually laid my head on the pillow

in each establishment – everything from cosy two-room country houses to a five-star palace (where I did eventually spend a night) – or sampled the menu in every restaurant, my expenses would have been marginally more than twice the fee I was being paid. This is where years of experience comes in. An experienced hotel or restaurant critic can spot a duff place the moment they walk through the door – although I have had the happy occasion where I've been forced to eat my words.

One-man trips are as rare as hen's teeth, and without doubt the best I've ever had was a two-week, high-speed twirl around Morocco for a travel company; flight, private car and driver, beautiful hotels and riads, everything included. I was to re-write all their itineraries, design and produce an online brochure, a set number of articles, all of which were paid for, and I threw in an ebook of daily anecdotes, *Morocco on the Run*, for the pleasure of it because I'd had such a good time.

It sounds wonderful, and it was, but the daily routine went something like this.

On travelling days, up at 6.30 – 7.00 to get a good start on the first stop on the itinerary, usually at least two hours away. Spend a couple of hours rushing around the city/historical site/fill in the space. Meet the driver and move on to the next ditto. Keep this up until we reached the next overnight stay, which we timed to be there for around 6-7pm. Shower, upload all the photos onto the computer and begin writing up notes. (A word for would-be travel writers; never, ever, leave your notes until the next day. If you lose your notepad not only will you never remember everything you wrote down, but you will be failing the client when you eventually come to write the article, and that is unforgivable. At the very least, photograph each page of notes and put them on your computer.) Have dinner around eight (drinking very little alcohol from the wonderful wine list because you will feel rough the next day) and back to making sure your notes are safe on your laptop. Only then do you put your head on the pillow.

I'm a prolific note taker – I use spiral-bound notepads for their flick-over speed – so I can spend a couple of hours each evening writing them up. Don't think you can simply get away with a tape recorder; that's fine for news journalists and interviews but you lose all the nuance that travel note-taking brings (and audio takes hours to transcribe, even with modern audio-to-text transcription, so imagine five hours a day recording for two weeks!). And don't assume that you can write from photos. They are an *aide mèmóire* and can't portray the sounds and smells of your experience. If you have a two-night stay because the city is large, you can have a lie-in till eight, and you may actually get time for a swim in the pool and a relaxed dinner that evening – after you've written up your notes. Otherwise, it's up at 6.30 the next morning and repeat the process.

On the Moroccan trip, I ate something in Chefchaouen, the beautiful 'Blue City' in the Rif Mountains, that disagreed with me had me stretched out on the back seat of the car, sweating and feeling sorry for myself for the seven-hour drive in a huge loop through Tangier and down the coast to Rabat, with twenty minutes on my feet in the seaside resort of Asilah, where, purely by chance, I took one of my favourite photos of Morocco, which became the cover for my photobook *Eye on Morocco*. I left my upper-end camera in a taxi in Fez, never to see it again, and my professional-level audio recorder in a hotel in Chefchaouen, which eventually arrived back in my hands after a supposed over-night delivery to Marrakech that took five weeks.

But as any travel writer will tell you, you don't do the job for the money, and to be frank, luxury wears thin after a while because you rarely experience anything of the place you are staying in other than what the organiser wants to force-feed you. Sometimes you need that meal shoulder-to-shoulder in a worker's café to show you that there is a lot more to life and writing than a bed the size of an island and champagne cocktails.

But it's damned nice once in a while!



MOROCCO

MOROCCO

Under Saharan stars

Sahara Desert

I'd always imagined my night under the desert stars as a sandy version of the cowboy on the range, rolled up in a blanket with his head resting on his saddle, (although that was before I encountered a camel saddle, a lumpy thing if ever I saw one). In a nod in the direction of romanticism, I'd thrown in a thick Moroccan rug to lie on. The reality was a bit different.

I'm too old and decrepit for all that roughing-it malarkey and I'm quite prepared to forgo my frontier spirit and ask the camp chaps if I can drag the mattress out of my genuine Berber-style tent of woven wool and throw it on the ground. But they go one step further – they bring out the whole bed, mattress, sheets, pillows, blankets and all. And they do the same for the other five happy campers who want to drift off with the stars as a coverlet. Maybe not the romantic image of a night under the Saharan stars, but I have to admit that it's a little dash of unexpected comfort.

I'm the first to bed down. The soft, warm breeze makes a single sheet enough covering, and I roll up in it, although I have a couple of blankets to the side for the night-time desert chill. The camp is lit only by three candles, their pockets of light flickering on the dark wool of the tents, and the glow from a three-quarter moon. There is a susurrating of wind and whispering as the camp settles down, checking if small flashlights are in easy reach for the late-night visit to the toilet tent fifty metres away. A low conversation drifts down from a couple sat on a dune above the tents, but not intrusive. We'd agreed there would be no Walton-style, 'G'night, Jim Bob', 'G'night Billy Bob.'

The stars are everything I'd hoped for. More than just twinkles in a black-blue sky, they seem to spit and shimmer with life, and I'm tempted to ask if someone could please switch off the moon so I can get the full celestial show-time effect. The wind has picked up slightly and I drag a blanket over myself. I try to keep my eyes open so that I can concentrate on my star-spangled desert night sky, but they have a will of their own, and I'm soon curled up under my blankets, drifting off in the silence.

The desert dawn isn't a vast, bright burst of colour that happens in some places in the world, but a gradual ice blue outlining of daylight against the shadowed deep ochre of the dunes. Slowly, individual features become clear; hummocks of coarse grass that pocket the sands become

visible. No sound except the whispering wind that creates small wavelets of sand.

I sit on a dune watching the sunrise, and sounds drift up from the bivouac as it comes to life; my fellow campers climb dunes of various heights, depending on age and ability. The ice-sky warms to blue. I hear the complaining sounds of camels as Zaid, the camel driver, loads them up for the return journey. He talks to them as he puts on their saddles over the top of folded blankets to provide padding (and also a useful way to carry the used sheets back to the hotel).

We mount our camels. The only thing worse than going uphill on a camel is going down one, or at least it is if you don't count the getting on and off, or the camel standing up to begin your trek, which pales into nothing the first time the animal drops on its front knees for you to dismount. And there's the bit in the middle, the lumpen swaying as the beast plods along, following the curve of the dunes in its meandering route, where your legs begin to ache because there are no stirrups to put your feet in to give you a modicum of support and at least a faint shade of elegance. Come to think of it, there's little to recommend a camel ride, so it's no surprise that most of the guides you talk to prefer to walk. I bet Peter O'Toole had a stunt double when it came to humping along on a dromedary during the filming of Lawrence of Arabia.

Jimmy Hendrix and Bob Marley put their best camel toe forward and we begin our return journey to the hotel and a hot shower. I discover that I'm at the head of the caravan, not because I have the bearing of a sultan, but because the nameless camel I've been allocated doesn't like to be behind another and nips at the bums of any in front of him. I thought its grumpy character was just the normal nature of the species, but it seems that all God's chillun got their own peculiar ways.

As our long shadows walk alongside us, I reflect that as humpy, lumpy and grumpy a camel might be, it has a romanticism that isn't inherent in a 4x4. If I'm going to spend a night under the stars I'd rather do it properly and put up with the temporary discomfort of an authentic ride on an animal that has all the appearance and angularity of something that has been designed by a committee – a committee that originally set out to design a horse but got slightly lost along the way.

Hammaming it up

Marrakech

Taking a hammam in Morocco is very much a family affair. Fathers, sons and grandsons bathe together, part of the ritual of manhood, and, I suppose, women-hood.

On my first solo visit to a neighbourhood hammam in Marrakech's Medina I was a bit vague on my surroundings and bathing form. I soaked myself by pouring a couple of buckets full of water over my head, but when I sat down on the opposite side of the steam room I saw that I had been standing under a pictogram indicating that it was prohibited to pour buckets of water over yourself. Politeness had stopped any of my fellow bathers castigating the ignorant foreigner.

After a few minutes a young man, fully clothed, asked me if I wanted to be washed. I said I did, and he told me to go and sit in a corner. Had I done something wrong already, apart from, that is, pouring buckets of water over my head? After waiting an age, and thinking that perhaps he'd had a change of heart or found a more promising client, I began to soap myself with *savon beldi*, the thick paste of black olive oil soap with the glutinous consistency of mud.

I'd barely got an arm lathered when Abdel, my 'washer', came back, bringing with him his own scouring pad. Most people use the coarse mitten that you can buy almost anywhere for a couple of dirhams – twenty if you are a foreigner, but still cheap – and which continue to release their gaudy dye months after the rough cloth has been worn as smooth as velvet. Something you learn very quickly is to take a small plastic bag with you to the hammam to put it in when you are done, otherwise your clothes will end up with the tie-dye look popular with hippies in the seventies.

Abdel's scourer was a bunched up piece of old fishing net, which seems interchangeable with the net bags onions are delivered in, depending on whether you are coast or country-based. Perhaps he'd just had a couple of days on the beach at Essaouira and picked up his scouring pad there. By sign language, I was told to spread on more of the soap, which you leave for a while to soak in and cleanse the skin. He took me by the hand and led me to the hot room, indicating that I should lie down on the marble floor. As hard as my bed was, it was sheer heaven to lie there and let sweat and soap work their relaxing wonders.

I drifted in and out of a light slumber, so I've no idea how long I lay there, probably no more than ten minutes, before Abdel came back and led me into a darkened, cooler room. By pushing and pulling, he got me into the prone position he wanted me in and began the scouring. Lathered and soaked, scoured and scrubbed, I lay there like a limp rag, being directed by Abdel's competent hands. He sat me up and mimed that I should scour myself and soak myself off a final time, using the pink plastic scoop he brought with him, a pretty little heart-shaped thing with the handle coming from the pointed end, and water from a black rubber bucket.

Two small boys with skin so dark that I was barely able to see them in the gloom except for the whites of their eyes and the glistening of the

water as they poured it over themselves, reflecting the small amount of light entering through tiny star-shaped windows in the ceiling, amused themselves at whitey getting washed. They got into the game of mimicing me as I scrubbed my head and poured water all over it with the scoop, so I followed them in the game.

While I was cooling off in the changing room I told the attendant I would like a massage, and a few minutes later an elderly man arrived, wearing a woolen bobble hat and a threadbare tweed jacket, with a pair of thin baggy pants kept up with a bit of string to complete the ensemble. Skinny as a tent pole, with shoulders stooped forward, the face below the bobble hat almost folded in on itself. The socket where his right eye would have been simply had skin drawn tightly over it, as if at some time millennia ago he'd lost his eye and the recourse was a hasty sewing job. The left eye was open, but the misty grey of glaucoma gave him the appearance of someone whose lack of visual clarity was no detriment in the stygian gloom of the hammam.

Nodding at me, old bobble-hat pulled the string around his waist and dropped his pants. I didn't realise I'd come to that sort of hammam! Things became clear when off came the jacket, the ragged shirt beneath it and the bobble hat, leaving him standing in a grubby old pair of shorts. This was my masseur, although his emaciated frame – I suppose 'wiry' would be more polite – didn't bode more than a bit of a polite tap on the chest and a fluttering of fingers down the vertebrae. Oh! we can so easily delude ourselves.

Twisted, stretched, pummeled and pushed, I felt like I was in the hands of someone who had a personal vendetta against all Brits and was making the most of this singular opportunity. For half-an-hour I held back the tears, afraid to embarrass myself in front of strangers. Baggy pants suddenly stopped, picked up his clothes, and wandered off into the gloom. I was glad to see him go. Needless to say, when I slid off the stone block fifteen minutes later I felt that every kink in my body had been straightened out. As I set out for the walk home through the narrow, darkened streets of high walls and horseshoe arches of the Medina, my body glowed.

Buying a Moroccan carpet

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 are woven, 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 bizarre 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 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, 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 jeweller's window. 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. "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 Mastercard?"

A Stroll in the High Atlas Mountains

I'm walking in the foothills of Jbel Toubkal in the High Atlas Mountains when I hear someone shout 'Hello', but when I look around I can't see anyone. They call again, and following the sound of the voice, I see a young man perched on the branch of a walnut tree above my head, camouflaged by the dappled sun and shadow of the leaves. I wave and walk on.

When the footpath ends I walk along the edge of the narrow walls of an irrigation channel, often no more than my size nine boot wide. Just as the hillside to my right drops a rubble-strewn twenty metres, I have to bend almost double to duck under the overhang of a large boulder. I shuffle along sideways on my heels, leaning as far back into the concavity of the rock as I can, but nowhere near as much as I would like to.

For a while I sit on a rock by a small cascade, staring into the middle distance, its plashing, tinkling and bubbling as meditative as any glittering candle, 'omm' chant or Buddhist *koan*. The stony grey earth that gives life to tiny terraced crops of corn and potatoes will never be picture-postcard material, but the translucent midday haze gives the scene a pleasing Victorian sepia wash. In this mid-morning period the light and air this high are so clear that you can have difficulty focusing, the eye bemused by the sharpness.

As I sit on my rock, a young lady dressed in a pale blue *gelaba* and headscarf of midnight blue passes by with a baby strapped on her back, swathed in a black shawl. As protection for them against the glaring sun even this early in the morning, she holds an ancient black city-gent's umbrella, large enough to provide shade for an entire family. Behind her skips a small girl not yet at *hijab* age wearing a pink dress with the grinning face of 'Hello Kitty' flapping about as the young madam jumps from rock-to-rock, making a game of her steep walk home.

My own walk takes me up the hill to Aremdt, and I see the remains of a white Puegot 304 jammed against a tree trunk, the stopping point of a metal-crushing tumble of two hundred metres from the narrow road above. A warning – usually ignored – about the combination of speed and rough stony mountain tracks that should be navigated with extreme caution and which, in this case, wasn't.

Near the village, cultivated terraces of apple trees, one of the main crops of the valley, have pockets of iris along their perimeter, not grown for their luscious purple bloom but for the corm that will be dried and powdered for medicinal use. Just beyond the fruit trees, the village begins with a hand-painted sign on a pink-painted shop wall that reads, •CaFé.For.Drinks• •Berber.Gift.Shop•. I walk past the open front with the owner sitting stretched out on a rug, his back resting against the internal side wall of his business. 'Fatigúe.' he says. I'm not sure if he's referring to me, who's slowly striding up the hill, or explaining why he's lying on the floor instead of attending to business. 'A cup of tea,' he suggests, or perhaps hopes that I'll make him one in the small cafe adjoining his shop. I smile, wave, and move on.

Crossing the flat cement-slab bridge over the river below Aremdt, I watch a group of small boys sat on rocks watching an older boy in the middle of the river build a dam, dragging large stones from the riverside and packing the spaces with the small stones below his feet. In striped football shirt and calf-length trousers he is thoroughly occupied with his labours, seemingly totally oblivious that he's soaked from waist down. But his mother isn't. In pink housecoat and dull gray headscarf, she struts across the bridge, yelling at him to get himself out of there, which he does with a sheepish and sorrowful face. She continues the harangue as he passes under the bridge and takes the footpath uphill, head and shoulders bowed, followed by his shouting and gesticulating mum.

Meanwhile, a short way upstream on the other side of the river, a girl in her early teens, clothed in a knee-length shift over a long-sleeved T-shirt, jumps into the waist-deep icy water, splashing a few strokes back to the bank, then repeating the cycle. Water and kids – an eternal combination.

As I join the road that leads along the other side of the valley down to Imlil, a Mercedes *grande taxi* pulls up. From the passenger side, a slim man slides out and unloads two overflowing shopping bags. He lifts the boot lid and pulls out a young bleating sheep, brought home for fattening. He's obviously been to the weekly souk at Asni. He rolls the sheep onto its back and grabs its four legs in his right hand, picking it up as if it were another bag of shopping. Resigned to its future, the sheep stops bleating, as together they descend the slope to the bridge, the man to his home and the sheep, eventually, to the pot.

The taxi does a hazardous three-point turn and offers me a free ride to the top of the zig-zag track that will take me back to Kasbah du Toubkal and lunch. *En route* he tries to get a booking to take me to Marrakech, but I'm going nowhere for the next few days, so we shake hands and make our goodbyes as he drops me off.

Stepping out in Fez

I've never been good with maps, particularly city maps. I quite like getting lost because there is usually someone to set you on the right path. And in Morocco you can always use a GPS. By that I don't mean the app on your phone, I mean the young boys in the street who are always offering to guide you somewhere. Unfortunately, half the time they don't know either, but you're lost, so who cares.

Despite my cartographic failings, for my first visit to Fez I'd bought a map. First lesson; never buy a map that has a pretty little seal on it. It may

seduce you into thinking that you are opening a box of delights but for all the good this one did I might as well have asked someone to scrawl a quick diagram on the back of a cigarette packet. But what the heck, I've got a mouth (which sadly speaks neither Arabic nor French), and so long as I remember that R'Cif, the square near where I'm staying, is actually pronounced 'R'Cef', I can't go far wrong.

I start in the Plaza R'Cif, and before I enter the melee of the medina I become absorbed by some ladies sorting through mounds of second-hand women's and children's shoes laid out on blankets. Bent double, they delve into the haphazard scattering, trying to match a pair. I watch for a few minutes, and the only pair I can spot are some bright red canvas sandals with enormous heels and a cord that ties around the ankle; sexy, but not really compatible with the steep streets of the medina. It occurs to me that it would make a pretty good temporary job for some young kid, sorting out the pairs and tying them together with string. Although perhaps part of the bargain hunting is in the chase for the lost slipper.

Never having been to Fez before it doesn't matter which direction I take, so I just walk into the Medina, turn right and weave my way into streets so narrow you can touch either side if you extend your arms.

As you enter the medina in Marrakch from Jmaa el Fna, all the shops in the first few hundred metres are given over to almost exactly the same products, mainly aimed at tourists. What I like about the medina in Fez is that while you still have the *babouches*, *djellabas* and brass trays for sale, the tiny shops are mixed in with butchers, coffee grinders, and vegetable stalls, purveyors of all your daily needs. I also like the way the narrow alleys rise and fall, often at awkward angles, as they make their way up the hill.

Within a few minutes I find myself at the foot of a steep set of steps. In front of me, a lady with a pushchair is trying to lift both it and a couple of bags of shopping up the slope. In the pushchair a dumpy child swathed in clothes glares grumpily, as small children can when not exactly pleased about being bumped up and down a flight of steps – and it was a long flight of steps. I gesture to the lady to take the handle, I take the crossbar at the front and between us we haul child and shopping upward.

When we reach the top I put my end of the pushchair down and, with profuse thanks from the lady, turn to continue on my way. And then I see another flight of equally steep steps, with no alleyways heading off in another direction. The only way is up. I turn around with the thought that sometimes it pays to mind your own business, and pick up my end of the pushchair again. My shortage of breath when we finally get to the top of this flight is as much to do with carrying a weighty young chap as it is to being out of practice with trudging uphill, but I comfort myself with the thought that the poor dear probably does it every day without a word of complaint.

The slope continues upward, out of the world of the tourist wanderer into the everyday world of Fazi family life. Outside a butcher's a young boy is deftly shaving a camel's head with a cut-throat razor, whether preparing it for the pot or practicing for a future as a barber, I've no idea, but he's doing a pretty good job. Next to the shop, a ram with a wonderfully curling set of horns is tied to a door with a length of string. Tomorrow's lunch or a woolly guard dog, again I've no idea, but with a set of horns like that, I'm not about to get any closer to find out.

I pick up two ballpoint pens from a blanket on the ground covered with pens, pencils, notebooks and the like, and ask the price. A pretty young teenager said "*Quatre.*" "Pardon," I say, not sure if I've heard correctly, and behind me a voice says, "Six." I wasn't going to argue for the sake of a couple of dirhams, so I hand the money over to the man sat on the blanket, who seems bemused by the whole operation. I look at the girl and laugh. "You said four." The broad giggling smile she gives me is worth every cent of the two dirhams I've been overcharged.

Service with a smile

Comptoir Darna, Marrakech

Comptoir de Darna restaurant is dark and decadent, wonderful in its sparkling exoticness, although I couldn't help feeling that, like so many of this sort of night-haunted places, the ambience is a bit different when the cleaners come in in the morning to do the carpets. Ever a pedant, I'm afraid.

The meal was wonderful; the service I can't tell you about as I was distracted by the voluptuous waitresses who glided around in tight black outfits with brightly coloured pouch-bags shimmering with gilded tassels. But I experienced a moment that made a happy man very old, and will stay with me as one of those moments....you know the ones, they happen, linger briefly, and pass, to reward you with a smile years down the line when the mind isn't concentrating on the realities of life.

Needing to relieve the strains of too much excellent Moroccan white wine, I wandered up the curved sweep of the elegant main staircase and found myself on a richly carpeted hallway that would have made a pasha proud. In front of me, a pair of enormous mirrored doors reflected back a bemused chap nervously looking for the sign that said either Gents or had a stick figure of a body with two rigid legs spread astride, showing me where to go. But good Lord, no! Nothing so banal – and besides, they speak French and Arabic in Morocco, so I would have looked in vain for the 'Gents'.

One of the mirrored doors opened up in front of me like the entrance to the secret cave of the Forty Thieves when Ali Baba struck the rock, although in this case, it was more an Ali Barbara.

Round at all the points the good Lord decreed that provocative roundness should appear on a lustrous young lady's form; curves to defeat the best geometrical designs of a luxury hand-built boat-maker, lips as rouged and full as one of Raphael's cherubim, dark cascading locks framing a face of delicious plumpness set in which were two deep brown incandescent pools masquerading as eyes. As I approached, those entrancing pools sparkled, her rose-red lips seductively bid me, "Bonsoir, Monsieur," as she gracefully opened the door to which she was guardian. Never in my life, from the far-flung Indies to the highfalutin' gambling soirees of Gay Paree, have I encountered a toilet door opener of such beauty. That was her job, to open the door to the toilet at just that perfect moment of arrival, and, by some magical device, probably known these days as a video camera, to repeat the action on departure.

It occurred to me later to wonder how far into the gents' urinals did the camera focus? Only as far as the sinks, to make sure we actually washed our hands before taking the twenty dirham coin from our pocket to give as a tip, or as far inward to focus on the ritual shaking and zipping that we all, each in our own way, perform?

It mattered not, the smile was as welcoming on departure as on arrival. I was tempted to feign a case of *prostatic hyperplasia* (look it up) to keep going back, but I think she may have noticed a bald old degenerate making repeat journeys. I consoled myself with the thought that all of us, even if our job is only to open toilet doors, can do it with the greatest aplomb we can muster, because it may just raise a smile for an aging juvenile who can drift back for a few moments to the time when his smile was one of love and longing, when it wasn't just a shell of skin and bone, now lost between desire and capability, looking for nothing more than a cheery sidelong glance, the sort we knew so many years ago. And this gift, the little darling, who I will never come across again in my life, bestowed upon me.

Map: [Comptoir Darna](#)

Taking the Strain

Imlil, High Atlas Mountains

There comes a time when we all have to accept age is creeping up on us. Mine was when I was faced with a steep walk up the mountainside from Imlil in the foothills of the High Atlas Mountains to my hotel high above.

I've been out all day. The weather has been grey and heavily overcast and I'm looking forward to a hot bath. I'm staying in a guesthouse up the side of the hill above Kasbah du Toubkal, where a new road has been cut in to access the small villages. The walk is steep, an uncomfortable experience on the way down for someone who isn't much of a walker. I'm hoping my driver, Brahim, will drop me at the door of Village Kasbah, an annex to the main hotel, where I'm spending a few nights.

We return to Imlil after a day out and I go for a coffee while Brahim checks in at the Kasbah village office.

The weather has closed in, heavy dripping clouds are rolling down from Jbel Toubkal and I comfort myself with the thought that I'll soon be deeply immersed in hot water, easing my aching bones. But while man plans, God laughs.

When I get back from my warming coffee, Brahim tells me that he has another job on and they have arranged a mule to take me up to the Village. Hmm... I've always thought it looks rather embarrassing to see a grown man who isn't a local going about his business, sitting on the back of a mule, especially as it will be led by a muleteer. An adult version of the seaside donkey, I've always felt. But it seems my only other option is shank's pony, a knee-punishing scramble up the hillside, and as I'd walked down it six hours earlier I still have it clearly in mind, and it doesn't appeal. I suggest that I'll walk up the road through the village, supposedly to stretch my legs after sitting in a car all day. I fool no-one, but they accede to my request and the mule, Mohammed his owner, and I start the slow walk up the village street.

I'm not tall, and Mohammed barely reaches to my shoulder, but twenty years as a muleteer covering the often punishing terrain of the High Atlas Mountains has given him leg muscles like whipcord and he's soon setting a pace, probably gentle for him, that has me thinking that in this case, pride doesn't so much come before a fall as a before a wheezing stagger up a modest incline. I keep my pace, though, but as we turn off the main road onto a rough track after about one kilometre's walk I concede defeat, climb onto a wall and, with Mohammed's help, sling my leg over the mule's back. I see no stirrups and imagine the discomfort of trying to grip the animal's side with my knees, an uncomfortable experience, as I discovered when I rode a camel, but my trusty guide slips my feet into folds in the saddle blanket to give me a modicum of belief that I'm secure.

We set off up a dirt path through a cluster of houses on the outskirts of Imlil, a narrow aqueduct gurgling alongside, past a couple of young boys playing with (or perhaps supposedly carrying) a blue plastic sack full of hay, an elderly gentleman who passes the time of day with Muhammed, and a mule with fully loaded panniers coming in the opposite direction. My gentlemanly guide steps to the side to allow it to pass and I avoid looking to my right where the path drops sharply away. It's not what you

would call a sheer drop by any consideration, but I'm not good with heights and even the metre-and-a-half from the ground I am on the mule's back gives me minor concern, assuaged by the fact that my only other option is a breathless walk that my aging knees wouldn't thank me for.

Soon we are in open country, and Muhammed and his mule plod along peacefully. I've walked the first part of this attractive route between Imlil and the Kasbah many times but never before have I taken the rock-strewn deviation from the well-worn path I'm used to. It was steep and rough coming down and I quickly discover that trying to hold my camera with one hand while attempting to video the walk, and holding on grimly to the narrow strap attached to the saddle with the other as the mule clammers over the rocks is probably not the best idea I've ever had. There's no doubt he is sure-footed, but it's my lack of practice at being sure-seated that I worry about.

But on we go.

As the ride wears on I begin to lose my nervousness, settling into the gently rocking rhythm as we climb the hill, with Mohammed warning me to duck my head with a gentle, 'Sorry', as we pass under low-hanging branches. The weather is settling into a damp and gloomy evening and fog begins to descend as we climb higher, changing the rocky terrain to more well-marked paths, no more than a mules-width wide.

Before I know it I see the steps leading up to the door of the Village, a final twist in the steep path, a short stroll alongside the steps fitter humans than I would take, and we are on the patio, with Mohammed slipping my feet out of the folds in the blanket and helping me to gingerly dismount. I'm surprised to find that I really enjoyed the ride, and my mind flashes back to the smiles I saw on children's faces as they rode along the beach at Blackpool when I took a stroll with my grandchildren three weeks earlier. I thank Mohammed and pat the mule before drifting off to my room for the long-awaited deep, hot bath. Meanwhile, my guide nips into the kitchen for a well-earned cup of mint tea before his trek back down to Imlil.

Geulize Girl

Marrakech

I'm a couple of hours early for a meeting in Marrakech, so I take a stroll around the flower market in Geuliz. Wandering through the crowded alleys, a pretty young girl walks alongside me and says something in French. I apologise, and tell her I don't speak the language. In beautiful English she asks where I'm from, and I tell her, and say I'm a stranger here. She says something else, which I don't hear clearly, but I'm

beginning to get the picture. She gives me a radiant smile and stops at a stall as I wander on.

I've got plenty of time to kill so I sit on a wall outside the market and begin making notes. A few moments later the tousle-haired blonde beauty comes out of the main door and turns in my direction. She sees me and smiles.

"Are you okay," she asks.

I feel like saying, "All the better for seeing you, sweetheart," but the words that come out are, "Fine, thank you."

When she asks if I would like to take a coffee with her, there can be no doubt that we are moving into a commercial transaction – she's a pretty young girl, I'm not a particularly attractive old man – but a chat would have been nice. I turn the coward's cheek.

"I'm sorry, I'd love to but I've got a meeting in ten minutes." More like ninety, and I wish I had the courage to see the encounter through, but I haven't.

"Do you live here?" I ask.

"I'm from Casablanca and I work here in journalism and communications"

She's seen my notebook and pen...I'm not fooled.

"So do I. I'm working here, that's why I have a meeting."

We look at each other. Her lovely smile has never left her face.

"It's nice to meet you," she says, and I shake her long, slim hand as we say goodbye.

I watch her as she walks down the street and crosses the main road. The last I see of her is her tousled head passing between two parked cars.

The Restaurant at the End of the World

Marrakech Medina

Camel's heads, sheep's testicles, calf's feet, and plenty less exotic treats are to be had at Jmaa el Fna, Marrakech's famous open-air restaurant.

In 2008, Paula Wolfert's book, *Couscous and Other Good Food from Morocco*, won the Cookbook Hall Of Fame award, twenty-five years after its publication. At the time, Moroccan cuisine would probably have seemed pretty exotic. These days, fancy food trucks and posh catering carts may be blocking the highways in Europe and the US, but Morocco's biggest street food heaven hasn't moved in a thousand years.

Jmaa el Fna, The Place of the Dead, The Mosque at the End of the World, North Africa's most vibrant and exotic square, the ancient heart of Marrakech, where snake charmers, storytellers and acrobats entertain the passing crowds. By day the bustle of henna artists, potion sellers, fresh

orange juice vendors, and red-robed water sellers; by night the curling smoke of a hundred barbeques spirals over the largest open-air restaurant in the world.

When dusk falls, handcarts are wheeled into Jmaa el Fna and unfolded to reveal portable grills, tables, benches, pots and pans. While the mounds of food are prepared, young men in long white coats work the crowds trying to convince you that the succulent dishes served at their stall are the absolutely top-notch best; “Deliah Smith created our menu”, “All our fish comes fresh from Sainsbury’s”. And Sainsbury’s would probably be proud of the fish the stalls serve, dipped in flour seasoned with salt and saffron before being deep-fried in bubbling oil until crisp and golden.

There are stalls to fit every taste and pocket; a bowl of *harira*, a traditional rich tomato and lentil soup with beef or chicken, seasoned with ginger, pepper, and cinnamon, or *b’sarra*, white bean soup with olive oil and garlic; add a sandwich served in a *khobz*, a small, round flat loaf with the top nipped off to form a pocket, filled with freshly deep-fried slices of liver dribbled with a green chilli sauce, or a hand-full of thin spicy *merguez*, and you will be set up for a stroll around the souks. (Keep an eye open for the *really* esoteric mixture of *merguez*, hard-boiled egg and tuna fish.)

Kebabs shops appear on almost every street corner around the globe these days, but in Marrakech vendors snub the effete pressed meat served elsewhere in favour of slices of real lamb, glistening with dribbling fat, sprinkled with cumin and salt as the cook hands it to you wrapped in a paper cone. Chicken with preserved lemons, delicately spiced with *kasbour* (fresh green coriander) and served with piquant olives; brochettes of lamb and liver, seasoned with red pepper and cumin, carefully grilled over charcoal, which spits and smokes as the luscious fats fall on to it; beef or lamb *tajines*, cooked with raisins, prunes and almonds, have their conical tops whisked off by the waiters, just as the lids of elegant silver salvers would be at the Savoy Hotel. (Although you may want to leave the *tajine* of sheep’s or calf’s feet and the sliced camel’s head to the locals to enjoy, and it would take a certain amount of culinary courage to sample a sheep’s head or bowl of sheep’s testicles – cooked, of course.)

On the west side of the square, a row of chefs steam mounds of snails in battered enamel bowls. The menu is simple, snails or snails, but as the little gastropods served in a tantalizing broth are a gastronomic institution in Morocco, it isn’t always easy to get a seat at these stalls. Supposedly wonderful for the digestion, locals drain the broth after having their fill of the snails. (They also often carry a safety pin to wheedle the little devils out, but a toothpick is usually provided.)

Vegetarians might not savour their best gastronomic experience, but it can be delicious. Hard-boiled eggs are chopped and mashed with potatoes,

with the inevitable sprinkle of cumin, (served alongside salt and pepper on every stall); bright vegetable salads, glistening piles of savoury chick peas spiked with fresh-ground black pepper or bowls of lentil stew cooked with finely chopped onion and garlic; fried aubergine with a hot green pepper served alongside a pile of fresh-cut and fried potatoes, all washed down with a glaringly orange Fanta.

Young boys man-handle small handcarts or struggle with large wooden trays laden with glistening sweetmeats through the densely packed crowds. Delectable as the pastries may look, they aren't always that sweet. If your taste is for fruit for dessert, try, *carmose*, prickly pear, and the vendor will carefully remove the skin for you.

For a simple wandering snack, strings of *sfenj* donuts are held together by a strip of leaf to make carrying easier. They are delicious with a coffee, and come either sweet (with egg beaten into the batter) or savoury. Also useful as a back-up snack on long journeys.

If you haven't washed your meal down with a drink at the stall, a glass of fresh orange juice will be squeezed before your eyes at one of the many carts around the edge of the square. You might also find raisin, pistachio and pomegranate juice, which have a mysterious flavour of their own. The Technicolor yogurts sold in big glasses look more off-putting than delectable, but *raib*, a home-made yoghurt with a milkshake consistency slides down the throat deliciously.

The beautiful chaos of the food stalls is entertainment in its own right, but when you have eaten your fill there is still the raucous street entertainment of Jmaa el Fna to keep you from your bed.

Map: [Jmaa el Fna](#)

Mulling over mules

Imlil High Atlas Mountains

I sit on a stone in the shade of a walnut tree and watch a young farrier hammer three-inch nails though a mule's hoof, nipping the excess nail off before bending the stub over. It seems over-kill on size, but as I've never shod a mule, who am I to say?

The mule gives the occasional enquiring look backward and downward, but other than that stares placidly ahead. New shoes fitted, it's led away and a blue plastic bag of feed hung around its neck. By the time it begins chomping, another shoeing job has been backed into place and the farrier begins hacking off the bent and split old shoes.

When the muleteer has hobbled his mule to a huge stone he walks across the street and sits under the shade a few stones from me.

"Hello, how are you?" he says.

"Very well", I reply "And how are you?"

“Very fine, thank you.”

He’s from Aremdt, the village high above Imlil, and he’s come down to have his mule shod. He’s a mountain guide who, when times are good, will make the regular two-day trips up Jbel Toubkal, the highest mountain in North Africa, seven hours there, four back.

“So how’s business?” I ask

He puts his hand out flat, palm down and wiggles it up and down in the universal signal of ‘not so good’

‘Is bad’ he says, ‘not much tourist.’

We sit in comfortable silence for a while until a minibus pulls up in front of the mule park.

“Bus,” he says, and jumps up, walking quickly over to the driver’s side. Words are exchanged and the driver shakes his head, leaning back in his seat as a passenger points a fat lens at two tethered chomping mules. Photo taken, the bus moves off up the village street.

My new friend wanders back and sits a couple of stones away. We resume our companionable silence. A few minutes later we hear the peeping of a message on his mobile phone. As he takes it out I stand up, shake his hand and tell him I hope it’s a booking for him and his mule.

“Inch’allah!”

Medina life’s connections

Marrakech

I was reading a while ago that when a group of school kids in the UK were questioned about where they thought milk came from, most of them had no idea it came from a cow. A fridge shelf in a supermarket seemed to be the main suspect. While it may be easy to snigger at the ignorance of modern children about some of the basics of life, it occurred to me that there are plenty of things that we take for granted, totally unaware of the story behind them.

Take the beautiful *babouches*, the soft leather slippers we see in rows lining walls in tiny shops in Marrakech souk. When you bought a pair did you ever think about where they came from? Probably not, but they certainly didn’t just appear thanks to the babouche fairy. Admittedly some are now being mass-produced in Asia, but others are still made by hand, and their story, and that of much of the beautiful artistry we take home as gifts and souvenirs, is intricately woven into the whole fabric of life in Marrakech Medina.

I was taken to a workshop tucked in a corner of a *foundouk* in the medina, a pre-20th century hybrid of cheap hotel and stable, where animals (camels, donkeys, etc.) slept downstairs and people slept in small rooms above. The workshop was no more than about three metres by one-

and-a-half, where a man in white skull cap and thick brown corduroy jacket against the cold was carefully applying a soft white leather covering to the thicker leather of a belt. This was where, between the ages of twelve and fourteen, over thirty-five years ago, my friend Hussein had worked making slippers, belts and soft leather bags, sharing the space with four others.

While Hussein and his friend, Mustapha, the owner of the small business, caught up with their news I picked up a soft, beautifully embroidered shoulder bag in warm, rose-pink leather, lying on the makeshift sofa beside me. I could see it draped across the shoulder of my granddaughter, and her smile as she received it. The bag wasn't quite finished, it needed a strap and fastenings, but I asked how much it was.

'You are here to take tea,' said Mustapha, 'not to buy something.'

As the guest, I was offered the first sip from the single glass in Mustapha's workshop, and when we'd each had a drink and the pot was being topped up for a second round, he climbed on his bike and rode off into the souk in search a strap so my granddaughter's gift could be finished. A few minutes later, an elderly gentleman in a white *djellaba* appeared at the doorway, enquiring about the belts Mustapha had been working on. After exchanging a few pleasantries with Hussein, he took them and went on his way. He was the buckle man, who would punch the holes in the belt and fix the buckles. He would bring the rough leather belts back to Mustapha for covering, and either sell the finished product himself or pass them on to someone else who had ordered them.

And that's when the interconnectedness of the Medina struck home to me.

Mustapha would decide on the products he would make each week, whether ordered from someone else or for him to sell direct to a shop. He would buy sufficient sheep skins for his needs, the most widely used in his type of work, from the daily auction in the leather market, and would then dye them himself and dry them in the courtyard of the foundouk, or hand them over to someone to dye to his choice of colour. When the skins were prepared he would cut them to the pattern of the model he was making that week and then hand them to a female cousin who did the painstaking embroidery at home as a way to supplement the family income. When the embroidered pieces came back he would assemble them, then cycle to a cupboard-size shop to buy the silken cord that would make the shoulder strap of exactly the right shade to match the dyed leather, working to no colour card other than years of experience. He then covered the press stud fastenings in leather and fixed them in place.

One day each week he would gather his bags, or belts, or slippers together, and perhaps those of his family made in other minuscule workshops, and take them to his customers in the souks. If one shop didn't buy them, another would. He would buy his vegetables from the

food market and bread from the bakery that form part of the five 'hearts' of the *quartier*, his meat from the local butcher with a whole lamb hanging from a hook, and his groceries from one of the dozens of narrow cavernous shops almost within an arms-reach of his home. Everything contained within the walls of the Medina, each having his role to play in the highly organised chaos of life within the rose-pink walls.

My 71st Birthday.

Kasbah du Toubkal, Imlil.

Once again I'm taking breakfast on the metaphorical roof of the world, the terrace of Kasbah du Toubkal, my routine every time I stay here. Below me, the houses of Imlil rise pink and beige through the dense green of walnut groves, the minaret of the new mosque the highest point of the village. Smaller villages pockmarking the valley and the almost dry riverbed, disappear into the distance as they meander the folds of the foothills of Jbel Toubkal.

To the right and left, other villages, often no more than a small cluster of houses, taper up steep slopes, clinging tenaciously onto the almost sheer rock. I've always been in awe of how the people here can build their homes in this apparently inaccessible terrain, where at times I would be pretty feared even to walk the footpaths which are often no more than a rocky scramble between houses. I've watched men carry sacks of cement and sand up almost vertical scree, drop it beside the piles of rock and building block carried up earlier on their shoulders, walking back down to the mule waiting patiently on the narrow track below, which is far as its sure-footedness can take it, and repeat the climb with another load. Sack by sack, stone by stone, the house will be built, sometimes over years, as money and time allow.

It may look like a hill-top fortress that's been here for centuries, but the Kasbah was built in the same fashion as any village house. With no road access, everything from bathroom taps to the ornate tiles on the bench I sit on were carried up the knee-crunching slope on the backs of man and mules. The largest item, a commercial fridge, came up in a sling carried on the shoulders of sixteen men, carefully negotiating the tricky slope from the village following ancient mule tracks. It's still the same even today, twenty-five years after its opening; the meat and veg for *tajines*, toilet paper for the rooms, computers for reception, *djellabas* and *babouches* for the comfort of clients and even the clients themselves, all arrive on foot or on the backs of mules. And this is the way it will continue.

While the Kasbah is in the careful hands of the owners, who built it almost three decades ago, it will never have vehicular access direct to the front door, and while it may be a bit of a struggle at times, the moment

you walk through the stout wooden front door set into a high stone wall and see the roses, smell the herbs and see Madame Fatima baking flatbread on a clay oven, you begin to understand why.

With no sound other than the susurrations of the river far below, fed by the last snowmelt from the peak of Jbel Toubkal, and the chirruping of birds as they skitter through the walnut trees, I think I'd be hard-pressed to find a more peaceful start to the day.

Tomorrow I'm back to the colourful chaos of Marrakech, a world away from the peace and quiet of the High Atlas Mountains, but being a city boy at heart I love the narrow, people-filled, ever-noisy alleys of the medina.

Getting my hands dirty

Imlil

Omar Auuzal picks me up in his wagon at the bridge in Imlil for our day out collecting rubbish in the neighbouring villages. Mohamed Bokare, the second collector in the team, hangs onto his platform at the rear of the truck as we set off for our first stop, Tamatert, high above Imlil with no direct road into the village.

We park at the side of the road and scramble down a rocky path into the village, armed with a couple of large blue nylon sacks. The tiny alleyways are steep and uneven, and the routine is to walk to the bottom of the village, turn around and clamber back up, picking up the rubbish as you go. This makes perfect sense; why start at the top and have to lug a heavy bag all the way back up the hill again to the truck? And it's not just the 'streets' we clean, but also the tiny cultivated terraces at the sides; everything collected and dropped into nylon bags.

For a couple of hours we traipse the village collecting rubbish; worn-out trainers, odd socks, tattered plastic bags, weathered cardboard boxes; even the donkey dung heap used as manure gets picked over for wind-blown waste. There's nothing much different to the basic detritus of anywhere in the world, but the age of double- and triple-wrapped everything hasn't arrived here yet, and despite the simplicity of the collection process, there's probably less litter here than you'd see in plenty of European villages. It's slow and laborious, but it works.

For the next part of the route we'll be tackling a new destination on Omar and Mohamed's collection run, and one infinitely more nerve-racking for me.

Only a few weeks earlier a new road had been completed up to Arghen, a village on the opposite side of the valley to Tamatert, which until then had no access other than centuries-old mule tracks. To call it a 'road' is euphemistic at best; it's simply a one-vehicle-width track, bulldozed in a

series of tight zigzags. This is definitely a road where you don't want to meet someone coming the other way.

In first gear, Omar hauls the truck up the mountainside, following the tracks of other vehicles that have compacted the rough stone into something vaguely resembling a surface. Some of the bends are so tight that even our short wagon has to make three-point turns to negotiate them, which Omar manages with a lot more confidence than I feel. When we arrive at Arghen, he executes a nerve-wracking series of turns to face downhill. The road is little more than a metre wider than the wagon is long, with a terrifying tumble down the mountainside as reward for the slightest misjudgement. As he shuffles the vehicle around and the rear wheels begin to spin and dig holes in the loose surface, I cover my nervousness with the pretense of taking photos, and climb out the wagon.

We park on a cut-away above the village and meet Hassan Aitjetame, a member of the Arghen Village Association (known as *Tagmatte*, The Family), and who is responsible for rubbish collection. I watch the clouds come rolling down from Jbel Toubkal, bringing the rain with them. It's cold and wet, and I've forgotten to bring a jacket; this is going to be an uncomfortable experience. Fortunately, the rains drift on down the valley, leaving only a light surface mud for us to slip around in and soggy waste for us to pick up.

The routine is the same as in Tamatert, walking the village street by street, collecting discarded rubbish as we go along, but Arghen is much steeper than Tamatert, and at some points we are scrambling over scree that moves unsettlingly below my feet. Omar, Mohamed and Hassan, and the couple of young boys who have joined in the fun, walk this sort of ground on a daily basis so are used to it, and politely overlook my staggering. It occurs to me that refuse collectors from European countries who belly-ache about the difficulties of having to tow a wheelie-bin two metres to an automated lift on the back of their wagon should be forced to spend a week with Omar and Mohamed.

When we get back to the truck with our load, a crowd has gathered. It's almost a party atmosphere, and Omar is congratulated on his tenacity in getting the truck up to the village for the first time. He smiles, as if the skidding and sliding had been nothing.

As we begin our descent the rains return, leaving great splashes on the windscreen to obscure the view and wetting the rough stones of the road. At each tight turn Mohamed jumps off his stand at the back and shepherds Omar as he makes his cautious three- and sometimes five-point turns. I don't comment, but a sideways glance at Omar tells me that he's only marginally less nervous than I am. With an almost audible sigh of relief – more on my part than Omar's because I only have to do it this once whereas he will be making the trip weekly – we arrive back at the

main road and scuttle off to the smouldering incineration area on the edge of Imlil.

Rubbish dumped, I thank them both, and leave. Ten minutes later, while I'm sat under the awning of a café taking a glass of mint tea, I see them driving up the main street, and wave.

Chaouen the Fat

Chefchaouen, Morocco,

I take morning coffee on the Plaza Utan el-Hamman, the 'watch the world go by' main square of Chefchaouen medina. The waiter spends more time hustling people into his café than serving them, and seems to take it as a personal insult if they don't come inside, throwing insults after those who walk away.

I'm amused by a rotund Spanish man sitting with a group of friends at a nearby table. He has a fancy Canon camera, but every time he tries to take a photo of his travelling companions sat at the table the camera doesn't work. I watch him for a while as he keeps trying, with no success, and complaining that his expensive camera has stopped working half-way through their holiday. I finally give in and walk over to him. I suggest he tips the peak of his baseball cap back a bit and try again. He does, and voila! the camera works perfectly. The simple explanation is that when the automatic flash flipped open, the peak of his cap was stopping it from opening fully, therefore not completing the electronic cycle. Laughs all round and a fully functioning camera to record the friends' holiday.

This ancient quartier is a place of corners shaded by hanging vines; a dispute as a builder blocks a shop doorway with bags of cement before he hoists them above; boys on bikes dodging the pedestrians as they scramble downhill, a father hand-in-hand with his small son entering a barber shop that has outmoded photos of models with dense lacquered hair taped to his window.

A mini-moment of drama occurs as a man with a long wooden pole tries to raise a wire supporting a large grapevine that crosses the narrow street. The wire has settled on a telephone cable, which looks as if it is about to be torn from the wall by the weight of the grapes. Mr. Cable is concentrating so much on poking the vines with his pole that he doesn't notice that the wire has slipped under one of the tiles on his roof. With a mighty heft he pushes the vines up over the phone cable and at the same time dislodges the tile. With a crash the roof tile hits the ground, scattering shards into the street. He looks around bemused, realizing that he has just created himself another repair job.

The crash makes a baker jump as he steps out of his shop. He's carrying a tray of baked round loaves covered in tea towel-sized cloths that he lays

on the low frame of a banquette minus its mattress, waiting for the owners to collect them. At one end, two metal trays of baked peppers show what someone will be having for lunch. At the end of the day, when all the bread has been baked, he will slide trays of honey and rose-water pastries into the oven to cook by the cooling embers of the oven's fire.

A Short Stroll Around the Souk

Marrakech

I took a stroll around the Souk in Marrakech yesterday afternoon, watching the artisans at work. It never ceases to amaze me, the quality of workmanship that comes out of a workshop measuring about four metres square. There are certain parts of the souk dedicated to particular products; the metal workers souk, the gelaba sellers souk, but if you drift out to the periphery as I prefer to do, away from the tourists around Jemaa El Fna, you come to what are basically workers suburbs, but not suburbs as we might know them.

Lined along the streets and in tucked-away little back alleys, a barber with one chair patched with electrician's tape and a cracked mirror will work next to a tinsmith slowly turning a piece of metal as he punches ornate designs to make the beautiful lamps that cast starbursts of light when illuminated; alongside him woodcarvers and masonry workers etch intricate designs into their chosen materials, a butcher whose sole stock consists of a camel's head suspended from a hook and a pile of congealing grey innards. (If you want to find out what camel's meat taste like, get down to the food stalls in Jma el Fnasa at night and you can delight your taste buds.) Dark caverns lit by a single fluorescent tube selling olives, olive oil and vats of preserved lemons for that emblematic Moroccan dish, *poulet au citron*; single-portion tajines cooking on a hot-plate beside a food stall made from a couple of paper-covered low tables and a few old stools, with the cook selling battered fish deep-fried in a blackened old frying pan. A shop with a collection of beautiful antique teapots on display shows, on further inspection, shelves of second-hand kettles on shelves at the back.

Those who can't afford a shop will have a carton of Marlboro open on a cardboard-box counter, selling cigarettes individually, (you can recognise the itinerant cigarette seller by the sound of the coins he jingles in his hands as he walks); a family-sized block of almond chocolate is cut into narrow strips, each offering four small square bites; carrots tied in small bundles and spicy green peppers sold in threes, just enough for a tajine. Estate agents buy, sell and rent from bedraggled hidey-holes furnished with a beaten-up old desk and a couple of 50s tubular steel kitchen chairs. Their properties must all be filed in their heads because there is no sign of

paperwork. Five-hundred-year-old doors with great studded nail-heads, lacquered with layers of ancient brown paint, stand open to reveal walls tiled in a mixture of gaudy seventies factory rejects.

And above all, the ubiquitous mint tea.

Thailand



THAILAND

My Thai moment

Wat Umong, Chiang Mai,

Everyone who visits Thailand has their 'this is Thailand' moment, that moment when you realise that this could just never happen at home, wherever 'home' might be. When I came to Chiang Mai on holiday at the end of January 2014 it never occurred to me that a year later I'd be living here permanently. A few days after my arrival I took a bike ride to Wat Umong, where the first of my now many 'this is Thailand' moments occurred, and I suppose, in retrospect, it sowed the seed that got me here.

A gong chimes, the mellow sound resonating through the trees. After a moment's pause it chimes a second time, this one joined by the howl of a dog. As the tempo of the gong picks up the dog is joined by friends, the deeper howl of the larger breeds counterpointing the high-pitched staccato yap of the Jack Russells, with a backing track provide by the continually crowing roosters until the previous tranquillity of the temple is filled with a cacophony – even the cockerels join in more heatedly. The gong stops, its song drifting away, and within moments the dogs' silence, until all that is left is the on-going crowing of the roosters.

An elderly lady shuffles to the concrete bench near where I'm sitting in front of the lake, supported by her daughter. The bench they aim for has no space between it and the metal rail guarding the pond so I offer my seat in the shade. The lady is here to feed the fish to gain merit by giving them life, and hopefully ensuring her own comfort in the hereafter.

As mum feeds the fish from a bag of bread pieces, daughter and I chat for a while before she goes back to her car to collect the live fish they bought earlier in the day at a market and will release as a further merit-making gesture. I'm left looking after mum, who's no trouble at all as she's verging on senile, and simply sits holding a colourful cloth to her mouth, smiling peacefully.

The fish in the lake are seriously ugly, or at least what little is visible of them in the murky water. All you see as the bread breaks the surface is a gaping mouth that spreads most of the way around the unproportionally large head, and elongated whiskers that look more like tentacles – no sign of eyes, body or tail to give any measure of size. They certainly don't give the appearance of the type that nibble at your toes in a foot massage, more something you'd surprise you granny with in the bath to bring on an instant heart attack to claim your inheritance.

Daughter returns with three plastic bags of thrashing fish. Mum complains that the stone bench she's been sitting on for the last twenty minutes is hurting her bum, so I'm left with the bags of fish while daughter takes mum back to the car for a comfy sit down. I haven't babysat in years, but within twenty minutes beside a lake in Thailand I've babysat a senile old Thai lady and three bags of live fish. Could life get any better?

While the fish and I keep each other company, the warmth of the afternoon sun and splashing of the fountains lull me into a meditative doze.

Daughter returns thirty minutes later and we finally introduce ourselves. Khan— known as Katie to her foreigner friends — explains the principles of Buddhist belief in the merit gained and passed on from past lives. The simple act of offering a seat to her mother might be a small repayment for an act of kindness she or her family gave me many lives ago, and will gain me merit in lives to come.

The evening sun is setting as we wait for Khan's sister to join us for the small ceremony of pouring the fish into the lake. The movement from the plastic bags has slowly decreased to an occasional flick of a tail and we are both getting a bit concerned that she may soon be earning herself some demerits if we don't get them into the water sharpish and they go stiff on us.

I look down and see what looks like a small brown eel that must have escaped from the slightly open neck of one of the bags, showing not a lot of action. Khan asks if I think it's dead, but not being an aficionado of small eels I've no idea, so I pick it up and throw it in the water, working on the premise that it will literally either sink or swim. We make a joint decision that at least we should get that particular bagful into the water, so Khan tips about a dozen more eels over the rail. We wait. Nothing happens. After a few seconds, we see a few air bubbles rise to the surface, followed by a cloud of mud rising from the bottom. A couple of eels surface and one glides across the lake, so at least there are some survivors.

Khan phones her sister to say that if she doesn't get here soon they will be having fish suppers for the next few days. Sister can't come yet because she's listening to a talk by a monk who is part of the extended family and she wouldn't like the repercussions of what would happen if she walked out. A quandary — do you avoid the demerits of leaving a monk's talk or chance them by letting the fish snuff it? "I think I'll get my mum," says Khan. I'm now reduced to babysitting two bags of fish, which might possibly be dead.

Soon mum and Khan are coming along the footpath at a fair lick of speed, mum as excited as if she was being taken to open her presents under a Christmas tree — although not likely in Thailand where, being a Buddhist country, Christmas is basically ignored other than recordings of

Christmas carols repeated as nauseum in supermarkets to cull extra dosh from foreigners. Within two minutes both remaining bags are opened and tipped into the lake, the thrashing silver bodies sparkling in the late afternoon sun. We watch for a few moments and then decide that, after all, merits have been earned. We say our goodbyes, mum nodding repeatedly with a big smile on her face.

The sun is gilding the treetops as I leave, and groups of monks are sweeping the dead leaves into piles with long brooms.

Map: [Wat Umong, Chiang Mai](#)

Room for one more

Lamphun

The drivers of the white *songthaew* at Lamphun bus station, the ubiquitous covered-in pickup trucks that provide local transport in Thailand, seem bemused and amused in equal measure when I show them the leaflet for Ban Phor Lian Muen Thai Plant Garden, the reason I've come to the city, I'm an obvious diversion from a conversation about football or some other 'man chat', and the leaflet gets passed from hand to hand, with obviously no-one having the slightest idea where the garden is. Eventually they realise they need to consult with the yellow *songthaew* drivers who make the more perilous long journeys out of town, all of about five kilometres.

One driver recognizes the place and holds up his first digit. Yes, I'm on my own, there's only me, which I conveyed with the nod of my head. He does the thumb-over-the-shoulder thing to indicate to me to get in the back, where I join a young man with a bag big enough to contain his worldly possessions, and a surprisingly elegantly dressed elderly lady with beautifully permed grey hair and glasses with small diamante decoration on frames that sparkle in the sun. She gives me a cursory glance, turns her head away, and from that moment disdainfully ignores me. Thailand may be 'The Land Of Smiles', but the marketing cant of the Tourism Association of Thailand doesn't appear to have reached Lamphun.

The driver seems happy with his passenger load and we set off. My first impression is that if someone had given me instructions how to get to the garden I could probably have got there quicker on foot, given the speed the driver went as we worked our way through the town, obviously looking for punters waving their hand from the side of the road like an auctioneer trying to spot a bid in a salesroom. The *songthaew* slowly fills, mostly with people who have done their weekly shop earlier in the morning, their bulging bags clamped between their legs to keep them from spilling over, or clamped to their side with a protective arm.

Once we hit the edge of town the pace picks up, until I'm hanging on to the bar at my side with white knuckles as we skitter around bends. The other passengers are well-practiced and sway in time with the erratic movements like a sailor accustomed to years of walking the deck in turbulent seas.

A trick I learned when negotiating the souks in Morocco is to take a reference photo of every turn. That way I only have to look at the photos in reverse order to find my way back. It works very well anywhere, at least until today. I intentionally sat by the open entrance at the back so I could take photos in case I couldn't find a songtaew on my way back and had to walk, highly probable as they don't stick to any fixed route or timetable. After ten minutes I gave up, partly because half the time I couldn't take a photo that would identify anything, but I also realised that if I wanted to walk back I better plan an expeditionary force. (When I finally did make my way back to Lamphun, I realised we'd taken a long way round at the dictates of the driver's fancy, and I could probably have walked back anyway, but there again, I'd probably have got lost.)

After twenty minutes I begin to think that some of my fellow passengers have travelled a fair distance to do their shopping because no-one gets off, although more people get on, until the ten-seater songthaew has eleven passengers who can't move because of the amount of bags and boxes packing the narrow aisle, and some you can't even see because of the bags balanced precariously on their knees.

We stop at a fancy roadside restaurant where I think some of the shopping might be destined for. On the contrary. A regal madam of ample proportions steps from the shadow of the doorway, followed by two employees wearing bright purple uniforms. One of them, a rampant queen, has the whole songthaew laughing as he theatrically packs the lady, a ten litre can of cooking oil and three small sacks of groceries into a space that doesn't exist – until suddenly it does. When I was an antique restorer I was used to packing shipping containers so not a millimetre of space existed to allow the furniture to move on its sometimes stormy journey across the Atlantic, but I was a mere apprentice at it compared to these people. Everyone smiled and no-one complained as space was somehow made for Madam to sit down and her luggage piled on top of other people's possession in the aisle or on the knees of those who had space, (obviously no-one expected the lady herself to put a sack of veg on her lovely silk dress). The young man who had been sat opposite me at the entrance made the concession of parking one bum cheek on the plastic seat and propped himself there, with his right leg out the door opening, jammed on the narrow step, the final place to travel when all other possibilities have been exhausted.

In most western countries this close contact would have led to discomfort and probably some friction. (My aversion to crowds would

certainly have kept me out of the songthaew if it hadn't been almost empty when I got in), but not in Thailand. This completely egalitarian form of transport packed young and old, professional and farmworker, housewife and student in a space not much bigger than a standard double bed. The elegant lady who had looked at me disdainfully when I climbed in, (the only person to do so, everyone else included me in their sweeping *sawadikap*, a polite greeting) chatted amicably with the lady opposite, whose worn cotton jacket and ill-fitting tartan skirt seemed to indicate that her lot in life probably wasn't an easy one, while the lady at my side beamed a big red-cheeked smile at everyone. Madam engaged in conversation with the young man who had given up half his seat for her, appearing to hang on his every word as he answered the questions she asked in a solicitous tone. Even I, so obviously non-Thai, don't feel left out.

We turn off the road onto a rough track, which throws a cloud of dust through the open windows of the songthaew, forcing everyone to cover their mouth and nose, and creating the only sign of mild annoyance I've seen during the ride. After a few moments, I realise it's my fault because we've arrived at the entrance to the gardens and, instead of leaving me on the main road with its relatively dust-free metalled surface and making me walk the two-hundred metres to the entrance of the gardens, the driver has taken me right to the door. I then discover that instead of paying the standard twenty baht fare, my nod to his single-digit held in the air at the bus station had been an acceptance that I would pay him 100 baht, five times the going rate, but a pittance for the quality of the entertainment. It also explained why no-one had got off, because he had made the destination of the farang his first stop, probably doubling the length of the ride that the other passengers had expected. And no-one complained.

Good girl, bad girl - Sublime acting on Thai TV

Arcade Bus Station, Chaing Mai

In the sultry heat of mid-afternoon, waiting passengers sit on the rows of plastic seats, making the most of a light breeze. In the Thai version of the Englishman wearing a knotted handkerchief to keep the sun off his head, a monk sports a sodden face cloth draped over his shaven skull. When his mobile phone rings, he lifts the towelling cloth up over his left ear, has a chat then lowers it again, the phone disappearing under the folds of his saffron robe.

A stall is doing good business selling things on a stick and steamed dumplings, with a choice of either minced pork or black bean. An uneven computer print-out gives his menu; a line reads '12 baht per child' which I

assume is the price of a child's portion and not the cost of an additional topping of more tender meat.

I have a while to wait for my bus so I take the chance of a quick bite in one of the cafes at the side of the station and order chicken fried rice.

While I wait, I get caught up in a lunchtime soap opera on a TV with the colour balance way off into the red zone. Usual story, nice girl has nice boy, other (bad) girl wants nice boy and enlists the help of her equally bad friends to separate nice girl and boy. I think it's meant to be a comedy, but it ends up in a catfight involving lots of shampoo and, as nice girl gets hurt by a flying vase (a cunning plot twist to bring nice boy and girl together again), it seems to take a serious twist. It doesn't matter though, because it's totally incomprehensible, performed by a cardboard cut-out cast with choreographed fights so bad that they are about as ferocious as a Laurel and Hardy pie-in-the-face routine. Most of the actors look European, so if it wasn't for them speaking Thai I could have been watching Spanish TV, or at least I could if I owned one, which I don't, because Spanish TV, and, it would seem, Thai TV, is excruciating.

Where would cruel girl be without her cruel sycophantic sidekicks? TV schoolgirls, models, business types, they all have them. Cool and superior they look, as they pick on the lesser types who try to emulate them. Then along comes the good girl, Miss Squeaky Clean, with the adorable good looks and fashionable dress but without being a svelte temptress. She ticks off the wannabes and puts a flea in the ear of bad girl, thus showing bad girl the error of her ways and returning her to a clean life and chastity – at least for a while – and showing the wannabes how much more rewarding life is if you follow the good girl path. Of course, this doesn't happen in a couple of scenes; they have at least half-an-hour to fill, but the gist of the story is the same, no matter how it's wrapped up. Give me the bad girl any time.

My fried rice arrives with a fried egg on top, and I've just finished loading it with fish sauce, chopped red chili and a particularly fiery liquid that I love but have no idea what it is made from, and am about to burst the egg yolk, when the waitress runs up with another two plates of fried rice, only one of which has a fried egg on top. 'Oh!', she says, puts the plates down on my table and with her fingers carefully lifts the egg off my plate, tenderly, so as not to break the yolk, and places it on the egg-less plate she's just brought out. I'm not sure if I feel cheated or not that I've been deprived of my egg, but compensate myself by the fact that my fried rice is with fish, and not the chicken I'd ordered, an unexpected and delicious change. Although I suspect the customer who got the egg but ended up with the chicken might not have felt the same.

Now, there's a new word for it

Chiang Mai

I'm sauntering home after my morning walk, a particularly early start, seven-thirty, to savour the cool of a sunny morning, knowing it will hot as Hades by mid-afternoon.

After languidly strolling for almost three hours, including various coffee stops along the way, I'm almost home when a well-dressed young lady on a motor scooter pulls up alongside me, her face partially covered by a white mask. She's wearing a white boat-neck T-shirt, a short cream cotton jacket, figure-hugging jeans that are obviously hugging a slim, attractive figure, and a black helmet set at a jaunty angle.

"Where you go?" she asks

"Home."

"Where home?"

I point in a vague direction. She mumbles something behind her mask I can't make out. I say thank you, turn away and keep walking.

My new friend rides off, and a few moments later I see her pull into a space to the side of the road where an elderly lady is setting up a display of cellophane-covered packets of apples. I think scooter girl has stopped for a chat with the shop lady, but as I walk closer I see she has, in fact, parked a couple of metres further on. Closer still, I see her dark eyes watching me over her white mask in the right-hand rearview mirror. It seems there will be a round two. She's persistent, I'll give her that.

"One hour," she says, dropping her mask to show a very pretty but slightly stern face. "I massage", rubbing her clenched right fist over her left palm.

"I don't think my girlfriend would be happy about that," I reply, albeit a non-existent girlfriend.

Ignoring me, she continues her sales pitch, looking and pointing at the zip area of my shorts.

"I sperm you."

"I think my girlfriend would be even less happy about that".

She frowns, pulls her mask over her nose and scooters off, presumably in search of someone with a more forgiving girlfriend or *sans* female companionship altogether.

I've been offered many things in my seven decades, but I've never had anyone offer to "sperm" me before, which goes to show, even in your golden years life can still throw up a little adventure.

Part Two – Three days later

I saw scotter girl again today as I was riding my bike and, as before, she was nicely dressed in a loose white shirt over T-shirt and jeans. She pulled

up at a junction to my left, waiting to come onto the main road. I turned my head at the movement, nodded, and smiled a thank you for not pulling out directly in front of me as most Thai on motor-scooters would. She must have thought of this as a foot-in-the-door, because immediately her eyes widened, her eyebrows raised and she started a sort-of nodding, wordless spiel. I kept riding.

These motorbike ladies are a common phenomenon in Asia, but the few of times I've been stopped in Thailand, it has always been by young ladies casually but prettily dressed, unlike the plump versions that patrol the beachside road in Da Nang, Vietnam. On my last visit, in September 2019, I was photographing a sailor's temple in the form of a fishing boat set on the beach when a motor-scooter pulled up at the side of the road a couple of metres away. On it sat a lady – at least I assumed the bundle was female – wrapped in a padded jacket, thick scarf covering the face from the bridge of her nose to her throat, dark glasses above that, and a baseball cap under her helmet. Her lower half was protected by thick, shapeless jeans.

A gritty voice called out from beneath the layers.

“Hello, where you from, you have marry?” A novel approach that could be construed as either am I looking for a wife – certainly not! – or do a want a leg-over? “Not with you, darling,” would have been my answer, had I been disposed to give one, which I wasn't.

Before I could make my, “Thank you, but no,” another motorchica suddenly arrived almost out of nowhere and braked to a stop beside me. (It was obviously a quiet day on the beachfront.) A much more shapely and youthful rider jumped off, scrambled over the wall separating us on the beach and the road, and standing her full four foot ten inches cut straight to the chase, “You want girlfriend? Boom, boom?” she asked, clapping her hands together to make sure I got her drift. At least we wouldn't have to go through the wedding bit, but I assumed the nuptials were more of what was on offer, although my answer was the same, “Thank you, but no,”

Declining both less-than-tempting offers, I unlocked my bike and rode off, but like the pestering rickshaw driver in New Delhi who wouldn't take “NO, FUCK OFF!” for an answer, the smaller of the ladies continued tagging me along the prom, eventually giving up when she saw a lone male slowly riding along on a motor scooter, a reasonably sure bet for business, given he was ogling her and going so slow he had difficulty keeping the scooter upright.

I spotted another gaggle of ladies a few minutes further on, and it suddenly clicked that this was their working patch, just as the *damas de noches* on foot would walk their beat up and down the same few meters. I imagine what it would be like if I had taken up the offer of one of the bulkier-clothed *damas* de mid-afternoon, to go back to where she conducted business and, like an arranged marriage where your new wife

isn't revealed until the bridal veil is dropped, to reveal a ravaged old slapper just as I'm getting down to my skiddies. John Thomas shivered at the idea.

The thought that occurred to me as I rode from my second encounter with the Chiang Mai scooter lady was that she was showing great enterprise. While Bangladesh and Malaysia are paying sex workers to stay at home during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Thai government is pretending they don't even exist. Despite the fact that prostitution in Thailand is illegal, it is an enormous earner for the country, more frequented by the Thai themselves than Johnny Foreigner out for a good time on his hols. In certain areas of Bangkok, Chiang Mai and other cities, the girlies, flamboyant in their skimpy outfits and "Hello handsome" calls, stand out like a highly raunchy sore thumb.

Just as any farmer or labourer, or anyone else in the day-wage economy, these girls put food on their family's table, pay for their children's education, and look after their parents in their old age, but the refined sensibilities of the governing and hi-so classes prefer to look the other way during these desperate days, despite, I suspect, sliding a few million baht into their back pockets from investment in the trade by way of bars and massage parlours.

I'm pretty sure I wouldn't look forward to getting up each day, dressing nicely, to spend hours riding around the city in temperatures that have been hitting the high thirties for weeks now, on the off chance that stopping fat, bald old men like me to offer sex services might pay the bills for the day.

So good luck, girly. I hope your energy and enterprise work out.

Part Three – The Final Curtain, Three months later

I was chatting with a friend who's pretty knowledgeable about the girly situation in Chiang Mai, and mentioned the scooter maid. It seems that I would have been in for more of a screwing than I might have expected. Come to think of it, though, it would actually be less of one.

The story goes that she's mobile because no self-respecting massage parlour will let her through the door, and nor will the less self-respecting ones either. Apparently, she's a bit of a tea-leaf, and has caused no end of trouble with her light-fingeredness. In an industry which – let's be honest – doesn't have a perfect reputation for straight dealing, to be cast out to do the business by way of two wheels surely speaks volumes. But it goes beyond that.

When she has inveigled her way into the temporary affections of some unsuspecting but probably horny prospective client and they get back to the hotel room, she asks for payment up-front. When said unsuspecting client is suitably relaxed and in mid-sperming, she suddenly gets a message that means she has to leave immediately, leaving poor

tumescent chappie with his trousers around his ankles, wondering where his Aphrodite has buggered off to with his 1,500 baht for non-services rendered. And he can be lucky if only her fee has disappeared with her because she's also pretty adept at lifting watches, wallets and anything not nailed down.

So all-in-all, there's quite a lot to be said for self-service.

No isn't always negative

Bangkok, Thailand

I needed to buy a flight ticket from Bangkok to Chiang Mai, but after various failed attempts online I decided to find a travel agent. Just up the road from my hotel near the Democracy Monument I saw an Air Asia sign outside a grubby-looking travel agency, whose lowered blind and dark interior seemed to suggest it was closed. After a few moments of peering into the dimness, I saw a movement in the shadows. The door opened slightly to reveal a short lady wearing a black Happy Jacket with a big red smile over her left breast. 'Yes we are open; cool so I closed door,' she said.

The premises had at some time been a café – still had electric cooking rings, pans and empty egg cartons – and possibly also a shop, its wire shelves displaying a couple of bottles of fish sauce lying on their side, the odd packet of rice and a few of spices. You suspect that anything you pick up will be well past its sell-by date. In two tall fridges by the door, four bottles of Coca Cola and a small assortment of garishly-coloured soft drinks would probably be covered in dust, had it not been that the fridge doors were hermetically sealed and last opened long ago. The lack of motor sound suggested you wouldn't get the refreshment of a cool drink if you bought one. Cluttered shelves and a desk at the front of the shop serve as the lady's office.

I explain what I need and she goes online to book a seat, but I tell her it won't work and that I'll pay cash. She looks uncertain. 'Will you pay my commission?' I agree to the 330baht she would otherwise make if the Air Asia system was working.

She brings up an earlier email booking on her computer and amends the info, removing a previous client's details. I assume it's a generic email to AA, although I would have thought they'd have an official booking form and she'd have an agency reference, but I keep quiet. She picks up her phone, dials, and enters into a prolonged conversation, none of which I understood, obviously, not having a word of Thai.

And so we wait, and I get an unofficial history of recent Thai politics.

With dramatic, theatrical gestures she tells me about people not being able to speak out. Waving her arms about, she throws herself back into her chair, hand over heart, with deeply sad features, scrunched up

forehead, her head tilted to one side, like a Kabuki actor in Japanese theatre at the height of a serious scene, although she stops short of the crossed eyes that illustrate a moment of great importance in that theatrical genre.

After our chat I ask her name. 'No', she replies. It seems a polite way of telling me that she doesn't want to give it, but when I ask again she repeats 'no', and I realise that No is actually her name, but spelled with an 'h' at the end, 'Noh'.

I make an assumption, which is that we are waiting for a confirmation of the booking from Air Asia, complete with flight number, code etc. After fifteen minutes, there has been no reply. Apparently, we're waiting for a call from her nephew, whose credit card she's using. We're not talking Thomas Cook here.

We continue chatting for another ten minutes; I'm probably the only client she's had in days. Using a well-oiled ploy, I look at a clock above her desk and say that I've got an appointment in fifteen minutes and can we check on the booking please? She calls her nephew. All done, and checks out with Air Asia. The booking will be sent to her email address and she'll bring it along to my hotel later.

When I ask for a receipt she reaches below her desk and brings out a folded used one, rubs out the pencilled writing from a previous client and enters my details, but I can still make out that she booked a room for someone called Zynasta for one night at 1100 baht two weeks earlier.

I have a slight panic attack when I pick up the ticket at the hotel in the evening. The booking is under a different name, presumably that of her nephew, but a phone call to Air Asia assures me that the person actually sitting in 22D will be me.

Chiang Mai Market café

A couple of times a week I take a cup of Thai coffee at a stall in Chiang Mai Gate Market. As ever, there's barely an acknowledgement of my existence from the Miseries, mother and daughter, who run the place and have never raised a smile in my direction in the four years I've been frequenting their establishment, other than when one of their plastic stools collapsed and I had to grab hold of the counter rail to stop myself hitting the deck.

Today Mother Misery made my coffee and put it on top of one of the cans of Carnation (known these days of honesty in marketing as Sweetened Beverage Creamer, and not Milk, as it was when I were a lad) that decorate the cluttered surface of the counter. I didn't even know it was there until Daughter Misery said, "Your coffee", the most she's ever said to me other than "*Sip ha baht*", fifteen baht, the price of the coffee.

Fortunately, I don't come for the sparkling repartee or even the pleasant smile I get from Aunty Lek and the pretty lady who makes the toast at her coffee handcart on the other side of the road, but because it affords me a decent station to watch the world go by.

My usual stool at the end of the counter, placed so I can lean against a pillar, has been taken by a rather raucous *katoey*, a ladyboy who is well past the 'boy' time of life. A face like a baby's smacked arse, but a decent tit-job, not the top-heavy set usually on show on 'go-go' dancers at weddings and other big dos. In the modest swell of décolletage, a gold amulet suspended from a gold chain nestles, although I can't help but wonder who or what the amulet is meant to protect her from.

She's obviously well known in the market; nods to many passersby, dips into the illegal lottery run by one of the lady stall holders, the rolled-up tickets picked from a plastic bag, and wins a couple of hundred baht – I've never seen anyone win before – and chats animatedly with the younger of the Miseries. Her voice is quite basso but her laugh is a painful screech, fingers-on-blackboard style.

When she stands to leave she's almost six-feet tall, helped by a pair of stack-heel sandals with slim diamante straps, possibly handmade, given the size of her feet. If she can afford the tit-job she can probably stretch to a decent pair of handmade sandals.

The lady she buys the illegal lottery ticket from is well known around the market. Dressed in a grubby pinafore, she chats with a couple of elderly ladies at the end of the counter where I'm taking coffee. From the pouch on the front of her apron she takes a well-worn white plastic shopping bag and begins shaking it thoroughly, mixing up whatever is inside. One of the elderly ladies puts her hand into the bag and pulls out a small rolled piece of white paper, which she unravels and I see is marked with the number '5' in black marker pen. She obviously hasn't won anything, and without a second glance she hands it back to the lady in the apron who re-rolls it and drops it into the plastic bag.

The second lady, elegantly dressed, takes a 500 baht note from her purse, hands it over and receives 350 baht change and a dip into the bag. A quick glance at the number and back it goes into the bag; she's just lost £3.50. At no point during the transaction did the conversation appear to change from anything but a chat between friends, and no movement other than a quick glance to check the number and the notes for payment and change. Chat and lottery draw finished, they separate and go their own ways.

The motorbike man with neatly-parted and oiled grey hair who delivers newspapers from a pair of panniers on his motorbike while four or five yellow parakeets cling to a bar on the handlebars, flapping their wings to keep balance, has taken up a position on a plastic stool just behind me, his magazines and newspapers arranged on shelves in a

vertical trolley at his side. He sits on a two-seater wooden stool, his bum perched on one end and a pile of change on the other. A cash-box without the box.

It's quiet today, other than the newspaper vendor hawking his wares while continuing a lively chat with the lady on the stall opposite his temporary newsstand who sells spirals of excellent spicy *lana* sausage and deep-fried pork bits.

In the closed-in meat and fish section I watch a lady cutting a large piece of pork, a small motor above her head driving a fan with half metre shreds of green plastic suspended from it. Used to keep off flies, different vendors prefer different speeds. Some twirl lethargically as befits the time of day (late afternoon), while others whiz round like demented fish in a bowl. I try to photograph her as she works, but the swishing from the plastic obscures her face, cooling her as well as keeping the flies off. One moment I catch her smiling eyes, the next her grinning mouth, but never both in the same frame.

Just outside the market, an older woman with a chequered scarf guts fish on a round wooden block, simply the cross-section of a tree. She lays the fillets on lengths of bamboo leaves alongside bunches of fresh herbs, the head – the best part according to most Asian people – placed beside the fillet.

In a plastic bath at the front of the stall, pink *tilapia*, Asia's biggest-selling fish, swim around in the aerated water flowing from a hosepipe. On two small barbeques made from a 20-litre metal drum cut in half lengthwise, four fish are grilling slowly. A young woman chooses one; the girl behind the grill puts down her magazine, wraps the fish in bamboo leaves to take away, and hands it over in exchange for 70 baht. She picks a live fish from the bowl, beats it a few times over the head with a small mallet to kill it and places it on the spot on the grill vacated by the sale, then sits down and gets absorbed in her magazine once more.

Two Good Samaritai

Chiang Mai

I woke early and was on my balcony at just after 5.30, watching the last rays of dawn start the day. By seven, the time my alarm usually goes off, I needed to get out, with the intention of walking the city as it woke. First stop, a coffee in the market.

As I crossed the zebra crossing to the square over the moat, home to early-morning second-hand clothes vendors who would be hanging out their stock on rails about the time I would normally be filling my kettle for the first of the day's far too many cups of tea and coffee, I saw a man lying on the ground close to the traffic lights. Filthy lime green shirt,

equally grubby trousers worn to threads at the bottom, feet black with never having seen soap or water for months – probably many months. One of the street people quite often sleeping rough in the area, his sole possessions seemed to be a pair of worn-out rubber sandals and a pale yellow, not-yet-ripe mango, held loosely in his outstretched right hand, possibly put there by some kind-hearted passer-by.

Even this early in the day, the heat is building, and with his temporary bed on the paving flags beyond the shade of the trees that fill the square, each with a concrete surround providing a place to sit and chat or watch the world go by with a fresh juice, waking up didn't bode well for him.

A man, probably in his forties, dressed in a well-washed brown polo shirt and loosely-fitting chinos, stood looking down at the indigent. By the time I reached the end of the zebra, he was joined by another man, slightly older, dressed in similar well-worn clothes.

The younger gave the sleeping man a gentle prod on the chest with three extended fingers. No response. He tried again, taking the sleeper's arm and gently rolling his body. Still no response.

With few words of discussion, the younger man slid his arm under the shoulders of the lime green shirt, the older doing the same beneath the bent knees of the tattered trousers. Carefully lifting the still comatose body, they carried him into the shade of a large tree and laid him along one of the cement benches. He rolled onto his side, hands together as if making a *wei*, or offering up a prayer had he been in the west, found his balance on the narrow seat, and drifted off again. The elder man picked up the worn rubber sandals, placing them on the hardened soil surrounding the tree, slipping the mango into the left foot for safe-keeping.

The two gentlemen watched him for a moment, ready to catch him if he rolled off his new bed, and, seeing that he had found his equilibrium, like an old sailor settling into his stride on a stormy sea, they walked away.

Sunday in the Park

Chiang Mai

Buak Hard is everything a public park should be – used. Tucked into the south-west corner of the moated old town, it's the only public green space in the centre of Chiang Mai.

It's graduation time, and photographers are looking to find backdrops to pose their clients. I stand for a while, watching a photo session with a young girl in a mortar board and gown posing with her certificate. A few days ago I saw a young couple robed and gowned being photographed with some ancient rolling stock at Chaing Mai railway station, and while

on a ferry down the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok, I watched a girl suddenly grab her camera to photograph her friend as we passed rows of battered metal barges painted dirty grey, berthed outside the naval dockyard. She'd completely ignored the lovely examples of Thai architecture and riverside images we'd been motoring past. Even beauty becomes mundane eventually, I suppose, and Grunge was *a la mode*.

In this instance the photographer, and presumably his client, had opted for the park with its bandstand sat in the centre of the small lake. The photographer's assistant throws a handful of seed to the flock of ever-present pigeons to encourage them nearer to the camera, then claps her hands and jumps up and down to get them to take off and provide a romantic background for the student's graduation photo. Unfortunately the pigeons are well used to this and are having none of it, and simply scuttle a bit further away, with a couple of the more timid ones taking to flight and dropping to the ground again when they realise their palls are scoffing all the goodies.

The photographer eventually gave up with the shot, but it gave me a fleeting memory of one of the few photos I ever saw of my mother in her youth. Only once in her life of seventy-six years did she go to London from her home in the North-east of England, when she was around seventeen in 1935. The grainy black and white photo shows her laughing as a flock of pigeons flap and flurry around her while she throws a handful of seed in the air in Trafalgar Square, one of the must-do experiences of the day.

A stout lady in a red shirt and cap carries two shallow baskets, one slung at either end of a bamboo pole. In the front basket, a small charcoal brazier is covered by a wire grill with about twenty eggs in their shells cooking on it. She stops at each rubbish bin, picks out the plastic bottles and puts them in her rear basket, a supplemental income to the eggs I presume, which don't exactly seem to be flying off the griddle.

The tinkling bell of the ice cream man heralds his patrol around the park. Business has obviously been good because the deep metal container is almost empty by the time I stop him. He slides a dessertspoon-sized scoop into the ice cream and puts three each of vanilla and coconut onto a cone, squeezes a dribble from a bottle of strawberry syrup (what we used to call 'monkey's blood' as kids) and tops it off with peanuts and a jelly-bean stuff that is almost flavour-less. Despite its popularity, I've yet to try the ice cream sandwich where the scoops are put between two slices of white bread.

From November to March I'm here most Monday mornings at nine for a free beginner's qigong class. We stretch, bend and wobble on unsteady aging legs as our instructors guide us through a repertoire designed to bestow on us suppleness and serenity. While we are straining, an AA

group deals with their own demons, sat on the grass near the lake. It's a very ecumenical park.

A group of Thai ladies indulge in an exercise class led by a camp instructor who has them side-stepping, arm-stretching and knee-lifting to high-tension power music. While most have the timing and rhythm of the well-practiced, one lady is so out of step and rhythmically incoherent that whatever the instructor and the other girlies are doing, her movements are left-step, right-step, arms bend ever-so-slightly inward at the elbow, repeat. And they keep this up for an hour. What impresses me most are the big smiles on almost every face at their instructors shenanigans. None of the seriousness I've seen in other park exercise groups. This is fun!

What's little more than an open-fronted bamboo shed with a few black plasticated armchairs and thin mattresses laid on the ground, acts as a relief station to ease the aches and pains with a massage, with the foot version usually having a few people dozing as their tootsies are manipulated. Next to the massage parlour is a spirit house watched over by four small elephant statues, where joggers and striders make a twist of their upper body to make a *wai* at the deities within, without breaking step.

At the end of the row of small bamboo stands at the back of the park, selling soft drinks and coconuts, packets of brown pellets to feed the fish, and renting woven mats for twenty baht, an old lady has a stall. When times are quiet she'll give you a massage, tell your fortune (in Thai only) sell you a nip of local whiskey, and maybe allow you to duck down behind her stall and take a quick drag on a cigarette, both the latter of which are forbidden in the park, but she somehow seems to get away with it.

While most of the Thai visitors seem to prefer the standard forms of park sports, badminton included, there are usually a few groups of young foreigners practicing circus skills, juggling, rope walking (from the dizzy height of six inches) etc. Speed walkers charge by with arms swinging across their chest – why do they do that? I've always thought it looked too ungainly and comic to be taken seriously, but apparently it's much lower-impact than jogging. I prefer low-impact sitting still. Martial arts are practiced, usually while someone is taking a photo with their phone; groups and individuals move gracefully as they rehearse elegant thai-chi forms; kids get dangerously near the edge of the lake, or plague their parents for an ice cream.

Same-old, same-old, the world over.

Since I wrote this story, the local authorities, in all their highly dubious 'wisdom', have 'done up' the park, which in this case is a euphemism for making a complete mess of it. Gone are the bamboo stalls and massage parlour, replaced by soulless cement kiosks; itinerant egg-sellers and ice cream

vendors no longer ply their wares to a hungry audience; the wood and cement seats that gave respite from walking the circuit are being replaced by fancy metal ones, a pretty stupid exchange in a country where even in the two months of winter the temperature rarely gets below the mid-thirties; no longer can you rent a split bamboo mat to spread on the grass for a picnic. Yet one more example of the sanitising of a once historic city.

Map: [Buak Hard Park, Chiang Mai](#)

Bangkok Sidewalk Vandeuse

I sit at the entrance to a small hotel just up from the Democracy Monument in Bangkok, sipping from a paper cup of coffee bought from the 7/11 next door. The 'dee-do' of the door-opening tone of the shop is incessant, as girls from the school opposite ('Drug-Zero School' a sign proudly boasts), neatly turned out in white blouses with sailor collar and blue bow, stock up on snacks for breakfast and breaks – packets of crisps and curly things, basically anything where the packet has more protein and nutritional value than the contents.

Cars drop kids off at the school gate, and I watch a young lady carry a large, carefully wrapped box with a broad pink ribbon and bountiful bow. The paper wrapping is either economical or tongue-in-cheek because it is sheets of newspaper, complete with colour photographs of local dignitaries.

Directly across from where I sit, a lady street vendor begins her day. I've watched her on a few occasions; always fashionably dressed with well-cut hair, auburn with a deep red tint and a fringe (for some reason referred to these days by the Americanised 'bangs'). Today she's wearing bum-hugging trousers of pink, brown, dark beige (a colour once known as taupe), and a sleeveless top of white-on-white floral design. She spends her day at a small, plastic-covered table under a large plastic sunshade of green, yellow, red and blue panels that hasn't seen a wash since the last rainy season.

As the cars arrive our lady sets out a row of plastic bollards to stop them from parking, or possibly to reserve the space for her street-vendor friends, although the bollards are usually ignored by drivers as there's just enough space between each to park a Mercedes or 4-wheel drive. She wanders off and comes back a few minutes later to see a policeman stacking her bollards and clearing them from the road. He tries to pile them on his motor scooter but she obviously has some clout because he gets a good talking too. He calls in on his radio, hangs up and puts the bollards back before scooting off with a surly backward glance. She has her territory marked out, although she's careful not to offend by putting the bollards out again.

Her main business is her dress stall, housed below a roof of two large sun umbrellas of even greater vintage and dishevelment than the one that shades her flower display. Her stock is stored overnight in a large aluminium container on wheels, (1.25x1.5 mtr).

A small flower table is the first to be set up, a blue metal table unfolded and laid over with a clear plastic sheet and a selection of pre-prepared garlands spread on it, probably in anticipation of passing trade on their way to the nearby temple, a five-minute walk away.

Next, she sets up three clothing rails, each just under two metres high by three long, the shade umbrellas slotted along the side of the storage container. Beside them is her display area, a frame on which are suspended skirts, dresses, blouses of various designs and hues: a modern print of paint slashes of purple and black over a white background paired with a black long-sleeve blouse; low-waisted V-neck dress with flouncy collar in pale cream, lightweight cotton (summer is a-comin'), as tasteful and fashionable as her own ensemble. On a folding table placed over a bright red fire hydrant (which would probably get her a fine anywhere else in the world) is a display of accouterment to set off her clothing. All the while she's moving she keeps up a running conversation with the lady making crepes on a mobile stall three metres away.

Once her shop is set up our russet-haired lady passes the day stringing blossoms together; marigold, jasmine, rose, for the decoration seen everywhere from taxi-drivers' mirrors to tiny shrines as a way of making merit with the Buddha. When a customer buys a loop she places it in a small white plastic bag and slips the money into a huge red, multi-zipped pouch that hangs around her waist. Nimble fingers, little finger keeled as if she were taking tea from a bone china cup, her life seems to be one of constant animation in a fume-filled main street.

As I watch, a lady with crinkly hair of exactly the same shade as the *vendeuse*, stops by, and from a black shoebox takes out a pair of extravagant pale gold shoes with two-inch platforms and seven-inch stiletto heels, perfectly matching the pair she's wearing. From a white plastic carrier bag she takes out a voluminous shiny pink handbag. Both are placed on the table, presumably on a profit-sharing basis.

Our lady knows everyone, and a *wai* or a few words – often many words – are exchanged with passers-by. You get the sense that this spot, where the footpath is widest and she has plenty of space to lay out her commercial enterprises, has been hers for years, and woe betide anyone who tries to muscle in on her turf, or in this case, pavement.

Mr. Kosol's fair exchange

Bangkok

Mr. Kosol Tananitporn has an ingenious way of building his wardrobe. He offers you a carrier bag of goodies and all he asks in return is that you take a photo of the two of you together and send him a copy, along with a sweatshirt (large size) of wherever it is you come from. He's so organized that he even has a plastic laminated panel prepared with his name and address for you to photograph.

Mr. Kosol accosts you in the politest way as you walk into Bangkok's Tha Tien market, along the alley that leads directly to his stall from the pier.

"Good Morning," he says, stepping from behind the counter of his cluttered grocery shop and proffering you his hand. "Where are you from?"

England, I tell him. I used to say that I'm English but live in Spain (as if it made the slightest difference) but it only served to confuse, so I eventually abandoned the pocket history for brevity's sake.

I don't know if his patter would be different whatever his visitor's nationality, but I'm told that his son studied in Scotland, the University of Strathclyde to be precise, as I later find out when he shows me a business card with the hand-written date of 2005 on it. His son has obviously done well because I'm shown a more recent card that shows him to have risen to the dizzy heights of Vice-president in charge of something-or-other for a major Thai bank.

Mr. K's life is portrayed in his business cards. He pulls out the most destroyed wallet I've ever seen, held together with a thick black elastic band, with four bundles of cards, receipts etc., all pertaining to a different element of his history. "I'm a senior," (i.e. a pensioner), and to prove it he shows me his pensioner's discount cards. It slightly shocks me to see that he's a year younger than me.

He is enormously well-travelled, particularly in Europe, which he has visited ten times, regaling me with a list of all the countries he visited on each of his trips, and five times to the US, with an equally detailed list of his destinations and stops along the way. I'm proudly shown a photograph of President Obama, Hilary Clinton and friend of Mr. K's, a monk, posing together when they visited Wat Pho. Mr. K tells me he shook President Obama's hand, and who am I to say otherwise? (I'm almost ashamed to admit I thought a bit of photoshopping had gone on here, but a quick check showed me that yes indeed, the Pres. and Mrs. Clinton had indeed visited Wat Pho, on the 18th November 2012.)

Sixty years ago the Tananitporn family business was furniture, forty years ago it was clothing and now, as he stands alone behind the counter

of his dried-food stall in ramshackle Tha Tien market, I'm not sure whether he thinks he's come down in the world. He points to the concrete floor of his workplace and proudly tells me that it is one hundred years old. The age of the dilapidated stall and display space is difficult to tell, although they can't be much the floor's junior.

Mr. Kosol hands me my plastic bag and says his goodbyes, although not quite as rapidly as I make it sound; there always seems to be something to add. I wander off, and in the spirit of making merit, I try to find someone even lower on the food chain than myself to pass the bag on to. Its new poverty-stricken owner might appreciate the two hard-boiled eggs and one-cup packets of coffee, (Mr. Kosol's monk friend's regular breakfast, apparently) but I'm not sure what they would make of a rolled-up calendar and two tiny clay amulets. Perhaps I was throwing away my luck by passing them on, but I prefer to think it would be to the betterment of the recipient.

Instant karma's gonna get you

Chiang Mai

The focus of my city walk today was to get to the railway station by small streets and work my way back in the same way, making a loop of around ten kilometres. First stop was a cheap *khar soi*, spicy chicken soup with noodles, for an early lunch at a local market.

Lunch eaten, I continued my walk to the station along a busy minor road, full of traffic and pedestrians shopping around the market. Meandering at a slow pace, glancing into shops and cafes, I suddenly heard a deep thump, and seconds later saw a black Volvo sedan from around the turn of the century, one of the big, boxy models, racing along with a crunched up bonnet, far too fast for the street. My immediate thought was, "He's doing a runner!" confirmed when I turned around and saw a badly smashed up motor-scooter lying in the middle of the road.

The scooter was lying next to another on its stand, so I just assumed the car had run into a couple of badly parked bikes. And then I saw a crowd gathering, the object of their attention being the body of a young woman lying stretched out across the road, her face covered by long, black hair. There was no physical movement and no blood, but having owned a similar vehicle years ago, and knowing they were built like a tank, if the poor girl had been hit by the Volvo her chances of survival were slight.

It's curious how the mind fixes on certain points, and I noticed that the sock on her left leg had been pulled down onto the sole, leaving the heel bare. Her shoe was nowhere to be seen.

At that moment there was no way of telling whether she had actually been on the scooter or she had been hit first and the scooter later as the

driver tried to flee the scene. There was no sign of a crash helmet, but that didn't mean anything, given the lackadaisical Thai approach to wearing one. If she had been on the scooter when it was hit, the car had been going some speed because it had been dragged around twenty meters further along the road.

I turned away, hoping the situation wasn't as fatal as it looked, and kept walking. There wasn't a single thing I could have done anyway.

And that's when I saw instant Karma made real.

Half a kilometre further up the road was a right-hand bend, and as I turned it I saw the Volvo again – smashed into the side of a new, very big, white pick-up truck.

It was a curious setup, and I couldn't work out where the vehicles had been for it to happen like this. The car was smashed into the rear section of the driver's side of the pickup, over the rear wheels, turning the truck at a right-angle to the road with its front end almost in the middle. It looked as though the pickup had been swung around because its other rear side had smashed into the back of a small saloon car that was parked by the side of the road.

The force of contact must have been considerable, especially as the front end of the Volvo was completely concertinaed, and that takes some doing. I couldn't work out why the front of the pickup was also severely bent. The driver of the Volvo, an elderly man who looked to be in his seventies, was still in his seat, eyes closed, mouth hanging open, no sign of life. With no airbag to operate, it was amazing he hadn't gone through the screen, because I didn't see any sign of a seat belt.

I arrived within moments of an ambulance. A female member of the two-person crew was looking at how to get the driver out of the car while the ambulance driver, with the help of a member of the public, pulled out a stretcher on wheels and an orange plastic panel with handles at either end. The driver shouted for help to lift the seemingly lifeless body out of the car. As the smash had happened in front of a row of food stalls there was no shortage of volunteers.

The female para-medic carefully fixed a support collar around the driver's neck, and showing the volunteers how to lift, slowly extracted him, laying him on the plastic panel. She began giving CPR while the ambulance driver fixed a plastic mask over the old man's face and attempted to give air by means of a plastic hand pump.

I walked on.

I'm not a rubbernecker. It had been enough to see the body of a young girl – whether it was a corpse or not – lying motionless on the road, and I didn't need to witness the removal of an old man – whether corpse or no. Whatever was in his head when he tried to flee didn't last long, about thirty seconds at most.

It was later reported that the driver, 76, had had a heart attack which caused him to crash into the vehicles. There was no mention, however, of the separate incident of hitting the girl, only saying that a second person had been taken to hospital in a serious condition. What struck me as strange was that as the car passed me at speed it seemed to be under control, travelling a good half-kilometre before it steered around a bend and ploughed into the pickup, which was about twenty metres into a straight section of road.

To anyone who knows Thailand, a 'heart attack' is used to cover many deaths because of the laziness and ineptitude of the police, even the death of a Dutchman who was found hanging from a stair rail with a rope around his neck, although that was later changed to suicide, an equally implausible cause of death given that his hands were tied behind his back. Like most things to do with the Thai police, it's reasonably certain a lump of money changed hands to attribute the cause of death to a heart attack, ignoring the unlikelihood of a dead or semi-comatose man being able to drive half a kilometre on a busy road between crashes and navigating a bed before coming to a literal dead stop.

Happiness is a fat smiling Buddha

Chinatown, Bangkok

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 mesmerising clanking and whirring of the 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 instead, 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 an online translator 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 last few years.

My boy lollipop

Chiang Mai

In remembrance of Millie Small, whose one and only hit by the same name made the charts in 1956, and who died from a stroke on the 6th of May, 2020

Each evening, when I go to the local street-food area, a ten-minute walk from home, across the plaza over the moat that surrounds Chiang Mai old city, I buy a Milo lollipop, sometimes two.

Milo, the drink, is a chocolate and malt powder you mix with hot water or milk to make an Ovaltine style of drink. Created by Australian inventor, Thomas Mayne in 1934, it is the *beverage de jour* in Oceania, South America, Southeast Asia and parts of Africa, if only the drinkers knew what the hell a 'beverage de jour' is. It has morphed into a cheap and cheerful iced lolly with a chocky flavor at a good price, ten baht instead of something four times the price that Nestlé sells, in between draining

water worldwide from natural, publically-owned aquifers and flogging it to the locals, who own it anyway, in plastic bottles at decibels the price.

I really like the Milo lolly and pick one up whenever I'm on my wanders around the city. But that's not why I buy them on my evening dinner run.

It's the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, and as I walk to Tesco I pass a group of restaurants and bars, once successful, now almost barren. No-one is doing any business, but the owners sit there, day in, night out, to serve a meal or a beer to two customers if they are lucky. I doubt they even cover costs. At one bar cum restaurant cum barbeque cum shop – they've tried every approach you can think of for the last six months – each day the lady owner brings her family and friends; mum, a couple of pretty girlies, and her severely mentally disabled daughter. They sit, eat and chat, but there is no element of making merry.

My lollipop buying began a few weeks ago, one for myself, one for the receptionist at my residence, whoever was on duty. Then I began handing them out, first to the disabled girl at her mum's restaurant. The subdued faces at seven in the evening, waiting for someone to pass by and take a seat, sparkled when I handed over the lolly to her grandma for her to open. The girly had no idea what was going on but smiled because everyone else did.

Then I began to hand them out at random; to the juice sellers, the food cart owners, the tired and bored, people attending stalls that would never make a baht, the indigents who exist on handouts, the children sitting at food stalls with their families, a face in the non-existent crowd. I had a few 'Why?' looks, some *weis*, the traditional greeting, and some thank-yous, 'You are kind,' comments, but always I move on quickly, a nod and a smile, no comment.

Tonight I bought three and paid for them. Then I asked the cashier at Tesco, 'Would you like one?' 'Yes please,' she smiled, so added another to my tiny bill.

A Word In Your Shell-like

There's a welcome breeze, making the 35° midday heat far more pleasant than it would be if the air was static. It's one of the main topics of conversation at the moment, the lethargy that almost everyone is suffering from. It will get hotter – much hotter - in a couple of hours but at the moment it's pleasant; blue sky, the chirruping of cicadas in the air, the muddy Ping River slowly drifting by, but with the breeze coming from the south, casting small ripples across the water, it's almost as if it's languidly flowing in the wrong direction. It would be the height of tranquility, were it not for the traffic on the busy road ten metres behind

me, and the Thai man listening to some ranting woman played at full blast on his phone.

Something I've not encountered elsewhere, and get amazed and annoyed at in equal measure, is that stick a microphone in a Thai person's hand and they will pour out a continuous stream of verbals at break-neck speed, using that Asian anomaly of being able to breathe through their ears.

You usually hear this at exhibitions or promotions, where the 'voice' wanders around extolling the joys and virtues of a half-price rice cooker, a tawdry, cheap and violently-colored bath towel, or a cringe-worthy, ghastly brooch in the design of a teddy bear, with pink glass for eyes and a top hat set at a jaunty angle. These are not invented for the sake of emphasis, but a sampling of some of the less jaw-droppingly awful dross I saw at a sales show at Airport Plaza in Chiang Mai recently.

To give the girlies – and boyies – their due, they do keep going, marvelling over the mundane and waxing lyrical over the ludicrous, barely stopping for breath as they move between vendors. I was presented with a minor and totally unexpected opportunity to get a dig in a few days ago. I was at the Plaza with a Thai friend who was intent on a close inspection of everything on offer in the Thai version of Sale of the Century. I was getting more and more wound up with the promo girly's grating cacophony and was making my way to the exit when we arrived together at the corner of a stand, coming from opposite directions. For a blessed moment she paused to take a breath and turned her head to look for the nearest crap to drool over, just as we passed, tilting the microphone in my direction, giving me the chance to inform the assembled adoring crowds via the mic that, "It's all a load of shite!" which would have meant nothing to 99.9% of the crowd milling around. I was rewarded a few minutes later when my English-speaking companion sidled over and said, "Got your message across, then."

One up for old Albion!

The worst of all though, are the MC's at nighttime stage shows promoting anything from tyres to resorts. (For some reason, it's usually men who do the night rants.)

Along with the product promo will usually be a band of anything up to a dozen musicians, fronted by half that number of dancing girls – 'dancing' being the loosest of descriptions, given that most don't know their right foot from their left elbow but have practiced wiggling their bums and bouncing their boob jobs in front of the mirror in their bedroom at home for enough hours to make them feel they have enough of 'what it takes', which, in this case, is a nice arse covered in tight sequined shorts and sufficient cleavage to create a shadow if they put their arms across their chest and push inwards. Thai ladies are not renowned in the bosom department.

Their main aim is to get the salivating punters to slip one-hundred baht notes under their knicker elastic or down the front of their – almost inevitably for some obscure reason – American flag bra. This is not the job for a skinny wallflower, no-matter how slinky her ensemble, although at a trade show I attended a few years ago in Bangkok, the boob jobs and rounded posteriors eventually handed over the stage to a girl in outrageously high diamante-covered sling-backs, with a beanstalk figure that would make Olive Oil envious. In a business where choreography is nothing more than a fancy Latin word for ‘shakin’ yore booty’, and even ‘bump and grind’ never got to play much part in the mirror-reflective training, this girl – in the words of the brilliant Chris Rhea – could “move like a river’, slippin’ n’slidin’ between raunchy and coy in a couple of well-tuned gyrations.

I bet the other girls never wanted to be on the same bill as her again.

Walk back into Chiang Mai along Lamphun Road

When I first came to Chiang Mai in 2014 I took a *songtau*, (a covered pickup with two bench seats in the back, the standard transport in the city and much of Thailand, the name coming from *song*, two, *tau*, seat), to Lamphun to visit a beautiful garden, Ban Phor Lian Muen Thai Plant Garden. On the way, I passed a spirit house manufacturer at the side of the road. I went back another day, had a look around, and walked back into Chiang Mai, a fair stroll, but I enjoyed it. I repeated the exercise to visit the spirit house place again today, although when climb out the *songtau* I’ve either sailed past it without noticing it, or got out too soon, unimportant either way.

I thought the walk was about six km back to the Iron Bridge, where I’ve parked my bike for the last 1.5km ride back to my hotel, but Google tells me it’s 7.4, although a sign at the side of the road tells me nine. Again, unimportant, because if the legs give out I just catch another *songtau* to their station beside the Iron Bridge.

First stop finds me sitting in the garden of a pretty little café exactly on the 6km mark, still with no sign of the spirit house factory. Obviously newly-opened, the owner jumps behind his machine with a big, welcoming smile; the waitress discreetly moves away from the client area where she’d been sitting concentrating on a paper cup of ice cream. I’m the only customer, but within a few minutes two more tables are occupied and a takeaway has just been and gone.

The interior of the café is small and kitschily decorated, with display racks of toy cars, miniature dollies and stuffed animals, as if the style has been copied from a brochure. The garden is filled with wooden furniture and large pots of assorted greenery. It could almost pass for a rustic

ambience, were it not for the susurrations of traffic along the main road and the roar of the generator powering the spray of the car cleaning service six metres away.

At one of the two tables are two youngish ladies with two children waiting for tubs of ice cream. When they are served, the foursome wander out to a motor-scooter parked beside the entrance to the garden. It's become so normal by now to see four people on a motor-scooter, one child standing at the front holding onto the handlebars between an adult's arms, the other sandwiched on the seat between the adults, that it no longer warrants a photograph or even a second look, but as the four of them are still each holding onto their individual full tub of ice cream, I only hope they don't have too far to ride in case it melts, or the driver at least isn't going to try to eat hers while on the move.

I find the spirit house factory at 5.1km – obviously I hadn't been watching well enough. When I first saw it six years ago it was a genuine small factory, with workers mixing cement, pouring it into moulds, carefully cutting designs in coloured glass and mirror, and decorating the fanciful homes of the spirits that need to be charmed and placated when a new building is constructed. Now it was much changed, nothing more than a showroom of ranks of brightly coloured miniature houses on pedestals, and not the colourful jungle inviting an adventurous search it had been on my first visit.

At 4.2km I see a small bakery, Santi, where fresh croissants are being rolled and baked before my very eyes. A sign says 'croissants 20baht', not especially cheap, but as fresh as fresh. I order two, and when the cheerful young lady puts a third and fourth into a cellophane bag I obviously look a bit perplexed. "Twenty baht for four," she says, smiling.

I return her smile, take the bag she hands me and eat my first one while walking, still hot from the oven; golden brown on the outside, fluffy with a small chew inside. I had intended to keep most of them for when I got home, to slather in butter and marmalade. Three of them were gone by the time I hit km 3.8. I was determined to save the last to go with a coffee at the small Victorian café kiosk in the park beside the Ping River on the last leg of my walk.

Noon and I arrive at the same time at 2.8km. With the temperature at 33 ° and not a patch of shade, I go into the best second-hand emporium in Chiang Mai, not to buy anything but to cool off in front of the industrial-size fans.

The place has been 'tidied up' recently, a lot of the bric-a-tat replaced by clingfilm-wrapped household plastics, becoming more of a shop than somewhere to delve for finds as it used to be. (I realise now where the café bought its kitschy decorations from.) Along with this it has lost much of its charm, but the industrial-strength fans and temporary shade, as well

as the newly-renovated toilets, set me up for the next stretch, with a much-looked-forward-to coffee in the park by the Ping.

As I pass the Foreign Cemetery at 12:32, only 1.2km short of my bike, with a well-earned nap in my room fifteen minutes after that, I forgo the joys of a river view and decide to dunk my last croissant in a coffee on my balcony, before slipping between cool sheets for a welcome doze.

From My Balcony

The view from my fourth-floor balcony is across the rooftops of Chiang Mai to the mountain of Doi Suthep on the side of which sits the temple of the same name, the icon of the city. It's said that you have never visited Chaing Mai until you have visited the temple of Doi Suthep, just as it was said that you had never visited Paris until you had been up the Eifel Tower. I have lived in both cities and never done either, and don't feel as though I have missed anything.

The most important view from my balcony as far as I'm concerned is downward to the street that passes in front of the hotel I've lived in since 2015. Not a major thoroughfare, but busy in a parochial way; cars, pickup trucks, motorbikes, songtaew and the occasional tuk-tuk going about their business, with plenty of foot traffic, most of it walking on the road instead of the pavement, a common practice in SE Asia, and hardly surprising given the condition of most of the footpaths and the fact that motorbikes tend to use them as parking spaces.

From my eyrie I watch the world go by while I take my first cup of coffee of the day, sometimes the most entertaining part of it. I've watched children growing into teenagers, old people leaving to retire to their village, the occasional crash between motorbike and pickup, both driving too fast and without concentrating, common in Thailand, parades, and food handouts to the less fortunate during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The following stories are just a few moments in those five years, a tiny sampling of observations from a birds-eye view.

Morning Rhythms

September 2015

There she goes, the girl of about thirteen, on her way to school, dressed in pristine white shirt with a large blue bow at her neck, knee-length navy blue pleated skirt, white socks with the tops neatly folded over, and black shoes with a thin strap, polished to perfection. On one day a week (which day escapes me) she is dressed in a dark green Girl Guides uniform, made colourful by the amount of badges she has sewn about her arms and

chest, testament to the Guide law of 'doing her best'. She carries a backpack half her size, loaded with books, as if she is Atlas with the weight of the world on her shoulders, which possibly accounts for her walking stance of never lifting her eyes further than a spot a metre in front of her feet. It's 6 a.m. and the world is coming alive below my balcony.

In an almost syncopated rhythm, as the young girl passes the gates of a grand house directly opposite my home, a lady with the air of being an elderly retainer (although up close she looks no older than mid-fifties) comes out the main entrance of the building carrying a couple of plastic carrier bags, which she sets down beside the front gate, a regal affair of ornate metalwork and gilded spear heads that wouldn't be out of place on a minor palace. Moving slowly because of a deformed left hip, for the next hour she will go over the three parked cars with a large yellow duster, water the garden, flick her feather duster around the doors and window frames, make sure the spirit house by the front gate, garlanded with marigolds for good luck, is well stocked with fresh food and drink to appease its residents and make sure they don't stray into the main house to cause havoc, and the hundred-and-one minor jobs that need doing around the garden before getting on her old bike with a big wicker basket fixed to the handlebars and peddling off to do some shopping at Chiang Mai Gate market.

At some point during her duties she will stop a couple of monks in their bright saffron robes who form an almost continual flow from the temple at the bottom of the street to the market with their alms bowls around the dawn hours, make her abeyance, receive her blessing, hand over her offering in the plastic bags and go back to work, re-hanging over her left ear the strap of the white cotton face-mask that is a common sight on the streets of Chiang Mai to filter the unseemly levels of pollution.

At around the same time as young girl and older lady make their passing, a young man in his early thirties comes out onto the balcony of the four-storey apartment block to the right of the large house. He has short, well-trimmed black hair, features more Tibetan than Thai, and a body-builder's torso that tells of many hours spent in the gym. Dressed in his work-out uniform of loose black sweatpants and white sleeveless singlet, he lays a hand towel on the flat rail of the balcony in front of his door, in which he rolls up a bottle of gaudily orange- or yellow-coloured energy drink. His actions are slow and precise, neatly aligning the bottle in centre-left of the towel before rolling it tight, like a *muay Thai* boxer undergoing a ritual before stepping into the ring. Almost exactly one minute later he will step out onto the street, turn right and stroll down to the local gym, a place of machines built from iron girders, thrashing canvas belts, industrial-sized cogs and enough metal weights to anchor a cruise ship – a world away from the chrome and digital displays of

modern effete gymnasiums. A couple of hours later he'll saunter back, bare chested if he has had a strenuous session or the day is hot, something usually only seen done by farang showing little respect to Thai sensibilities – or mine, come to that.

On the other side of the grand house is a one-storey building, partially obscured from the road by metal sheets fixed to the back of the metal-barred gate, although from my vantage point I can see into a garden full of floribunda, trees and verdant greenery. At the road frontage of the building is what appears to be a two-metre high wooden blind, but in a couple of hours will show itself to be a wooden screen that folds back concertina-style to reveal a second-hand clothing shop from which two long rails of merchandise are dragged each morning and dragged back around eight in the evening. During the height of the day when the sun is at its most glaring, the stock will be covered over with two sheets of lightweight fabric to protect it from fading.

At this hour of the day, though, the large gate of the garden is drawn back and a lady in her early fifties rides out on a small motorbike towing a large trailer, coupled together by simply hooping a v-shaped metal bar over the seat. In the trailer are bulging plastic bags full of clothes, the metal bars of disassembled clothing stands sticking out, and a couple of plastic mannequins balanced precariously on top.

Gate closed and ready-to-roll, she puts another bag of clothes between her legs and off she goes, but only about 500 metres to the small plaza over the moat, where she will set up her rails along with a dozen other vendors of second-hand clothing and a few food stalls, among them Auntie Lek, who sells thick coffee and thin tea, and barely-cooked eggs poached in a cup to go with the diced slices of toast slathered in Carnation condensed milk that her daughter or niece cooks on a small brazier at her side. They have been there, seven days a week, off-an-on, for twenty years.

A few minutes after her departure our clothes lady will be back on her motorbike, minus trailer, to collect the rest of her stock in plastic bags, again jammed in the space between her legs and sometimes piled so high that she has to lean to one side to peer around them to navigate her way back to the market. She'll be back with her loads around eleven, having spent the best part of an hour on either side setting out and re-packing her stock.

The day has begun.

Washday Blues
14th September, 2017

The lady in the third floor of the apartment block across the way from my room is hanging out her washing, dressed in a yellow nightdress. I'm particularly interested in the bras, which are all black and, for a Thai lady, pretty voluptuous. Can a bra be 'voluptuous'? I'm not sure it can, but even that I should think it at least describes the wearer. And I'm sure they must belong to the lady who's hanging them out because the apartments are so small that I can't imagine two of persons of such voluptuousness living in the one room.

But there must be two people at least (unless she's taking washing in) because when I tear my eyes away from the dripping bras I can see a row of shirts and T-shirts dangling on hangers suspended from a metal clothing rail. They are arranged in an orderly fashion, from something that looks like a Thai 'small' (as compared to a European 'small' which would be 'large' in Thai sizing, or an American 'small' that would accommodate a family of four Thai for a camping holiday or make a sizeable extension to the home of the lady doing the laundry, if only she had somewhere to erect it using a few bamboo poles as a frame), to a short smock that would be either a comfy fit for her or a *gandora*. And for the non-fashionista, a *gandora* is the wonderful loose robe worn by Arabs that I'm told Western ladies find extremely sexy on a man. I've been wearing one for years. Never done me any good.

It's just occurred to me that it's Monday, the traditional wash day in England and maybe even further afield. Because the recently deceased King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Rama IX, studied in England and was deeply impressed by the country (which goes to show how easy some people are pleased) Thailand adopted many things British, including driving on the left-hand side of the road, something which confused me no-end when I arrived here after living in Spain for fifteen years. Maybe they also adopted the 'Monday wash', although I've not seen any evidence of Dolly Blue, the little circular block wrapped in a twist of blue paper that coloured the water deep blue (hence the name one assumes) but for some reason brought whites out bright and sparkling. I later found out via Wikipedia that '*White fabrics acquire a slight color cast after use (usually grey or yellow). Since blue and yellow are complementary colors in the subtractive color model of color perception, adding a trace of blue color to the slightly off-white color of these fabrics makes them appear whiter.*'

(Apropos of nothing here's a bit of British social anthropology for you younguns; a 'dolly tub' was a galvanised metal tub full of steaming soapy water where clothes were pounded with a 'dolly stick' or 'poss stick', a thick wooden pole with a handle, the luxury version having three short legs for extra swirl before being rung out through a mangle, a contraption with two rollers turned by a big handle that squeezed most of the water out. The precursor to the washing machine the dolly and the mangle were darned hard work and probably responsible for shortening the wearable

life of clothing by a good couple of years. I ponder if the Dolly Blue and its cleansing power was the origin of the term 'washday blues' and not the miserable state of mind brought on by Monday's labours.)

Anyway, back to the voluptuous underwear drip-drying on the balcony over the way.

This is obviously a lady of style and/or daring because the last item she hangs on her metal bar is a pair of voluminous, as distinct from voluptuous, shorts, although I can imagine both words being applicable in certain circumstances, as they appear from a distance to be made of some shiny, shimmery, rich purple fabric, probably more suitable for belly dancing than going to the market. As I've only ever seen the lady's upper half as she hangs out her washing I can't comment on whether they adorn her nether regions, but given the size of her bras I think it highly possible.

Cool Suit Dude

15th April 2020

Sitting on my balcony I see movement out of the corner of my eye at the gate of the fancy house opposite. Standing there is a small man in a big white suit with black piping around the collar and cuffs. There's so much free space we could comfortably share it. While waiting for entry he does that looking around thing we all do when bored with the wait, and I see he is wearing a red medallion on a long black cord suspended around his neck, reaching as far as his navel, over a white T-shirt with fine black horizontal stripes. 'Cool dude,' I think.

The gate opens and he drives in in a yay big car, also white, which would indicate that while his dress sense isn't one to be desired, there's a bit of folding stuff there somewhere. He disappears into the house.

At the front of the garden, to the right of the gate, is a spirit house, very common in Thai gardens as a way to placate the resident land spirits when a new house is being built, working on the premise that give them a home of their own and they won't haunt yours.

While Cool Dude is in the 'big house', the gardener sets up a couple of chairs and a table in front of the spirit house, laden with candles and offerings of flowers and food. I hadn't noticed them at first because of the fancy gates in front of the shrine. Gilded spikes, escutcheons and fol-de-rols, the gates wouldn't look out of place around Buckingham Palace, although a bit OTT for a suburban home.

Cool Dude comes out and starts setting the scene more to his liking while the gardener shuffles around him trying to get a large purple Siam Commercial Bank beach umbrella into place, not made easy because CD can't quite make up his mind where he thinks would be the most

propitious spot for convening with the spirits. Man of the house does his best to get in the way, but eventually, CD is happy with the position, and an orange electric fan is placed just so to keep him cool under his parasol.

Mrs. Of the House brings out three more chairs; one is placed directly behind CD, the others about three metres to the left. Man OtH takes the seat behind CD, wife and mother the spares. Gardener gets on with polishing the household cars.

CD begins chanting; Man OtH plays with his mobile phone; the two ladies chat. Everyone seems to be ignoring CD. At one point, Mrs. OtH gets up, goes into the house, and brings out a tabby cat, which she strokes gently while continuing her conversation with mother. Obviously the ritual taking place is very profound.

Fifteen minutes of chanting, the last few going at a fair rate of knots, and CD splashes holy water over shrine, offerings, and the surrounding ground with the aid of a small brush. Man OtH gets out of the way, possibly not wanting a holy shower. A bit of chat, smiles all round, and the group disappears back into the house, taking the cat with them.

A few minutes later, CD re-emerges, hitching up his oversize trousers. (I worry about the dirt the bottom of his trouser legs are collecting, and ponder that they are going to need a bloody good scrub and a soak in bleach to get them clean again.) He climbs into his car – it dwarfs him – reverses back into the road, and is waved away by the family, who carry the chairs and table back into the house, dismantle flower and candle display. Gardener struggles a bit with the Siam Commercial Bank umbrella, but in five minutes all is back to normal. He begins watering the garden and hosing down the drive, possibly unaware that Thailand is entering the worst drought for forty years, although perhaps he thinks that having propitiated the spirits, all will be well on their little patch of Buddha's green acre.

Malee's Veg Shop

19th April 2020

Each morning, around seven-thirty, I see Malee's white Honda drive from the underground car park below my hotel home. She's on her way to Mueang Mai Market, the wholesale fruit and veg market that supplies most of the food shops and restaurants in Chiang Mai, where she will put on a mask sewn by her aunty, a full-face, clear plastic guard, and a pair of gloves before she does her shop.

A couple of hours later she'll be back, parking in front of the main entrance to the hotel we call home to unload her purchases into the red and green corrugated cabin set back from the steps. She told me a couple of days ago that at the moment only about twenty-five percent of vendors

are working, as farmers from the mountain areas up to three-hours' drive away, have stopped delivering, fearful of coming into the city and possible infection with the coronavirus. They feel safer at home, although after three weeks they must be getting desperately short of money, and are probably having to destroy a large amount of produce. An elderly lady said it's the worst she's seen in forty years of working there.

Malee began her vegetable shop a couple of years ago with a small bamboo stall, open to the elements other than for a thatched palm roof. She would display her fruit and veg in baskets on counters on two sides, sitting there until early evening, through the awful heat of April, when it regularly hits the high thirties, and the torrential storms of the rainy season later in the year. When I asked how business was doing, she would say, "Not big profit, but better than sitting in my room."

Toward the end of 2018, she changed the bamboo stall for her new metal one. I'm ashamed to say I was unimpressed by it; too big and too close to the entrance. I much preferred her rustic stall, a little bit of country in the centre of the city. But I didn't sit there for ten hours a day getting baked by the sun, did I? I'm not renowned for tolerance.

A few days later her small shop was hauled under the overhang of a large tree and painted a lively green and red. Over the next few months, pine shelves were added to over-hang the lip where the drop-down shutters close overnight, tiered shelving behind. More baskets were added as she increased her lines from the basics of potatoes, carrots, onions, broccoli, garlic, that were all her small bamboo cabin could hold. Purple aubergines, stalks of celery, bundles of slim asparagus, local fruits and veg; small pineapples, peeled and quartered, sit on a bed of ice for instant eating; red, green and yellow peppers brighten the green scene; red onions for salads, papaya in green and yellow varieties. ("Keep that until tomorrow, it will be sweeter then.")

Malee will sell you a single, cling-film wrapped carrot, an avocado, ("Ready in two days", she'll tell you), a hard-boiled egg, a red onion and a small head of lettuce – a salad for one, with a couple of mandarins or a pair of bananas for dessert. On her return from an occasional visit to the family farm she will bring back freshly grown produce, the most savoured by me being the small, tangy lemons picked the morning she leaves, sold for a tenth of the price I'd hand over in a supermarket.

We often chat about cooking, and a couple of times a week, as I'm stocking up on fresh veg with her, she'll drop in a few tomatoes, a handful of peppers, a bit of this, a bit of that, refusing to take payment. "They don't look pretty, but they are okay for soup," she will say.

Malee's shop is more than just a place to buy veg; it's a place for a quick chat, a bit of cooking advice, a chance meeting with another resident of our high-rise home, rare in these lock-down days. It has become an institution; an institution that would leave a hole in both the physical

environment of the local community and in our daily lives were it no longer there

Morning Rhythms, Virus Time

12th June 2020 5:50 am

Soft morning light; the colours of another hot day to come.

The lady from the food shop over the road slides open the long gate to her yard, rides out her red motorbike, then pulls out an overloaded trailer full of clothes and clothing racks, just as she did five years ago, hooks it's v-shaped handle over the seat of her motorbike and rides up to the square over the moat at the top of the street.

A couple of years ago she stopped her clothes sales at the moat and changed her second-hand clothing shop into a small food-shop, a type of small restaurant of under a half-dozen tables serving economical food that are the staple of eating throughout Thailand. A bit of a grubby four-table example, (most of them would never stand a health check) but the food is okay. With the decline of almost every style of business, partly due to the considerable drop in tourism experienced in Chiang Mai in 2019, plus the devastation wrought by Covid-19, she obviously wasn't making much from the food shop alone, so as the country closed down she went back to her six a.m. routine of setting up her stall, closing by around 11, carting it all back home again and preparing for the lunchtime crowd, if about four people can be considered a crowd.

When I first wrote about life below my balcony in 2015, as part of a few personal stories about the morning to-ings and fro-ings, she was one of only two clothes vendors on the square. Now the whole area is taken over with clothes rails and tents. One stall deals only in white ladies' shirts and blouses, many of them very beautiful; others sell only jeans and trousers, a couple specialise in men's shirts. As winter approaches, jackets, sweaters and long-sleeved shirts appear and while almost everything is second-hand, it's of good quality and in good condition.

A trickle of monks pass by as they return to the monastery at the end of my road, having spent the dawn hours collecting alms in their shiny globe bowls covered by a saffron-coloured cloth that matches their robes, in front of Chiang Mai Gate Market at the top of the street. Recently I saw a foreigner in the group, standing a head taller than any other monk. Obviously a novice, as he passed below my balcony he dropped his bowl, sending a melodic tone reverberating through the air. An older monk carefully showed him how to wrap it up again in its saffron cloth and carry it safely.

An occasional rickshaw rider pedals by, outward from the market with ladies surrounded by bags of shopping, the rickshaw returning a short

time later with their slow, laborious pedaling, looking for new customers. Most of their trade these days are tourists, so they've been badly hit, first by the drop in tourism, then by the virus.

The body-builder from the small apartment block across the way, still there after five years, meanders down the road, carrying a water bottle and a clear plastic bag of food. He no longer rolls his bottle of vivid green energy drink in a towel along the balustrade of the walkway in front of his tiny, one-room home, before striding off to the gym, back straight, full of purpose. The closure of the gyms during lockdown has obviously affected him; his once tight stomach now has a small bulge, his stance less erect, his movements lethargic instead of energised.

I rarely see him making his morning offering to the monks as they make their way home, which was always part of his daily routine on the way to the gym, although I do occasionally see him climb out of the window of his first-floor apartment to sprinkle bird food on the open platform that could be considered a balcony if only it had a wall around it and easier access. He seems to dislike pigeons, or at least the white ones, because if any attempt to have a free meal he shouts and claps his hands to scare them away, a futile gesture as he also scares any other birds away as well. But there seem to be fewer birds around these days, and I've not seen a white-tailed squirrel skittering along the phone or electricity cables for ages.

The most profound affect of the pandemic is the quiet. A few months ago, even at this early hour, the road would be busy with traffic, both on foot and motorbike, occupied with their morning chores and visits to the market. Even the house opposite is quiet, where the elderly master of the house would stride up and down like an imperious Japanese office inspecting his troops, taking exercise while waiting for his car and driver.

As I write this at 6.54, he steps out the front door, green mask hanging from his right ear, followed by his household retainer carrying a black canvas folding chair, which he sets up on the grass under the shade of a tree while the elderly gentleman makes a quick abeyance to please the spirits of the house at the ornate, rather grandiose spirit house by the front gate. He then sits in the canvas chair where, in lieu of the striding exercise he once did, he pumps his arms up in the air a few times.

The lady who had the curious habit of walking up the left-hand side of the street, trailing her fingers across the walls, fences, and gates as if reassuring herself that she's still connected with the world, passes below me, this time on the opposite side of the road. Tidily dressed, hair taken care of, she has the same slow gait she has had since I first noticed her three years ago, walking slowly, eyes down as if lost in thought. She'll be back in about an hour, same gait, same contemplative staring at the ground a metre ahead of her feet.

As if telling me that they are still there, I watch a lone squirrel running along a telephone cable stretched between wooden poles. The day is beginning.

New Year's Eve 2020

Imagine an elderly man, a septuagenarian, stripped down to his skiddies (a British naval term for underpants), sat on his tiny balcony, at a folding metal table covered in a red checked tablecloth, matching napkin. To his right, a can of Federbrau Beer, Single Malt, 5.4° alcohol; a generic, Germanic-named beer, probably brewed in Thailand from inferior hops, the signature of Thai-produced beer.

To the left, an almost empty 500ml glass, waiting for the dregs from the can. The third of a four-pack, nicely chilled, as was the bottle of faux Italian white wine (sic) consumed over dinner. White it may have been, but it's doubtful if a sliver of *la dolce vita* ever got within sniffing distance of the cork, never mind the vat it was produced in.

Below him the music from the small group of staff who are having their own little party after having grilled the meats to satisfy the New Year's Eve Party for the residents of the High Rise Pueblo of Smith Residence. *Farang* (foreigner) satisfied, this is about the only time the staff get to celebrate together – a few beers, their own food grilled on the diminishing glow of the barbeque; wives and girlfriends sat on one side of the two metal folding tables pushed end-to-end, draped over with paper tablecloths, chaps on the other side.

At one time he'd probably have said the ladies were discussing babies, housey things, *et al*, and the chaps football, but times change, and not speaking Thai, he remains in ignorance, but gets the feeling that, linguistic failings aside, he'd rather be sat at their table than those of the farang, who, once the food is gone, are off to other celebratory highlights. But three floors below, the Thai staff and partners – plus one blanket-wrapped baby – relax, chat, *sabai, sabai*, the basis of Thai life and culture. Ten people – families, couples, partners enjoying friendships.

Meanwhile, in the party domain of the farang, they talk loudly, repeating the same old, same old from last year, the intransigence of life in a foreign culture, the need to maintain *joie de vivre* despite the underlining uncertainty as to whether they will be here to see the New Year in for 2021.

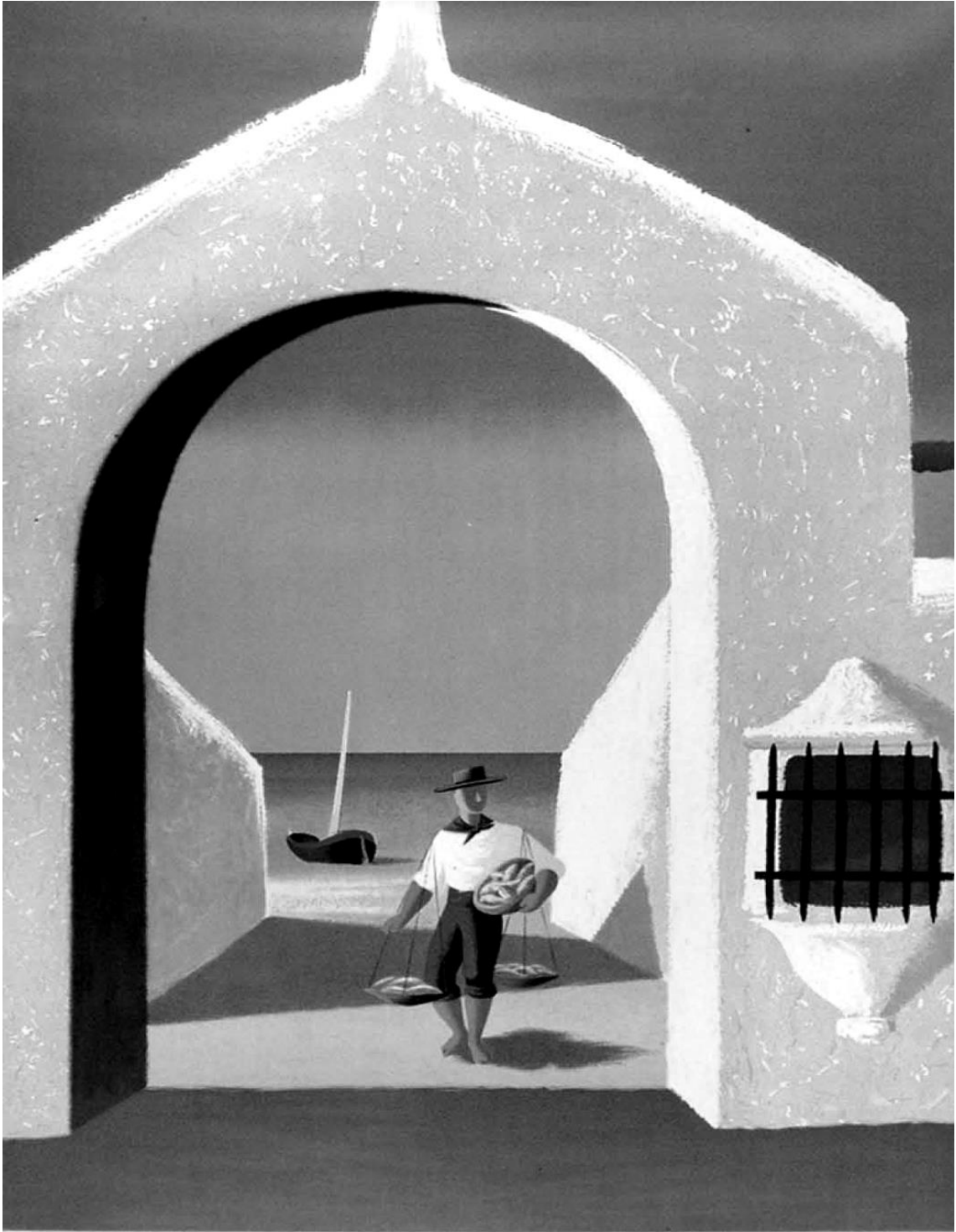
But wherever you are, whatever you are doing and whoever you are with, I wish you a very Happy New Year.

End Days

4 November 2020

Chiang Mai in the north of Thailand has been a pretty easy place to be during the time of the coronavirus. However...as a junior officer in the British Merchant Navy I sailed in pitch darkness through war zones during the Arab-Israeli six-day war in 1967, that began the day after I celebrated my 19th birthday; crashed down the side of a mountain in the Seychelles with two terrified hookers when a taxi blew a tyre; hung onto a ship's rail as we pummelled through storms in the Indian Ocean that could have capsized us at any moment; spent 48 hours without sleep pumping water out of the hold of an ancient cargo ship in Pakistan to put out a jute fire, changing my shoes twice because the soles burned through; woke up in a French Foreign Legion camp and slipped out before I was conscripted; smuggled bacon and rum into Saudi Arabia. I've been on the flight deck of a commercial airplane as it avoided by seconds a crash landing in Greece: been mugged twice, once in Queens in New York and again outside my own front door in Valencia, Spain; had two brain scans to check on damage, been kicked the shit out of just because someone fancied it, and had a death threat because of my writing.

Sitting in a 32sq mtr room in Chiang Mai, drinking rubbish Thai beer, is not how I intend to end my days.



S P A I N

SPAIN

Set in stone

Valencia

When restoration was being done on the bell tower of the cathedral in a beautiful ancient city in La-Mancha, Spain, in the 1970s or thereabouts, which will remain nameless to save embarrassment, included in the work were twelve escutcheons, the heraldic shields of the señorial families of the city, some of whom were Conquistadores who had been part of the discovery and exploration of the Americas. Given the weathering of centuries, some of the stone carvings were very badly worn, but in-depth research provided the stonemasons with the coats of arms of all but one of the famous families of the times.

The head stonemason approached the clerk-of-works, or whoever is the top sahib on a cathedral restoration, and told him they were one short of a dozen, and could he suggest what to do? The boss was probably up to his eyeballs at the time because he told the head stone mason to make something up that looked suitably original. So the stonemason did. It wasn't until a few months after the inauguration that someone spotted that the twelfth historic escutcheon was, in fact, the emblem of Real Madrid, the head stonemason's favourite football team. I don't care if the story is true or not, but it tickled me to death when I was told the story by a local a few years ago.

From the perspective of the 21st century, all the religious statuary of the great cathedrals, and even some of the smaller churches, can look a bit samey, but you can occasionally find something that tells a slightly different story. Life as a medieval stonemason must have been a bit boring at times, so it's no surprise some of them had a mucky sense of humour and, in some cases, the opportunity to sneak it into the adornment of grand edifices, such as churches and monuments to the high and, so they probably supposed, mighty.

While religious edifices were reasonably sacrosanct in their stone decoration, monuments to mammon were another matter. The master carvers of La Lonja, the 15th-century silk exchange in Valencia, seem to have had a bit more leniency in their choice of decoration, and you can just imagine one of them, on a particularly boring day of carving acanthus leaves and sheep, thinking, "I think I'll carve something a bit naughty today."

On the left arch of the front door is the small carving of a naked couple having a good old snog. One figure is positioned above another, holding the head of the person below. We assume it's a couple, but as we can't see

any bosom's it might well have been an early homosexual stone encounter. The lower person's legs are raised and bent at the knee, and just parted enough to leave you with the teasing, "Will she or won't she?" (if it is indeed a she).

On the opposite side of the arch is the figure of a crouched man reaching out for the hindquarters of a dog. There could well be a perfectly honourable explanation of the carving, but in the way of lonely shepherds (supposedly) quitting themselves of their pent up passions on their flock, it tempts one to think that this is one canine that is about to be more than just a man's best friend. It gives a whole new meaning to the phrase 'getting a hard-on'.

Edvard Munch is best known for his painting *The Scream*, 'a haunting rendition of a hairless figure on a bridge under a yellow-orange sky', as the Museum of Modern Art in New York describes it, although there were actually four versions made by Munch between 1893 and 1910. There's no record of him visiting Valencia during his lifetime, but it wouldn't surprise me if he had made a sneaky visit and taken the idea from a water spout on the Torres de Serrano, one of the two remaining 14th-century gates to the city.

Look up to the left on the city-side of the towers and you will see a gargoyle. We think of gargoyles as being ferocious beasties that were put on churches and cathedrals to scare devils away or allow Quasimodo types to have a bit of a swing on a quiet day. They were, in fact, simply an ornate way to disguise the overflow from a roof, an artsy-looking downspout if you will, and admittedly do seem pretty nifty during a heavy storm when you see rainwater gushing from the gargoyle's mouth.

The gargoyle on the Torres de Serrano appears to be dressed as a haggard old woman of the period. Her head may be covered so we don't know if she's is bald or not, and there is no yellow sun above her head, but the pained terror in her face, the hands clasping her cheeks, and the open-wide mouth of a six-hundred-year-old scream is as near to the tortured imagery that Munch portrayed in his famous painting as makes no difference.

Map: [La Lonja de Seda, Torres de Serranos](#)

Picasso, baby, you light my fire

I was chatting with my friend Aurelia, a lady well known for being able to hold onto her pocketful of euros while everyone else was scrambling down the back of the sofa for a few centimos to buy a coffee, about 75-year-old Pierre Le Guennec, the electrician who came forward a few years ago with a collection of 271 paintings by Pablo Picasso, valued at around £43million, which he said the artist gave him while he was installing

security systems in various houses in the three years before Picasso died 1973. Picasso was known to give some of his images away – the museum of Eugenio Arias, Picasso's barber, in Buitrago del Lozoya is a case in point - but Aurelia told me a story that tickled me pink.

The artist had a keen interest in bulls and the bullfight, and one of his friends during the 1950s was Luis Miguel Dominguin, arguably the top torero in Spain at the time. Dominguin's farm, La Paz, near Saelices in Cuenca Province, was home-away-from-home for some of the most famous aficionados of the bullfight at the time, the likes of Hemingway and Orson Wells, and he was known for his flings with cinematic beauties, Lauren Bacall, Rita Hayworth and Ava Gardner amongst others.

During his stays at the farm Picasso would wander the small villages and workshops, making rough sketches of agricultural workers, local artisans and the like, sometimes using the images in his finished works.

In the late 1990s, Aurelia, who was born in the small village of Saelices and still has family living there, was chatting with her grandmother, Cesaría, when an image of Picasso suddenly appeared on the TV screen. 'That's Don Pablo,' grandma said excitedly. "I haven't thought of him for years." A bit taken aback that her grandma should even recognise Picasso in the first place, Aurelia asked how she knew his name.

During the 1950s the family had a small factory making the curved roof tiles that are commonplace on Spanish houses, and Cesaría's father used to do the rounds of the local towns, selling his wares from the back of a cart. Picasso was interested in ceramics and how the local artisans used the mud, and would quite often turn up at the factory – and when we say factory, it was more like a shed in the back yard – and watch what was going on. He was an inveterate sketcher, always drawing on something, whether it was a drawing block or the side of a bit of newspaper. Often he'd get so carried away he'd simply tear the sketch off, chuck it aside, and begin another study. Cesaría would pick them up when he left and put them in a wooden box.

It was enough to know that her gran had been on chatting terms with Picasso, but to know that somewhere there might just be a collection of undiscovered sketches tucked away nearby had Aurelia's pulse racing.

"And what did you do with the box?" she asked nervously.

"It's probably still lying around somewhere," said gran.

"And the drawings?"

"Oh, that was great. It was really good paper, and that was difficult to get hold of then, so we used to use a couple of drawings each day to light the kiln. It burned really well.

I've never known Aurelia stuck for words, but you can bet your bottom dollar she was then!

Peace on the edge of the city

Valencia

I'm sat on the ground, leaning against the wall of the Ermita de Nuestra Sra. de los Desemparados, (Our Lady of the Forsaken), in the Partida de Fiscal in the *huerto*, the acres of market garden that surround Valencia, within a stone's throw of the City of Arts and Sciences. Next to me, the *partida*, a piece of agricultural land, is called the Partida Romance, and I can't help thinking in a sardonic sort of way that between the three of them, Fiscal, Romance and Forsaken, they seem to pretty well sum up my life at the moment.

The day is warm but slightly cloudy, with patches of pale sunlight appearing in the gaps in the clouds. God seems to be smiling on me because as the clouds drift by they seem to break and divert, leaving me in a little patch of almost continuous sunshine. Off in the distance I can hear the susurrations of the traffic on the motorway between Valencia and the beach at El Saler, as it passes the rice paddies of the Albufera, birthplace of Valencia and Spain's iconic dish, the paella. But the noise isn't loud enough to cover the twittering of a few birds or the skittering of dried leaves across the tarmac in front of the Ermita when the occasional light breeze wafts by.

Valencia prides itself of being Spain's third city, although on the quiet many of its residents will tell you that in reality it's not much more than a big town. Everything's compact and within walking distance if you are reasonably fit. Nowhere is this more noticeable than if you take a walk into the *huerto*.

From where I sit I look over the top of fields of artichoke, cabbage and spinach to the City of Arts and Sciences and the chi-chi new apartments on Avenida Francia, where many of the city's 'new money' have made their home. On my ride through the tiny narrow roads that cut through the market gardens I passed patches of ground newly turned, with a heron pecking the ground as it follows a tractor cutting the furrows for the next seasonal crop, most of which will end up in Valencia's Central Market and the neighbourhood markets scattered throughout the city.

Parsley and spring onions are showing their fresh heads, and in another couple of weeks the kale and spinach will be pulled. Large patches of *alcachofa* – Jerusalem artichokes – provide Valencianos with one of their favourite foods, although I've always found them laborious and boring to eat, and the spikey grey/green leaves seem to overwhelm the plant that produces such a small amount of edible material.

A five-minute drive from my little patch of sunlight, the rice fields of the Albufera begin, once the biggest rice producer in Spain, and, during the Moorish occupation, the most productive in the then known world. At

the turn of the year the rice fields of the Albufera look like little more than a patch of sodden earth after a heavy storm has passed, but by June the emerald green stalks will stretch as far as the eye can see, broken only by the occasional one-storey *casita*, where the farmer stores his tools and where he would once have slept during harvest time.

On the other side of the city, running alongside the motorway that follows the coastline to Barcelona, later in the year a carpet of darker green will cover the ground. These are *chufa*, the tiger nuts that make *horchata*, the strange milky-looking drink that's supposed to contain more vitamins and minerals than almost any other plant, coming a close second to the magical aloe vera. At least with horchata you can savour its fresh, slightly sweet flavour, whereas swallowing the juice of the aloe vera is like trying to gulp down a slithery, slimy raw egg. Served with giggle-worthy (at least to the British) sponge fingers called *fartons*, horchata is a favourite drink of Fallas and hot summer days.

I never leave the huerto without a few plant cuttings, this time it was from a great stand of papyrus. Up-ended into a jar of water, they will begin to put out roots in a couple of months, and by late summer will be about two metres high. It's how my terrace garden comes together; a bit here, a bit there...although I think I'll draw a line at flooding it and trying to grow rice.

Life after death's not what it was

Valencia

Well, I saw a first today – a zombie getting booked by a policeman. Which according to my lugubrious Irish friend, Mike, is “what happens when you let the zombies out before midnight.”

Actually, it was toss-up who was most embarrassed, the copper in his deep blue uniform with his hip-holstered pistol, or the nervous looking zombie with his black and white caked-on make-up. The plod even asked for the un-dead one's ID card. Now how does a zombie get an ID card? You need a photo for your ID card, and I thought zombies couldn't be seen by the camera...or is that they can't see themselves in a mirror?...or is that a vampire? And besides that, if the face on the ID card was plain ordinary and un-made-up, how would the polis be able to compare the photo with the scary (as if!) painted face in front of him? A lot of deep philosophical thoughts here, far more than a man needs on a bright sunny day without the aid of a pretty big beer.

You'll have guessed by now that he wasn't a real zombie, (and if you haven't realised by now, please don't ask me to be your friend on Facebook), but some poor bloke who got caught out in some tom-foolery. The tom-foolery was the monthly meeting of *Desayuno con Viandantes*, a

group of people who meet on a Saturday morning in a public spot to share breakfast. Everyone brings something to eat or drink and puts it on a communal table, or in today's case, a communal wall, and shares it. It was started by a group of architects and artists who decided to 'open up the urban environment to the public by sharing breakfast', or some such malarkey, and it went on from there. You don't have to be a member or pay an entrance fee, you just have to show up and bring something with you. Strangers passing by are equally welcome, and in fact, that's how a lot of people find out about it and come to the next one.

Usually it's just a chat amongst friends (and a way to make new ones) but sometimes they arrange some sort of event. Today's was partly to promote someone's book about...you've guessed it...zombies. Actually, I think it's not exactly about zombies, but the word's in the title so it seemed like a good idea to get dressed up. And so it was, with loads of people wandering around in gory face paint and tattered clothes.

For more than a year there has never been any difficulty with the police – which always surprised me, given the Spanish police's propensity for doing anything that will keep them occupied other than solving a crime – but today the group's luck ran out. They've held breakfasts in all sorts of weird places, including a major roundabout and on one of Valencia's pedestrian bridges, with nary a word from the boys in blue, but today we were slap-bang in the middle of the city, in front of El Corte Ingles, the up-market department store on a busy Saturday morning.

I had a feeling there was something in the air when I saw a van load of anti-disturbance police giving us the glad-eye, not sure if we were the advanced guard of 'Save Your Local Cemetery – It's Where A Zombie Calls Home!', or just a load of plonkers in silly make-up. It was obviously too hot for them to get out of the van and work up a sweat, so they drifted off. It's pretty certain they'd called it in for some other Mr. Plods to deal with it, because ten minutes later a car-load of the boyos in blue turn up, three heavies in Ray-Bans and forage caps. A couple of minutes later another car arrives, and three more tumble out. Where were all these forces of law and order when I picked up a poor lady who'd had her bag nicked a while ago? Obviously too busy having a coffee somewhere in a nice cool café.

So, anyway, after much feet shuffling at being caught in a compromising situation, i.e. impersonating a zombie, names were taken, notes made, and the six guardians of justice hunched their shoulders and swaggered off. The zombie was later seen clean of face after a quick wash and brush-up, probably working on the premise 'let someone else be made to feel like a complete dickhead if the polis decide to come back'.

You can't blame him really; being a zombie, even a fake one, must be a real dead-end job.

Testing, testing, testing

Having reached the age where getting out of bed in the morning is done with more of a roll than a sprin, and I need to sit down to slip my foot through the leg of my underpants, I thought it was about time I had a top-to-toe check-up to determine what was on the way out, and what had a few more years of struggling life left in it. The liver was sure to be on the doctor's sucking-in-of-breath-while-pouting-the-lips list.

First thing was to have a blood test, and at my local clinic these begin at eight in the morning, an hour I'm especially familiar with, following a numerical list. Be far enough down the list and you might get out in time for lunch, which you will be needing by then because the form you get with your number on tells you in big letters that you must be in a state of *AYUNO*, fasting, so your Weetabix for breakfast will have to be forgotten. I was number two, which meant getting there at least on time, given that appointments usually run a bit late at the best of times. Along with your form you are given a clear plastic tube with a jolly bright yellow cap, which you have to take with you filled with your *primera orina del dia*, your first pee of the day.

Come test day I knocked the alarm off and rolled over for my usual extra five minutes, which inevitably extends to my usual extra hour. At ten to eight I remembered with a jolt that I had the appointment for the test and reckoned that, with a decent turn of speed, I'd get there just as number one was coming out of the cubicle.

I will impart a little piece of information that is possibly one snippet too many but which, in the interests of authentic reportage, I'll include. I'm 'regular' – regular as regular can be. First thing after my feet have touched the bedside rug is to put the kettle on, and the second is warming the plastic toilet seat with five minutes of spiritual contemplation while it boils – the kettle, not the plastic toilet seat. On this particular day both kettle and contemplation would have to wait but nature must take its course. As the plastic temperature rose I spotted the little yellow-capped bottle on the bathroom shelf, awaiting the *primera orina del dia*, which, at that precise moment was being thinned out by five litres of toilet water. I might have got away with being late a couple of minutes, but I guessed that a 40-1 dilution for sampling purposes wouldn't go down too well. Either that or I'd be dragged into hospital immediately with a supposed case of advanced anemia. (Yes, that's to do with blood, but you get my drift.) All-in-all there didn't seem to be a lot of point joining the Dracula brigade that day so I decided to give it a miss.

The next day I went to the clinic full of humility and in my best Uriah Heep 'You can beat me Mr. Copperfield' mode. I concocted some cock-and-

bull story about getting the dates confused and please could I make another appointment and I promise I won't do it again. I usually have a coffee on my way but I realised as I was half-way there that I'd completely forgotten to take any money out with me. Not to worry, I'd be back home in fifteen minutes and make one there.

The charming lady who deals with analysis bookings was deep in conversation with a lady in her mid-forties who repeated everything said to her to an elderly lady, presumably her ma, standing next to her, who then repeated it back verbatim in a strong voice which proved that not only could she hear the receptionist perfectly well in the first place, thank you very much, but her foot wasn't that far in the grave that she couldn't bloody well understand, either! Nonetheless, to and fro, repetition after repetition, they went, as the queue extended behind them.

After ten minutes or so another receptionist arrived, a big blowsy piece with "I'm only here because I'm paid to be here, not because I particularly want to attend to you miserable dross" metaphorically etched across her forehead. The queue took a metaphorical deep breath, hoping that the nice lady currently dealing with the repetitive drone syndrome couple would be free when it was their turn to be attended to.

Just as Blowsy took up her defensive position behind her fortifications, an old Mr. Grumpy type, well past his sell-by date, jumped the queue and slapped a fistful of prescriptions on the counter, demanding to know something-or-other that escaped me because of his *baso profundo* growl that bore little resemblance to any Spanish I recognised. A timorous old maid in front of me, and next in line after the repetitive pair, did a faint wave of her hand and uttered a querulous "Señora....." by way of indicating that Mr. Grumpy was being less than *hidalgo* by pushing in. Blowsy slowly raised her eyes from her desktop and gave a "Who rattled your cage?" glare at the old dear, silencing any further complaints from the rest of us.

A barking session ensued between Blowsy and Grumpy when he was told that whatever he was waiting for, he'd have to come back next Friday for it, a week away. "Next bloody Friday! It might as well be next bloody year!" he shouted. "Well you can come back tomorrow and see if they are ready," said Nice Lady, "but it won't do you a lot of good because we're closed." Snigger, snigger, snigger, went the queue.

The repetitive duo finished their act and moved away from the counter. I was just about to step up to Nice Lady when Timorous Old Maid realised that Blowsy hadn't made eye contact with her yet so nipped in front of me smartish, just as Blowsy looked up and a hollered "NEXT!" That was me. Bugger, bugger, bugger! That's the last time I give up my seat on a bus for a white-haired old granny!

I stepped forward waving my analysis form and badly prepared excuse. "Sorry, I got the date wrong and should have been here yesterday but I confused....."

"WHAT?"

"Sorry, I got the date wrong and should....."

"WHAT?"

I pride myself that I can handle most situations in Spanish, but the mere hint of a foreign accent had obviously set Blowsy's back up, and why should I expect to be seen by the exemplary Spanish Health Service when all I was probably doing in her country was lying in the sun, boozing and buying up their property heritage for peanuts. (a. I have a skin condition called rosacea which means that I have to stay out of the sun, b. I try to refrain from likker during the day, and, c. when KP start giving peanuts away for free, that's when I'll be able to afford them.)

"Sorry, I got..."

"What date should you have been here, dear, and what's your name?" asked Nice Lady, as Blowsy switched her glare from me to her for interrupting what could have been a pretty good patronising situation.

"Yesterday, and it's Workman."

"Right...yesterday...and what did you say your name was?"

"Workman, *uve doble, o, erre...*"

"Right, pet, probably best if you give me your card and I'll read it myself."

Rifling through a thick file while Timorous Old Maid grimaced at me for interrupting her go, she eventually came across my form and handed it to Blowsy.

"Photocopy that!" growled the baggage, thrusting it at me.

Now, this struck me as a bit odd. Here's a health service with God knows how many employees, fancy equipment and subsidised medication, and I have to make my own photocopy of my analysis form – about four *centimos* worth.

Thinking that there must be a photocopying machine available for public use, I asked, "Where?"

I could see it forming, the viperous, "I don't give a monkey's t....."

"There's a newsagent across the road with a copying machine," said a sweet young voice behind me, which was rewarded by the same 'rattle' look from Blowsy that Timorous Old Maid got earlier.

I smiled my thanks to Sweet Young Voice and turned for the door, just as I realised that I didn't even have the four centimes for the copy with me. I turned back to see Blowsy still glaring at me.

"Look, I've come out without any money," I said, hoping that she might relent and run up the hospital's bill by four centimes on this one occasion only. Her continued glare and extended silence told me she wouldn't.

“Okay, I’ll go home and get some money, but I’ve got a copier at home so can I take the form with me and make a copy there?”

“No.”

I struggled to see the logic. If I could take the form out the building to the newsagent’s to make a copy, why couldn’t I take it home to make one? What did she think I was going to do, make a dozen copies of the form and hand it out to my friends to confuse the Spanish Health Service?

“Of course you can, love,” said Nice Lady, obviously not seeing Blowsy’s logic either, and earning herself yet another visual slapping from the dragon. “Bring it back as quick as you can and I’ll make you another appointment.”

So I did, and she did, and when I got back Blowsy was nowhere to be seen. Possibly locked up in her cage having scared the rest of the queue away. At least it’s one way of keeping the Health Service numbers down!

Fruits of Love’s Labour

Valencia

A few weeks ago I made my first olive harvest. Friends had been telling me how much their trees had yielded; those with plenty of trees and fruit had sent some to the *cooperativa* for making oil; those with a few less trees were busy salting and preparing them to have with an *aperitivo* sometime next year. (A word of warning to those who have only come as close to an olive as taking it out of a jar. Never, ever, eat one straight from the tree. They are extremely purgative and will have you doubled up in pain as you try to hobble as fast as you can to the toilet. You’ll usually fail to get there.)

The simple truth is that by the time you soak the olives in brine, changing the water each day for the first month, then each week for the next couple of months, and only then can you add your preferred selection of herbs to create that perfect olive flavour, and for which you’ll have to wait another six months before you’ll actually be able to find out if you got the mix right, it’s easier to nip to the nearest supermarket and bung a few herbs and spices into a jar of already prepared olives and only wait a few weeks. To do it the prescribed, historic way will probably cost you more in salt than the best olives your local deli can offer.

Not to be outdone, I picked my own harvest – all twenty-six of them. Not twenty-six trees, twenty-six olives. Don’t laugh! It’s easy to be scornful, but just think how gastronomically cultural I’ll seem when I open the jar about next June and nonchalantly offer them to my guests. “These are my own crop,” I’ll tell them. “And of course I picked them by hand and prepared them according to an ancient recipe.” (In fact, as my eldest son is getting married in August I may just keep them that little bit

longer to reach absolute perfection, and present them as the *piece de resistance* of the wedding dinner.)

Having mentioned my small attempt at organic production to friends, I'm getting inundated with advice. "I'll give you my grandma's recipe, it's the best I've ever tasted," says Silvia from Murcia, although Italian Giovanna swears that I should really use her grandma's recipe because the Italian's have the best olives in the world, overlooking the scandal of a few years ago when it was discovered that some of the producers in Lucca, where they supposedly make the best and purest olive oil in the world, were blending small quantities of local oil with large quantities of Spanish olive oil and passing it off as their own, conveniently forgetting to mention it on the label.

I remember going into a café in America years ago and seeing a sign that read, 'Cookies like Grandma used to make, \$1. Cookies like Grandma thought she used to make, \$2.' Since then I've ignored all advice from everyone's grandma, and rumbled along in my own sweet way.

And so it's been with my precious little jar of olives. They've been through the preliminary salting and are now into the secondary, weekly salting stage. In just two weeks I'll be dithering over the recipe. Do I add a couple of bay leaves and just a sprinkle of crushed chilli, or maybe go a bit eastern with a small handful of whole green cardamom? There again, how about whole black peppers, thyme and rosemary, for that rustic flavour?

It's all too much! I think I'll just nip round to Mercadona and buy a big jar of Gordal.

Life at Café Lolin

Valencia

I lived in Spain for fifteen years before moving to Thailand in 2015, thirteen of those in the barrio of Ruzafa, Valencia. This little story was written a few months before I left Spain permanently, although I didn't know I would be doing so at the time I wrote it.

Each morning at eight I arrive at Café Lolin, just around the corner from my apartment in Barrio Ruzafa, Valencia, as Xieu, (pronounced Choo) the Chinese owner, is opening up. (And I always restrain myself from greeting him with 'Ah, Choo'. I doubt very much he will understand the limp joke.) While he gets a head of steam up on the coffee machine I start putting out the tables and chairs on the *terraza*, i.e. the pavement outside his café. The heavy sun umbrellas I leave to him. Sometimes I'll take the newsagent his early morning *cortado* and collect the newspapers for the café. At least I'm assured I'll get first read of El Pais that morning.

As I drink my *café con leche*, Xieu's wife, Fang, arrives and takes over serving while Xieu busies himself in the kitchen preparing the Spanish breakfast staples; *tortilla de patatas*, *beicon y patatas*, *morcillo*, *trocitos de lomo*.

Shortly after, Ferne, their daughter, passes by, taking Cristina, her often petulant daughter, to school (although to be fair, I think most little girls are petulant at that time of day). I've watched Cristina grow from a small round-face dumpling wrapped in a blanket when Ferne did a promenade around the tables presenting her to the regulars, who cooed and cawed as society demands, to a confident seven-year-old, queen of the *calle*.

I have fond memories of my grandkids, six-year old Katie and Danny, two years younger, on a weekend visit from the UK, running up and down the street with Cristina, laughing and shouting in languages totally incomprehensible to each other while being chased by a child-devouring monster, my forty-year old son, Jim, while his elder brother, Tom, and I wished to hell they'd rush off and scream elsewhere. But other regulars never minded.

Over the years, with the addition of two more kids, Alex and Andres, the space between the door of the café and the row of tables on the terraza has become almost a kindergarten. If the family are busy there's always someone to keep the kids entertained with a bunch of keys, a mobile phone, or spoon-feed them with one hand while turning the page of *Las Provincias* (the local daily) with the other, while someone else will make sure that none of the other kids will run out into the street in front of a car. We hear stories of neighbourhoods of the past where everyone kept an eye on kids in the street, but in 2014 Ruzafa, not one of the niños of Café Lolin is unobserved out the corner of someone's eye.

Like most cities world-wide, many of the bars, cafes and shops in my barrio have been taken over by Chinese, and I have to be honest and agree with the cultural image they display, that as a race they can be rude, difficult to deal with, and totally concerned with the extra *centimo* they can stick on the bill.

And that's where Xieu, Fang and Ferne provided a total contrast.

Whatever time of day you arrive for your *café*, *tostada* or *copa*, there's a big smile waiting for you. They may have been on the go since day-break, and you may have had a bad day and want to take it out on someone – but while every other Chinese-owned bar, café and shop in the barrio will welcome you with a glower, Xieu and the ladies are there, never without a smile, a chat if they have a moment to spare, an invitation to share their meal if I turn up late afternoon while they are having their very belated lunch.

Café Lolin makes the barrio a barrio in the fullest sense of the word, a neighbourhood.

One day in late spring they weren't there. No Xieu, Fang nor Ferne. My coffee was served by Jorge, the son, who had previously run the afternoon shift. A nice lad, but no Xieu. My questions as to the whereabouts of the family were met with evasive answers. Eventually I stopped asking, until one day, shortly before I left for Thailand, Fang visited briefly. Same big smile, same enquiry about the health of my grandkids. She gave me their new business card, a restaurant to the north of the city.

I'm glad they made the step up and are doing well, but Café Lolin isn't the same without them. No more putting the tables out and taking the newsagent his morning coffee, no more chat with Fang as she potters, preparing for the day. I even miss the kids running up and down – sometimes. And I never did get to say 'Ah, Choo!'

The Cruellest Cut

When you are lying flat out on your back with your underpants around your kneecaps and John Thomas languidly lying there, and a young lady with sexily slim glasses and long, dark flowing hair, says "Tos," you can't always be sure whether she's giving you an insult or spurring you on to action. Fortunately, in this case I could, because the dark-haired young lady was a Spanish doctor, and she was telling me to cough, as she gently strobed a bit of medical equipment over my family jewels to see if I had a hernia. I didn't, but the cold gel she put over the head, (the equipment's, not mine) certainly made my shy little parts jump a bit.

It's a man thing, but we're always a bit nervous when the person examining our naughty bits is a svelte young thing and not some hulking brute with tobacco-stained teeth and hairy nostrils. We lie there hoping one of two things; a. that we're not suddenly going to get an unexpected – and in this case unwanted – rise, and b., infinitely more embarrassing, that little jonnie hasn't hibernated totally and will at least be showing himself in some sort of semi-manly condition.

When I'm told to drop my underpants and hold my *pene* straight up so that she can have clear access to my *testiculos*, at first I think she means hold it up in the air, i.e. at 90° to the body (I'm lying down, remember), but before I embarrass myself I realise she means straight up along my body. This gives me the chance to do what all self-respecting chaps would do, and that is carefully cover it with my hand so that no comparisons can be made with the chap who came earlier. (Non-self-respecting chaps would simply flop it on their belly and put their hands behind their head as if to say, "So what do you think of *that*, sweetheart!" The answer being, "Nothing." They've seen plenty of pricks in their life and you and your manhood are just two more.)

I don't know if it's a shortage of specialisations, but in my experience anything to do with ears, nose and throat is dealt with by a male doctor, whereas anything below the beltline is handled (metaphorically speaking) by a female. It was the same when I had my vasectomy. The doc that did the snip, the one that anaesthetised the poor little chap and the two attending nurses were all ladies – and I mean that in all its senses. Terribly polite they were, making all sorts gentle conversation that avoided totally any reference to the parts under inspection. It was also a woman doctor who I made laugh when she gave me the result of my sperm test a few months later. “Everything's fine,” she told me, “your results are negative.” “Thank you, doctor,” I said. “That's the first time in my life I've had a zero result in a test and been happy about it.”

Budgie smuggling

Valencia

In 2012 I was invited to take part in a bike ride through Morocco's High Atlas Mountains to raise money for Education For All, a charity that builds boarding houses so girls from the poorest families in the most remote valleys in the High Atlas could continue their secondary education. I was very enthusiastic about the idea, but as someone whose longest bike ride was thirty-five kilometres along the flat at the edge of the Mediterranean, close to my home in Valencia, I was dubious about my ability to see it through.

I set myself the target of at least one reasonable bike ride each weekend of about forty kilometres to get me into shape and not to look totally farcical when I had to get off my bike and push at the first up-hill in Morocco. Being of a relatively sedentary nature, the first ride peaked at about twelve kilometres, when my loquacious Irish friend Mike rang to see if I fancied a beer on a beautiful sunny Saturday. The return twelve km passed a bit sharper than the outward.

Weekend two saw me off down the coast, or more truthfully, down to the coast from the city centre and a few kilometres riding parallel to it. Still didn't do the forty, but at least my duff knee held up. I live in a permanent state of stress because the handlebars have a habit of twisting loose, making me steer at perplexing angles.

But as with the best-laid plans, the rides got interrupted by trips up and down the Costa Blanca researching a new guidebook, and panicking about missing deadlines. The bike rested against the wardrobe in the second bedroom for most of the next three weeks.

Fortunately, the Moroccan ride isn't organised by the Cycling Style Stassi, the sort who demand those ridiculous, slithery Lycra long-johns or Airstream sunglasses, but Mike McHugo, the organizer of the ride,

suggested that I take a decent pair of cycling shorts. I know I need something, as I'm one of those chaps who carry an emergency supply of Vaseline wherever he goes because his buttocks chap merely at the sight of a saddle, although that might be an unconscious reaction to the one on my bike, which is held together with rolls of black plastic electrician's tape and wishful thinking.

I was doing my regular radio phone-in with ONDA CERO, the local radio station, and telling the host about the awful cycling shorts I'd been told to get. "Oh," she said. "You mean the budgie smugglers." I didn't cotton on at first and then she told me to think about it, which I did, and burst out laughing. I suggest the same to you, think about it...chaps in skin-tight shorts, sort of ballerina pants....Budgie Smugglers!

Those of you who have had the rare good fortune of seeing me in the flesh will know that I'm not exactly a Rudolph Nureyev. I won't say that the trouser belt needs reinforcing, but it does have its work cut out at times, trying to help me maintain the idea that I'm a trim size thirty-four. Plenty of times I've been out on my bike and seen a cycling club tearing past, its members looking svelte in their slim outfits. Quite often there's a couple of more sedate chaps plodding along behind who have been shoe-horned into their pants by ever-loving wives doing their utmost to get hubby out of their hair for a few hours. I only ever go out in baggy shorts, loose shirt and a baseball cap, and I've shuddered at the idea that I might ever look as totally and utterly plonkerish as the *sportivos* in their figuur-hogging shorts and paunch-covering vests. But it appears that indeed I might just have to.

As I was driving back from Alicante a few days after the interview, I spotted a sports store called 'Sprinter'. That'll be me in a few days, I thought to myself, to which the little devil on my shoulder chortled, "In your dreams, sucker. In your dreams!"

It was three on a Friday afternoon, the time when most self-respecting Spaniards have just finished lunch and are stretching out on the sofa for twenty minutes siesta. Apart from a couple of girlies at the checkouts deep in conversation, totally ignoring the chap who was trying to buy a pair of reflective sunglasses with yellow lenses and white go-faster stripes on the arms – well, you would, wouldn't you – and a girl patiently folding polo shirts, I was the only one in the vast aeroplane hangar of a place.

I eventually found the cycling section and began to flick through the slinky, shiny bits of kit that pass themselves off as cycling shorts.

The first ones I saw seemed fine as far as an exhibitionist's fashion statement goes, with a couple of straps hanging from the waistband, a sort of 'lift and separate' for chaps, I thought, much as a Wonderbra once did for the gels. I quickly realised though, that the straps were braces, the article was a full-body ensemble, and, to be totally fair to the Wonderbra ladies, I realised that the figure-hugging shorts ensemble was on par with

the jollies-hugging and thrusting pants of any Rudolph Nureyev wannabe. Get people concentrating on the latter-day codpiece or cricketer's box, and it didn't matter a bugger where you put your feet!

I'd worked up enough courage to try the shorts on and see the lower body clad in form-unforgiving Lycra, but to see the full barrel and bosoms so outlined was just too much.

Over on the shorts-without-the braces rail, I found a few pairs of just shorts, but they were all either small or XXXL. Small I may not be, but I was damned if I was going to go for the extra biggies, although frankly for something with so many X's, they didn't seem that enormous. I found another rack and a pair of M and XL. Confident that at least one pair would fit, I took them to the changing rooms to try them on. When I found that both M and XL were so tight that they stopped the circulation just standing still, never mind when the legs were whizzing wheels around, I realised that I'd have to take a deep breath (literally) and try the XXXL.

The rail was only about three metres from the changing rooms, and I'd still not seen any customers in the store. I have never been to a nudist beach as I'm of the opinion that my figure should be kept a closely guarded secret, but hey, there's nobody around, so why go to all the lengths of putting the trousers back on when I'm only a few strides away from the XXXLs?

Clad in a pair of cycling shorts more figure-hugging than I suggest you try to imagine, a pair of black socks, and a grey shirt with the tails hanging over the shorts, I stepped out of the cubicle. The rattle of the curtain rails caused a very bonny lady of a certain age to turn her head to see where the noise came from – where the hell had she come from in ninety seconds! She looked me up and down, the glaze of, "Oh, the poor old dear!" showing in her eyes. I immediately dove for cover and grabbed the trousers.

You simply can't recover from a situation like that, can you? The best I can say is that, fortunately, the tails of my shirt were long enough not to show whether I was smuggling budgies or not, but the white skin gaping between short bottoms and sock tops probably said it all.

Thank the lord I didn't try the full braces kit is all I can say!

Being At The Bottom

Valencia

By the very nature of city life, if you want to enjoy a bit of greenery more than a couple of dangling geraniums and the odd cacti, you have to

visit a formal garden or – in the case of Valencia – the dried-up riverbed that now sports a whole series of horticultural endeavours.

Having been forced to spend childhood Saturday mornings grubbing weeds out of my father's enormous veg patch, I abandoned the idea of life in the green-finger trade, but not to the extent that I can live without a few plants around to allow me to get my fingernails dirty and feel like a real son of the soil, when for most of the time those fingers are banging away at a plastic keyboard.

When I lived in Manchester I had a wonderful roof garden where I could sunbathe in the altogether without being overlooked. (I can't guarantee I was never seen but I'm pretty sure that those who did get a glimpse of the beached whale wouldn't have come back for seconds.) It was right below the flight path to Manchester airport but I was never able to spot my little green patch whenever I flew into the city.

My first attempt at greenery in Spain was the Hanging Gardens of Villajoyosa, much appreciated by the locals but eventually so full that I could only water the plants from a distance, which thoroughly pissed off the punters in the patio of the bar below if I missed. A friend once asked if I wanted some pot plants because the light on my terrace was so good and my fingers a verdant shade of green. There was I thinking of a few clematis or a nice jasmine in a ceramic pot when what he meant was 'pot plants' – marijuana. As I lived opposite an emergency hospital that had police coming and going at all hours of the day and night, and with that particular pot plant having a very distinctive leaf, I declined.

One of my criteria when I moved to Valencia, was that I must have a terrace of some description as home for some of the more unusual plants that I'd collected, among which was a five-metre palm tree I'd found abandoned on the streets of Alicante. Not to my surprise – seek and ye shall find – the first place I was offered had a wonderful roof terrace totally empty apart from a cracked bathroom sink, a grubby towel, three odd socks and a lifetime's worth of pegs. The sink made me wonder, but bear with me and all will be explained about the towel, socks and pegs.

Three years on and my mini garden was about to overwhelm the space that once seemed to offer so much opportunity for gardening dalliance, and it's not only me who enjoys it. Sra Ruiz, the pensioner who lives on the floor above absolutely dotes on it. Many's the time I'll be out there doing a bit of dead-heading and I'll hear a voice from above saying, "Señor Derek, I hope you don't mind me saying so but I think the *lestilocrimfalmaldia* in the corner is looking a bit jaded and could do with a bit of a feed. Personally, I'd recommend duck's blood with added *amonito salvate* and with just a touch of decomposed *clorofilia*, but of course, that's only a suggestion. I'm sure you have your own preferred remedy. The English usually do." For gardeners, please don't rush to your 'Everything you should know about gardening but don't understand the

Latin' book. Lestilocrimfalmaldia, amonito salvate and clorofilia don't exist – at least I don't think they do – and whilst duck's blood almost certainly does, it probably departs this world with the duck's carcass and not as a soil nutrient. I made them up because I don't have the slightest idea of plant names or what you put on them. I work on the premise of 'that big green thing in the corner will look lovely in a pot with the little speckly wotsit with the floppy leaves'. I have a son who is a professional gardener and landscape designer who admits that I have a real crap knowledge of horticultural terminology but boy, can I make the little buggers grow.

It didn't take me long to realise that, being on the first floor and my terrace being the first flat surface that something encounters from its fall from the washing lines of the six storeys above, I was going to find myself with a fair collection of oddities, most of which were of absolutely no use to me at all. I could have been like the disgruntled old sod we all encountered in our early years who would keep any ball that went over his wall, but what value to me have a red sock with a bunny on the side, size 3, a rucksack with the straps about three inches apart and only suitable for a nine-year-old, a blue gingham plimsoll, a pink hand towel with a frayed edge and faded *Te Quiero* - 'I love you' embroidered in the corner above a heart (obviously not intended for me), a perhaps best not to mention that one, and a couple of dozen pegs? None is the answer (apart from the pegs), so I devised a way of returning them to my vertical neighbours without causing embarrassment.

When you come into my building you enter a small foyer with a couple of steps up to the lift. Between the foyer and the lift are a pair of doors which are usually jammed open with a folded cigarette packet. Just before the doors are two small marble-topped pillars that cover some of the very iffy electrics in the building.

If something is small enough I tuck it through the brass handles of the doors. This serves well for most things and nothing usually hangs around for more than a day. Some of my neighbours are kind enough to say thank you for the return of their footwear and bathroom impedimenta, although most don't (sadly the landlords have allowed for a certain lesser quality of clientele to accommodate themselves on the upper floor, but what can one do?).

I feel I provide a valuable recovery service, delivered (almost) to your doorstep *muy rapido* (although I have to admit that the skimpy red satin panties with the embroidered *corazon* (sweetheart) below an enticingly tied lace bow on the front did linger a little longer than is perhaps decent before they were returned. I am human after all.)

The strangest thing of all to descend onto my terrace arrived this morning. I went to hang out some washing and saw a peg lying on the tiles. At first, I thought it was just another one come astray from

someone's washing, but as I got closer I saw that the peg was clamped around a folded piece of paper, with the word '*Hola*' showing. I un-pegged the note and found a message written on the back of a torn-off piece of calendar.

'Hola: Soy Gay' (it read)
'Tengo 57 años y me gusta tu y tu terraza.
Un Saludo
Sigfrido
-telf'

For non-Spanish speakers,
'Hello, I'm gay
I'm 57 years old and I like you and your terrace
Greeting
Sigfrido
Telephone number.....'

Somebody likes me! Unfortunately for Sigfrido, I'm straight, and, quite frankly, I'd much rather the note came from a Sigfrida, but at least someone on God's earth thinks I'm worth dropping (literally) a billet-doux to.

I was tempted to send a message to the phone number, saying thank you, but thought that it might be someone having a joke, so decided against it. There again, perhaps it was my terrace he was more interested in.

A near terminal rift occurred last year when I was entertaining a new lady friend to a birthday dinner. The theme was Moroccan, and my apartment was ablaze with candles in sconces, rugs scattered hither and thither, and rose petals floating in silver and luxuriantly enamelled blue bowls. Aromas of tajin filled the air and freshly laundered *djelabas* (those voluminous robes that make everyone look incredibly sexy, no-matter – well, almost no-matter – their size) laid out for my new *enmorada*. Believe me, if anyone was going to score that night, it would be me!

In preparation for the event, I'd laid out a Moroccan rug on the terrace. On it I'd placed a low table and some Indian silk embroidered cushions. In the plant pots I'd plunged candles and those bamboo paraffin burners that look good but cost pennies from a garden centre. All was set.

As the clock struck nine, the bewitching hour when my little bewitcher would arrive, and almost coinciding with her finger on the bell, someone from above decided to be a firefighter for the night and put out the flames obviously gutting the apartments below. I heard a great *sloosh*, but at first nothing twigged. It did at the second one though. Someone was raining on my parade! In fact, they weren't just raining, they were completely

tornado-ing! I dashed outside and saw my candles sputtering into soggy indifference; my carefully laid (and borrowed) pristine white bowls serving an exceedingly thin *sopa de agua*, napkins limp with more lip-smacking liquid than they were designed for, cushions that would squish the arse out of the most incontinent gastronome and a carpet that whimpered “Hey, cool man, but, like, next time how about the dry cleaner?”

“*Coño, gilepollas*, may your mother and sisters suffer the wrath of eternal fire and your cousins lose control of their reproductive organs and foster nothing but...but....and... and I’m bloody well never going to stick your socks in the door handle again, and...and especially the red knickers!!!!”

Not a literal translation, I accept, but you get the sentiment.

I continue returning the size 3 socks, the gingham plimsolls and the frayed-edge hand towels. But just you wait till the red knickers fall agin’. Possession is nine-tenths of the law – and them beggers is mine!

Nothing like a good blow job

Barrio de Ruzafa, Valencia

I’ve just had a brilliant idea if you’re ever stuck in the traffic – blow your horn like mad and everyone will instantly get out of your way. Or at least that appears to be the idea of Spanish drivers, who’ve got the tolerance of a gnat as far as most things go, but this is exceeded by their total inability to wait in traffic without making a blaring racket.

It happens every Monday lunchtime, the same brain-dead cacophony. There’s a local street market on Monday mornings, and between one and two, just before lunch, all the stalls are being packed up and the vans loaded, ready for a slow crawl out of the barrio. With most of the side streets closed, the traffic can only pass down the road right in front of my flat. There are four sets of traffic lights on the street, but drivers can’t see the set two blocks to my right, partly because most of the vans are coming out of a side streets and blocking the view. So the patience-less pricks start leaning on their horns.

I got so fed up that a few minutes ago I leaned out of my window and screamed at one silly woman with one hand on the horn and the other out the window holding a cigarette, “*Oiye tonta, son semaforos. No se va a cambiar solo porque tu golpeas el claxon como eso!*” (Hoy, stupid, they’re traffic lights. They aren’t going to change just because you’re hitting the horn like that!) She nearly jumped out of her seat, no idea where the voice came from, but at least she stopped long enough for the traffic lights to change and move her on to the next block. Mind you, a couple of minutes later another horny bastard arrived under my window.

The Spanish really are crap drivers, especially on the motorway where they will be so close to your backend that you can see the colour of their eyes and whether they had a decent shave that morning. A psychologist once explained to me that it was because the Spanish have a very narrow personal space barrier and that they don't sense the closeness. No dearie...they're just shit drivers! And they never leave the middle lane. I was driving with a friend a while ago and jokingly said that when they repaired motorways in Spain they never bothered with the right-hand lane because so few people used it that it never got worn out. She came straight back and said that was because it was only used by foreigners and pensioners like me!

Statistically, it's true that the Spanish are the worst drivers in Europe – even worse than the Italians – based on insurance claims. And the men are the worst. The same friend that was ageist with me said that if you saw a bad driver and it looked like a woman it was a transvestite. Quick as a whip, she is!

But it's quietened down now; the vans are gone and the intolerant car drivers with them ...at least until next week.

(My apologies to gnats. They may have a very high tolerance ratio.)

Sixteen Floors Up

Tales from a Hispanic High-rise

I arrived to live permanently in Spain almost on the cusp of the new millennium, on September 9th, 1999, (a numerical alliteration, 9, 9, 1999). Everything was new, exciting, and totally different, and for the first few months I spent many happy hours sitting outside cafes with the accompaniment of too many glasses of excellent Spanish brandy, making notes on the world passing by. Over the couple of years I lived in Benidorm, these notes became a series, Sixteen Floors Up, Tales from a Hispanic High-rise, all loosely based on real events and real characters, although treat with a gay abandon probably brought on by too many copas de cognac. (The name comes from the fact that at the time I lived on the sixteenth floor of an apartment block – perhaps not a good thing when vertigo is a close associate.)

Concha and Jaime Primero

In every society there exists, or should exist, an element of the unlikely; that little bit of difference that adds colour to an otherwise drab existence or acts as a distraction to the mundane normalities of life. In our vertical village, that little sparkle is created by Concha and Jaime Primero.

Concha is a lady of blatantly obvious attractions, displayed in the modern-day version of the figure-hugging sweater and flounced skirt of a

youthful Bardot. Although dear Concha kissed goodbye to the sunny side of forty somewhere in the last decade, she still has the ability to turn almost every male head in the neighbourhood; those under thirty considering the pleasures to be found in the arms of an older, more experienced woman; the thirty-to-fifty-year-olds musing on the delights of a fling with a lady discreet enough not to cause any difficulties with the wife and three *niños* fighting for space in the one-bedroomed shoe box ten stories up; and the over-sixties ruminating on the joys of a tumble with a well-rounded madam young enough to be their daughter – well, younger sister anyway.

An example of Concha's head-swivelling ability was vividly displayed when the circus visited our patch recently. Three roustabouts spent over an hour piling sand over the electric cables that crossed the makeshift road between the arena and power plant. Being well above the usual 'sleeping policeman' level, it had to be approached a snail's pace and with extreme caution. Along promenaded Concha on her evening *paseo*, provocatively kitted out in skin tight jeans; bosom delineating white sweater with two little protuberances which the ladies who decorate girly magazines usually produce with copious applications of ice. Dark glasses, and carefully applied just-off pillar box red lipstick completed the ensemble. The effect she had on the assembled machos wasn't so obvious in the way the pedestrians acted as in the resoundingly dull thumps of ogling drivers hitting the sandbank unawares. The local exhaust and sump repair men must have had a field day.

Jaime Primero is a scraggy mongrel of dubious provenance, whose forbears must include a poodle, which accounts for the curious kink in his mangy hair, reminiscent of a home perm gone badly wrong; a dachshund, for the short legs and splayed feet; a labrador which gave him the outsized head; and a bloodhound, for the ever mournful expression which seems to say 'Okay, don't say it, I've heard it all before,' when his gaze crosses that of someone new to the area who can't quite understand how a melange of such obviously unsuited spare parts could have been assembled outside of a laboratory dealing in the more unsavoury aspects of animal experimentation.

Whatever the derisory comments that may be directed at Jaime Primero, he is envied by most of the men on the block because he is the subject of Concha's complete adoration, and spends more time snuggled into her benevolent bosom than any of them could hope to aspire to. And may God be looking after the poor soul who refers to Jaime Primero as anything but 'Jaime Primero'. He may look like the scion of a rag-bag of Tiger Bay outcasts, but to Concha he is the embodiment of nobility, epitomised by that most famous of Spanish kings. The mere thought of him being addressed simply as 'Jaime' sends a shudder down Concha's

spine capable of registering seven on the Richter scale. You wouldn't call Prince Charles 'Charlie' to his face now would you?

When I arrived at Casa Vertigo, Concha seemed to take some sort of shine to me. I've no idea why. Perhaps it was because she'd seen me about the place with cameras and tape recorders dangling all over and was intrigued by this obviously professional reporter scurrying about nailing bent politicians and standing up for the underdog – and believe me, Jaime Primero is about as underdog as a dog can get. More likely it's because whenever I found myself in the lift with her and J. P. I was bright red and seemed tongue tied to be in proximity to so voluptuous a specimen of Spanish sensuality. It took me three months before I had enough vocabulary to explain to her that the redness was a skin condition called *rosacea*, not normally found in Latin types, and the mumbling was because when we first met I only knew five words of Spanish, and I'd forgotten three of those. Still, from that unpromising start we became good friends and often take a coffee together at our local restaurant, where Concha is accepted, if not as Queen of the neighbourhood, then at least as Princess Royal.

Sunday lunch time at our local is when Concha holds court, although not in the regal sense where she receives any formal acknowledgement, but more by the polite nod, the slight wave of the hand, the gracious small bow of Snr. Ruiz as he removes his beret and takes his usual seat, second table on the left, where a bottle of *tinto* will be open and a glass of *fino* poured. Just like the old British Airways advert, it must be two-thirty because Snr. Ruiz has just arrived. They have never been seen formally in each other's company, but everyone knows that Concha and Snr. Ruiz have had an understanding going back almost to her arrival.

How Jamie Primero and Concha came together no-one knows; possibly through an act of benevolence on her part on seeing his disorganised body surmounted by a lugubrious expression, or maybe the recognition of being two of life's little lonely-hearts who, whilst never having been actually rejected, never quite fitted in either. Enough that they turned up together eight years ago and ever so gradually found their niche in the neighbourhood, where they add a little touch of sauciness and colour to the high-rise we call home.



TURKEY

TURKEY

Staying at my granny's

Hotel Atak, Goreme

'Grim' was the first word that came to mind when I walked into Hotel Atak, tired after a ten-hour bus ride from Safranbolu, and I wasn't too happy about the lady of the house trying to sell me tours fresh through the door, even before I struggled up the dark stairway with my heavy suitcase.

My opinion didn't improve when I was shown a room with a double bed and a dressing table-sort-of-thing that doubled as the only place to hang clothes. Unfortunately, the floor space didn't allow for leaving a case open and I didn't feel happy about sharing the bed with it. The room next door had two single beds, and while I prefer a double, at least my case could have its own bed. We moved in together, happy with the one-metre space separating us.

I was offered tea, but I asked for hot water so I could have a cup of Nescafé instead. Not that I particularly like Nescafé, but because the coffee machine doesn't seem to have arrived in the more rustic towns of Turkey yet and latte doesn't get a look-in. (They have a curious way of serving instant coffee here; the glass comes full of hot water with the sachet on the side. It's still hot but the powder doesn't mix properly as it would if it went in first. Ah well, when in Rome.)

With the hot glass came a two-bar electric heater that not only gave the room a slightly tepid warmth but actually added an air of cosiness. (M'lady departed with the finger-waving admonition not to leave it on when I went to bed.) I'd bought a thick coat in Chiang Mai in preparation for the 'frozen north' of Turkey for the princely sum of forty baht (a whisker more than one euro) and as cosy as the glowing two bars look I think I might well be wearing it in bed. (In fact, the thought being father to the deed, I'm now wearing it, sat on the floor, plus my baseball cap, a grand improvement.)

With the electric fire came an extension lead, just as well, as the only socket in the room is in the bathroom, so the lead dangles from above the sink, stretching into the chill bedroom but only reaches as far as a metre in, not quite close enough to give warmth but at least takes us back to the cosy look.

It suddenly occurred to me that instead of trying to move the mountain of the warmth to the Mohammed of me sitting on the bed, I should do the reverse. I'm now divested of my jacket and sat on the floor within eighteen inches of the fire. My left side is still a bit chill (the furthest from

the two bars) but my right certainly appreciates the move. I am, however, still wearing my baseball cap.

After a bit of a walk earlier this evening (and discovered that if anywhere is designed to part you from your tourism dollar, pound, yen, euro or baht, Goreme is), I've decided that staying at the Hotel Atak is like staying at your granny's, it's all a bit old-fashioned and worn around the edges but it's homely, and if it was good enough for her and your granddad to bring up your mum or dad and various aunts and uncles then it's jolly-well good enough for you and none of your uppity complaining, thank you very much!

When I went to use the bathroom I found that the small packet of soap was actually labelled for another, more up-market hotel, and had obviously been purloined. While I doubt my granny ever stayed in an hotel in her life, I feel that filching the soap is something she would have done, just to show the neighbours.

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Raining on their parade

Istanbul, July 2017

Escaping from a total technological meltdown that cost me the whole morning, I decide to review my plans and visit Topkapi Museum for what remains of the day.

At Çemberlitaş I turn in the wrong direction, but as that wonderful line from *The Lunchbox* says, 'Sometimes the wrong train takes you to the right station,' I carried on regardless. As I approach Beyzit a light rain starts, not enough to send me back to the hotel but sufficient to dampen my spirits even more. At the station, vibrant Turkish music is playing, red and white balloons decorate lampposts and bob in the air. A queue snakes its way along the front of the canopied restaurants; young and old, middle-class and impoverished, stand in the fine drizzle. Pasa Doner are opening a new take-away, with a promotion of a free kebab and carton of yoghurt. The kebabs are being cut from a cone of chicken weighing 150kilo, enough to feed a couple of thousand people. Maybe not as big as the crowd that shared five fish and two loaves at Tabgha but still a pretty big feeding experience.

As both the music and rain intensify, staff and friends of the establishment dressed in red polo shirts emblazoned with the Pasa Doner logo, begin dancing, circling around and around, feet rhythmically moving in a side-step, cross-over movement, *halay*, I think it's called. Totally oblivious to the rain soaking their clothes and hair and dripping of the end of their noses, they keep up their performance, as much for themselves swept up in the delight of dancing as for the crowd that

continues to grow, despite the now pouring rain. Neither the rain nor the dancers show signs of abating, the smiles of the latter never fading, despite their sodden, clinging clothes. Kids join in the dance, others bob balloons.

Plastic bags protect the heads of those waiting for a free lunch, proving in one way or another that old saw, 'there's no such thing as...'. While the snake slowly uncoils, would-be diners move to the rhythm of the music in their slow promenade to their kebab and carton of yoghurt in a plastic bag. My hour in the rain is rewarded when a member of staff, seeing me hunched over camera and notepad to keep them dry, comes out from behind the counter and hands me my promotional plastic bagful. Lunch is unexpectedly served.

Technology can be dealt with; moments like this, spontaneous or otherwise, happen briefly and disappear. As I make my way through the packed, narrow alleys to the Grand Bazaar my mood is warm and dry, despite the continuing drizzle soaking my cap and shoulders.

Betwixt God, Politics, and Mammon,

Izmir, 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 *damas 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 damas 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 railway 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 to 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 Mammon the other. Given the dubious

characters historically associated with the former, I'd rather trust the latter any day.

The Turkish delight of smoking a Nargile

Istanbul, October 2017

A ten-minute stroll from Istanbul's Grand Bazaar is a small graveyard with tall, ornate bas-relief carved headstones. Beside it a low stone-arched entrance leads to a narrow alleyway, which in turn opens into a step-back-in-time; Erenler Nargile ve Çay Bahçesi, a one-hundred-year-old *nargile* café set in a three-hundred-year-old mosque, the Ali Pasha Madrasa. You can't miss the building, the aroma as you walk by is unmistakable, perfumed and heavy.

A nargile is known by many names – hubble-bubble, *hookah*, *shisha*, *cachimba* – but it comes down to the same thing; a water pipe with a five-hundred-year smoking tradition, which, contrary to popular belief, is used for smoking aromatic tobacco, not hashish or any other kind of narcotic.

I sit in an ancient room on a banquette of red and gold below domes decorated in looped and swirling designs in blue and maroon, cracked and peeling with age. On walls that haven't seen a coat of paint for generations hang scenes of ancient Istanbul and complex designs of intricate calligraphy, their oils and glass dulled with decades of patina from the thousands of pipes that have been smoked over the years. Clusters of brightly coloured lamps hang from the ceiling, the glow from their delicately pierced metalwork casting filigree shadows. Around me, groups of men and the occasional woman sit, drawing on their nargile. From the area where I sit, three smaller rooms radiate, like cosy little snugs in an English pub. If it weren't for the dumbphones and modern clothing it could be an image from a century past.

The water pipe originated in India by emptying a coconut and dipping in a straw. It arrived in Turkey in the 16th century, with a tube replacing the straw and a glass bowl the coconut. By the end of the Ottoman Empire, to be invited to smoke a nargile with the sultan was considered the greatest of honours.

My pipe is brought and set on the floor beside a small table. By the entrance to the café a narrow brazier glows with charcoal, scooped into metal pans with long wooden handles, and brought to the pipe to heat the apple tobacco I've chosen, the residue flicked on to the round metal lip below the clay bowl that holds the tobacco. Beside the brazier a long row of pipes await preparation.

From the long-necked glass bottle of the nargile (the *gövde*) a decorative metal section extends, at the base of which is a long flexible tube (the

marpuç), used by the smoker to draw the smoke through. At the top of the metal section, a circular tray acts as the collector for the charcoal that sits on thin pierced foil that covers a small clay bowl (the *lüle*). In the bowl is the flavoured tobacco – orange, apple, lemon, amongst others. The glowing charcoal is placed on the foil and by drawing through the pipe and the *gövde* half-filled with water, the filtered tobacco smoke is inhaled, and either exhaled in the same breath or left to linger in the mouth like a good cigar.

As I draw on my pipe and sip my apple tea I feel myself getting very slightly stoned, nothing at all to do with any illegal substance but due more to the fact that I am a life-long non-smoker and it's at least ten years since I smoked a *cachimba*, a gift from an Egyptian friend, and the soporific effect of the tobacco is working its languishing charms after a soggy day of frustrations. Almost on cue to my pipe being fired up, a *muezzin* chanting the evening call to prayer filters through the hubble-bubble of conversation.

For forty-five minutes I sit and let the soporific effect ease my tensions. I feel myself settling, but the sweats are on me and I know my time is up. From past experience, I know that if I keep smoking I'll slowly slide over and fall asleep, and I envy the years of experience of those around me who can happily puff away. I hope I can make a graceful exit.

Map: [Erenler Nargile ve Çay Bahçesi](#)

A Café in Antalya

Monday 22nd April 2019

At the beginning of April 2019, I gave away all my worldly possessions other than the 30kilo Qatar Airways allowed, and left Chiang Mai, Thailand, permanently – or that was the plan. Three months later, after travelling in Turkey, Bulgaria, and Morocco, I was back, for no other reason than I missed the chaos of SE Asia.

Another new café/office; decent coffee, comfy chairs, open-fronted to allow the cooling breeze from the Med., good-ish music, on a corner on the prom and opposite a shop called *Miss Love*, a place I'll never enter on the grounds that I'd probably have my illusions of svelte young ladies in low-cut red sheaths selling sensual underpinnings destroyed.

I'm coming to terms with the idea of a peripatetic life, a grey nomad as distinct from a digital nomad, a group that I can never resist referring to as 'digital gonards'. I'll know in a few weeks about the economics of it, but the emotional adventurist element appeals. For a long time I've been saying I wanted a home but I'm not so sure now. Living out of a suitcase isn't perfect, but I'm beginning to realise just how small my needs are. I

have plenty of clothes, all the equipment I need, more than I need, actually, and the small temporary things – a plate, a cup etc. – can be acquired along the way and abandoned when I move on.

I need to change my case, though. After changing the wheels in Istanbul, the new set have a mind of their own, wandering off in directions and adventures not of my choosing, like a supermarket shopping trolley with a wobbly wheel that wants to stock up on fruit while my preference is to have a shufti in the wine department. Our current relationship is one of disputation – on my side at least. The case tends to be silent on the matter except for the rattle of castors as it heads off in a contrary direction, maintaining an air of hauteur as if it's demeaning to get involved in argument; if I want the pleasure of its company on my voyage it wants a say in the matter. I've travelled alone quite reasonably for most of my life, thank you very much, and I don't intend to drag along a recalcitrant companion, no-matter how deliciously red it is or how many years we have travelled together. It's like they say; never buy a woman a new frock because she'll be wanting shoes *et al* to go with it. You'd think a new set of wheels would have been enough, but no, it's like a geriatric who has just had new titanium hips fitted, it wants to go off waltzing into the wide blue yonder. Enough said!

Effendi

Izmir

I've just been called effendi. It's the sort of name you'd expect to hear from the lips of Sid James, dressed in a grubby djellaba, when he sidles up to Kenneth Williams in some desert-orientated Carry On film, and says 'Hey, Effendi. I'll give you four camels for the big lady,' referring, of course, to Hattie Jacques – a very big lady, none of which will mean a thing if you aren't British of a certain age. My 'effendi' was different and much more polite.

I was walking toward the Karsiyaka ferry dock when it started to rain. I took my small jacket out of my shoulder bag and as I did so I heard a small 'plop' but ignored it.

"Effendi," a voice called, coming from a chap crossing the road to my right, who pointed at the ground behind me, where the leather case for my small Lumix camera was lying. The case itself isn't expensive, but it would have cost the best part of £30 to replace the battery strapped to it, and as I'd already had one die on me I'd have been very 'effendied' indeed if I'd had to buy a second replacement.

Shortly after my camera case episode I come across one of the strangest concept cafes I've ever seen. Cafes in clothing shops, cafes in bookstores, cafes in florists, are all pretty passé, but a café in an electrical goods shop?

That's a new one on me. And it's not just a few chairs for the punters to sit on while taking a breather from buying a fridge, it's a properly designed and attractively furnished caff that just happens – or for some strange marketing reason is designed – to share premises with a purveyor of high-end electricals. Fridges, washing machines, irons, kettles, and the panoply of all you could desire for that lovely new kitchen of yours, if only you can get the second mortgage it would undoubtedly cost.

It's not as if the windows are crammed with white goods on display, either – merely a single washing machine, marked down from 1995 TL to 1544 TL in front of the door. It's what caught my eye in the first place, not that I was looking for one, but it looks so incongruous, set between elegantly-dressed ladies taking coffee at tables either side of it.

Step inside and the service counter seems far too large for the six tables I see, four outside and two just through the door. It's obviously just opened because electrical stock is being unpacked and placed on shelves. Presumably, the bulkier items will arrive later.

What I'm more concerned about at the moment is a latte, big and hot. If you like Nescafe or bitter Turkish coffee you are in your element in Turkey, but until I arrived in Izmir a decent latte had been in short supply.

In order of necessity, I ask for a latte and directions to the toilet, which is upstairs. As I get to the top of the spiral staircase I get my next surprise. Beyond the display of more fancy white goods and kitchen desirables is an open-fronted terrace with views of the Gulf of Izmir to Alsancak, furnished in pale woods and beige upholstery that form the decorative theme throughout. I take a seat and my latte arrives – big, hot, and excellent – as I take in the soft breeze whispering from the Gulf.

While I'm as likely to buy a fridge as I am to buy a pair of jeans or a half-dozen roses from other cafes-cum-whatever, I'm impressed, and being the only man among a dozen ladies drinking coffee, the owners might well be on to a good thing.

Small Moments Of Kindness Antalya 2019

As I was taking photos this morning I dropped my Lumix compact camera, which wouldn't open when I tried it, a surprise because it's a sturdy little thing and neither this nor its predecessor seem to have come to any harm after a fall, in one case bouncing down a cement stairway.

There are lots of small photographic shops in Antalya, and I went into a tiny one built into the corner of a building, that seemed to sell anything to do with small electrics, cameras, and computers.

I asked the lady at the counter if she spoke English. "No, she doesn't, but I do," said a man, appearing from around a set of shelves with an

impressive array of stock. I told him what had happened and asked if he knew of a Panasonic dealer. I was surprised when he said they could repair anything electronic, and could he let me know by Monday how much the repair would cost. We exchanged phone numbers and he said he would call.

Twenty minutes later, he called. "Mr. Derek, your camera is working fine. There seems only to be a problem with the battery." I always have a spare strapped to the camera case so he'd simply swapped them over.

I wandered back to the shop, where he demonstrated a fully functioning camera. He refused to accept payment. I'd been prepared to pay around 50euros for the repair, but all it cost me was a thank you, a smile, and a handshake.

The stitching on the strap of my shoulder bag came undone a few days ago, which made it almost useless. A shame because it's a good size and I like it. The same was happening to the stitching around the zip of my rucksack, which carries all my equipment when I'm on the move. Both could be replaced, but they suit my needs, so yesterday I walked all over Antalya, trying to find a haberdashery to buy a needle and cotton, but to no avail.

As I passed a small arcade near the old town I noticed a tailor shop tucked away in the corner. I went into the tiny shop where an elderly man sat working at a sewing machine, and explained my predicament. He laughed, pulled out a needle from a pin cushion, and pinned it in my jacket lapel. Then he gave me a big bobbin of black thread and a scrap of fabric to wind as much as I needed on to. Sewing done, I now have two fully-functioning bags again.

Wandering near my temporary home later in the evening, I spotted a small haberdashery shop a couple of streets from where I'm staying and decided go back when it was open to put a small sewing kit together. As I left my building this morning I remembered my needle mission but couldn't be bothered to take the lift back to my room and find the needle the tailor gave me to use as an example so I sauntered back to the haberdasher to take care of my big job of the day.

Procrastination when we travel because we feel nervous we might not be able to communicate affects most people, I suppose. It certainly does me. But it's surprising how rarely that lack of communication actually occurs. A pleasant demeanor, a few gesticulations and mimes, with plenty of pointing, usually does the trick, especially when accompanied by a smile, as it did with the lady in the haberdashery.

I entered, smiled, and said hello, and got the usual Turkish greeting in return, although not quite as dour as men offer, and pointed to some packets of large needles in a glass-fronted cabinet, miming small by holding up my hand with a small space between thumb and forefinger. She went to a higher shelf in the cabinet and took out a small cardboard

box full of packets of needles of various sizes. Sifting through them, she selected a packet of assorted lengths but each with a man-sized eye I could easily deal with.

Then came the thread. I couldn't see any small bobbins, so I pointed to a row of large, coloured ones, and did the thing with the thumb and forefinger again. M'lady scuttled from behind her counter and out the shop, pointing to a stand of metal baskets full of small bobbins beside the entrance, a multicoloured delight for any seamstress, but all I wanted was black and white, which in my experience cover most emergencies.

Back in the shop with my selection, she put the three items in a small, plastic bag decorated with blue flowers, counted up the cost in her head (I could see she was doing that because her lips moved) and held up six fingers, although to be anatomically correct, five fingers and a thumb. Six liras, a figure that allowed me to get rid of a lot of the small change that had been gathering in my pocket.

This little story has taken about ten times longer to write than the transaction actually took, but it's these tiny, insignificant moments that delight me, and which we take for granted and simply forget about, but which nonetheless are part of day-to-day life.

Up And Down In Izmir

Kemeralti Bazaar, what is left of the historical quarter of Izmir, is big, and while it may lack the architectural grandeur of Istanbul's Grand Bazaar it makes up for it in the way that the shopkeepers only try to coax you into viewing their wares in a sort-of offhand way. "Effendi, you would like to buy a leather jacket? No. Maybe a packet of socks, three different colours. My friend over there has good Turkish delight and pistachio. No. Okay, maybe another day." The latter said knowing you will never come back. 'No hurray, no worry,' as a Moroccan friend says; 'Insh'allah'.

I've found that with markets everywhere that are built on or near a hill, as soon as the streets start going upwards fancy commerce ends and local life begins, a perfect example being Fez, where the straw-hatted, sunglasses-wearing dilettante tourists fade away as their tour guide hangs a right at the metal-workers shops at Place Seffarine because his feet are killing him and if he has to pose for a selfie with one more bleeding tourist he'll headbutt them. But for me, the parts where the street goes vertical are where I want to be.

I wander through the Bazaar and hit Kallersi Cadersi, the beginning of the garment district, where porters carry great bundles of frocks balanced on their heads – ensuring *cervical spondylosis* in the not-too-distant future – and where every dilapidated, beautiful example of Ottoman

architecture, with their glorious oriel windows overhanging the street on the first floor, hanging on by the odd screw and years of paint, houses a long cutting table and half a dozen machinists whizzing away at knock-offs of big-name fashions. (Not for nothing does Turkey rival Thailand for its quality copies.) Some are inhabited in a rough-and-ready state, others are renovated or in the process of renovation, although sadly too many are far past the state where anything can be done.

I duck into a side street and see terraces of short flights of stairs climbing the steep hill. A young mother comes out of a house five flights up, seventy steps in total. She manhandles a pushchair down the steps while holding a small boy with her other hand. I reach to take hold of the front of the pushchair but she refuses to accept help. At the bottom of the stairs she puts the boy in the pushchair and wanders off. I wonder how many times a day she does this, and how many thousands of other mothers have done the same for generations. Going down is bad enough, but going back up with a pushchair and shopping is an experience I'll pass on.

I work my way back to the Bazaar down the main street, Eşrefpaşa Cadetsi a steep, curved road in an area full of shops selling white goods and furniture of the 'who on earth would want that crap in their house' style. Tiers of steps radiate from the road; down on the left to the lower reaches of the garment district, and up on the right to Lord knows where. I pass a couple of antique shops, separated by a steep flight of stairs. Lining the steps on both sides is furniture of the sort that, as a one-time antique restorer in England I would have given my eye teeth for, although most of it has been outside in the wind and weather for so many years that, like too many of the buildings in this run-down area, is way beyond redemption. At the top of the steps sit two ladies in animated conversation, the elder holding court on a low stool, literally looked up to by the second, young enough to be her daughter, sat on a small rug on a step.

I find myself back at the top of Kallersi Cadetsi, wander down, pick up a half kilo of mixed dried fruit and nuts on my way to Konak Square and the iconic image of the clock tower, only to find it covered in plastic, poetic justice for those poor suckers who visit the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, only to take their selfishies stood in front of an artist's representation of the glorious interior of the dome, or at least as it will be when restoration is complete.

The inevitable group of Chinese tourists wander into the square and, failing an opportunity for a selfie in front of the clock tower, the zombies are herded together in front of the pretty little mosque for a group photo, each of them giving the sign, palm forward, first and middle finger forming a 'V', that has ruined so many photos in Asia and for which I've

never been able to find a reason, although it is marginally better than the heart sign made by two co-joined thumbs and forefingers.



ELSEWHERE

ELSEWHERE

Ibiza, meet Sofia.

Sofia, Bulgaria

On ulitsa Vrabcha, a street that runs parallel to ul. Moskovska that passes alongside the glorious Cathedral Saint Aleksandar Nevski, once one of the grandest and most important streets in Sofia, I find myself at Bar 6, an urban seaside bar, despite the nearest beach being three hour's drive away.

A patch of plastic grass laid over the jigsaw tiles of the pavement, (the tiles of which, after years of weather and feet, have imprinted their pattern on the faux greenery), three brown and yellow striped beach umbrellas, (not as ghastly as they sound), supplemented by a large orange version, provide shade, under which well-used bamboo chairs and tables with woven seats covered by orange cushions, stretch the imagination to create the ambiance of a beachside bar on Ibiza.

The Ibizan image is strengthened by a lady who would have been at the height of her clubbing youth during the decadent decade of the 1970s, who has refused to leave the hedonistic fashions of the era behind, even fifty years later.

Beneath the multi-panelled floppy cap of a style that could well have been modelled by Catherine Deneuve in her youthful prime, madam's makeup is a masterpiece of the Technicolor palette. Fiercely-plucked eyebrows, little more than a thin arch, hover over eyelids that start as a pale turquoise and softly blend through rose pink before coming to rest on intense kohl-outlined eyes, below which her cheeks bear patches of vivid rouge over pale cream face powder. Given her colourful facial display, her lips lack the emphasis I would have expected, merely a thin sliver of what used to be called (and quite possibly still is), taupe, that in-between shade of brown and grey on a clothing salesman's sample card. Even though our lady left her first flush of youth behind several decades ago, she still has a flair for colour co-ordination, her carefully-shaped fingernails painted to match the exact shade of the pale turquoise of her eyes.

Below a loose open blouse of ruched grey fabric with a pattern of white daisies and deep red roses, she wears a white embroidered blouse with small sequins carefully attached, as sold by the tens of thousands on quayside market stalls to free-spirited girlies – or at least those who thought they were free-spirited – who floated along the prom of Ibiza town in its heyday, wafted along by the sounds of Café del Mar when they

hadn't got beyond Café del Mar 10, before which their music was reminiscent of the heady days of happy hippy-hood.

I'm impressed. She may never have visited Ibiza during that mythical heyday but on this side-street in Sofia she adds a small touch of personality, of eccentricity perhaps, a memory tucked at the back of the mind of the first real burgeoning of expression in clothing, colour, and individuality on a mass scale.

Fortunately, she and Bar 6 complement each other; at some other more mundane bar she might merely look incongruous, a bit silly even, this elderly lady who still hangs on to her youth like a modern-day Miss Haversham, but on the other side of the coin, the bar, with its fake grass, beach umbrellas and worn cane furniture, could look like nothing more than a faded joke, a worn-out idea to be 'different' that's past its prime. But with Miss Ibiza in attendance, it doesn't. I wonder what will happen to either of them when one or the other is no longer there.

Map: [ulitsa Vrabcha, Sofia](#)

A Room With A View

Sofia, Bulgaria

It's easy to imagine the nomadic life being one of change – new vistas, new experience – and while that might be true for some of the time, in the main it's a life lived out of a suitcase, too much time spent looking at bus and train timetables with tedious overnights because of limited service, and never really knowing where you are going to lay your head two days hence or what the bed will be like; eating in your room from supermarkets and not dining in restaurants; wondering if you can get to the next border crossing with the minimum of your current country's currency so you aren't carrying a load of useless money that eats into your budget. Sadly, the truth is that everyday mundanity more than balances out the newness of the vista and experience.

Having arrived in Sofia late afternoon and found myself staying in a curious place, half Adams Family, half the everyday accretions of someone else's very long life – a combination I quite like, actually, here's my evening's entertainment before I saunter off to bed.

It's just past seven-thirty and I'm sitting on the rear balcony of my home for the next four days, under dense grey clouds leaking enough rain to overflow the metal gutters on the adjacent buildings and entertain me with a staccato rhythm as the run-off bounces off the small sheet-metal roof protecting a short stairway four floors below, leading into what would have once been a pleasant stone-flagged yard. Now the yard is home to four abandoned radiators (two large, two small), two glazed doors propped against a wall side-on, a toilet, complete with plastic seat

and lid in the down position, and an ancient wheelbarrow lined with dried cement, which has sealed the rusting metal enough to create a small pond, where some of the drips from the guttering land, adding a pleasing 'plop' to the timpani.

For company on my balcony, to my left I have, in receding order, an aluminium stepladder, one of the steps of which is currently acting as a table for a glass of very pleasant, very cold Chardonnay (4.99 Bulgarian leva a bottle, £2.23). Behind it is a vegetable rack with a plastic bag of onions (four) and another containing a big head of cabbage. Beyond that is a hand shovel, a red plastic bucket sat on a small grey waste bin alongside a couple of mops, and a broom with shank and head in an elegant matching shade of royal blue. To my right is a large purple mop and bucket and a grey brush and pan combo. The lady of the house obviously likes to keep her home ship-shape-and-Bristol-fashion.

To the front, and slightly to the right, a pair of bedraggled pigeons huddle disconsolately under the eaves of an out-rider to an apartment on the top floor of the adjoining building, one above my level, which is the rear of the one that fronts onto the street at the corner of the block. The shit on the drainpipe they stand on would indicate long residence. As the rain drifts off, one of them hops down onto a narrow strip of roof and struts across, its chest puffed out. It shits on the move, the ordure mixing with the last of the rain dripping from the guttering, creating a yellow dribble that drips onto the stone-paved yard four floors below.

Set into the pantile roof opposite, two skylights reflect the now paler clouds drifting over their position high about the ground, creating in the imagination the scene of a poverty-stricken artist, surviving on a crust of bread and a glass of wine from a magnanimous benefactor, the image reinforced by the crumbling brick chimney sat on the ridge of the roof.

Most of the balconies, whether glazed or open, are as often as not used for storage, and the few lights shining through thin lace curtains illuminate what look like rooms decorated in a style that has barely changed since Noah launched his floating zoo. Other than three small window boxes of red, pink and purple flowers, almost all the exterior plaster and woodwork is rotting or deteriorating, apart from a few plastic window frames that have replaced the original wood.

The anomaly of this image is that if I walk ten metres to the front of the building I look out over what is one of the oldest and, at one time, one of the most prestigious streets in Sofia, with the glorious St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral almost on eye level right in front of me, and beyond that the Parliament building, in front of which passes, quite literally, the 'yellow brick road', along which the finest examples of *fin de siècle* architecture in the city can be found.

On the street where I (temporarily) live there are only odd-numbered buildings, the even side being gardens and long-established trees that

form a green break in front of the magnificent gilded domes of the Cathedral.

Perhaps I should have taken my glass of wine with the rich folks' view.

Street Life

Jodhpur, India

Everyday working life and business in Jodhpur, as in most of India, is conducted in tiny shops in buildings that elsewhere would be considered historic monuments. Intricately pierced stonework acts as vents, ornate fenestration - the arrangement of windows in a building - gathers dust, their paint peeling.

I wander off Clock Tower Road, the main street through the old town, if a thoroughfare no more than three metres wide can be called a 'main street', and arrive in a small square. Men are sitting around on beat-up old chairs or stretched out on a platform built around a large ficus tree, a tree known variously as Chinese banyan, Malayan banyan, Taiwan banyan, Indian laurel or curtain fig, its smaller variety known in the west as the weeping fig. But this monster has nothing to cry about and provides shade for half the square.

The music that permeates the air comes from a blue-painted *chai* stall, the centre of urban life that dispenses a flavoured tea made by brewing black tea with a mixture of aromatic Indian spices and herbs, the glue that cements Indian society just as mint tea does in the Arab world. Broadcast from an ancient portable radio hanging from a hook above the hot plate where *samosas* stuffed with a spicy potato and pea filling, and *aloo tikki*, small potato pancakes, are deep-fried as a snack in a disreputable blackened wok, the tininess of the radio's tiny speaker is worsened by it being played at full volume. Gruesome men's public urinals, totally open to public view, don't deter visitors to the tea stall, even though gentlemen are peeing no more than two metres from the chai kettle.

I watch an elderly man playing with his toddler grandchild, probably about sixty years separating them. He sees me watching and taking photos and tries to get the child to look in my direction. With his permission, I move closer, but the small boy can't be coaxed to look at me. While I'm standing there a tall, angular man insists on having his photo taken, announcing that he's 'India's Mr Bean', said with a smile of gummy lips and a mouth where there is no trace of a tooth, and to be truthful, he does have the movements and mannerisms of an Asian Rowen Atkinson.

This small moment of pleasurable unimportance is played out against a backdrop of centuries-old buildings with elegant enclosed balconies and ornately carved heavy wooden doors. Much of the old city is in the Mughal style of architecture, an amalgam of Islamic, Persian, Turkic and

Indian design, one of India's most distinctive architectural styles from the 16th-18th centuries, constructed when Jodhpur was a prominent centre for trade between the east and west.

Across the way from the chai stall, under a rusty corrugated iron canopy precariously hanging over what seems to be the patio of a once-upon-a-time stunning building of the Mughal style, now sadly in ruin (which is something that can be said of a large portion of the architecture of the city – both stunning and in ruin), a man sits stirring two ancient crucibles of milk, slowly heating and thickening to a creamy texture to make a large, pastry-lined tart, the name of which I can't figure out but which looks delicious. The small factory seems to be a producer of local sweetmeats, although the total lack of cleanliness and the fact that milk is probably one of the best things to avoid if you don't know its provenance would suggest the need of a staunch stomach to sample them.

On my way back to my guest house I witness a total logjam at a narrow crossroads. Pedestrians, motor scooters, tuk-tuks, bicycles, wide delivery barrows and narrow trolleys all surge around a lone policeman attempting to create some sort of flow, armed only with a whistle, the piercing tone of which is ignored by all. Despite the fact that everyone is in the same boat, the clamour of horns is deafening, each person probably assuming that if he or she makes enough noise everyone else will move out of his way. Obviously no-one does, and even though I'm only about ten metres from my doorway my route is completely blocked, so I re-trace my steps, pushing my way through the crowd to take a much longer, but inevitably much quicker route to my cup of coffee on the hotel's roof terrace.

Up on the roof

Blue House, Jodhpur, India

I'm sat in the rooftop restaurant of my hotel in Jodhpur, The Blue House. Overlooking the roofs of the city may sound romantic, but while the terrace is attractive in a blue-painted, amusingly decorated, kitschy sort of way, the rooftops below me are an unglamorous mixture of cement blocks and russet-coloured sandstone hundreds of years old, sheets of blue corrugated plastic to provide shade, black plastic water tanks and TV disc antenna, but...I change my seat at the table and face the opposite direction, to where the bulk of Mehrangarh Fort stretches itself languidly along the outcrop of rocks above the old town like a protective serpent watching over its offspring.

Perched four hundred feet above the city, its battlements rise thirty-six metres. The materials used in its construction were chiselled from the rock on which it stands, giving the impression of the fort growing from

its base. From this angle all that can be seen are the high walls of the ramparts, the cannon barrels resting among its crenulations, a collection from hundreds of years of warfare, I'm told. To the right, I can see the towers of the main entrance and the highest private apartments of former Marajahs peaking over the wall. At the opposite end, a white temple represents the extreme of the habitable part of the fort.

A pale blue sky creates a backdrop to the fort, the clarity of light and air outlining every feature. Unfortunately, the same can't be said of the quality of the air in the town below its battlements, where a mixture of dust and vehicle emissions create a thick amalgam in the throat, leading to projectile spitting from every doorway, without the spitter taking the slightest notice as to whether anyone is passing his shop as he expectorates.

The other distinguishing feature of my view is the *shikhara*, the main tower of the Shiva Temple to my left, rising like the white and gilded tip of a fancy wedding cake, although one where the white icing has faded in a way reminiscent of Miss Havisham's wedding cake in Charles Dickens' novel, *Great Expectations*, as she spends her life mourning being jilted at the altar.

Between the Temple and my bedroom, a few metres from where I sit, are the loudspeakers of a tiny mosque that sits in the narrow streets below. At no more than one hundred meters from my pillow, I am privy to the *adhan*, the Islamic call to worship, being called out by the *muezzin* at four a.m. each day, echoed by those of the two other mosques in the city. I'm used to it because of my time in Morocco and, distinct from the *adhan* heard in many Moroccan towns and villages where an ancient, stretched cassette tape is used, the voice of the person behind the microphone that gives me my early morning wake up is refined and melodic.

Sleeping has not been easy; being on the rooftop, my room stores the heat of the day. The air conditioning blows like a hurricane, rattling the casing; the overhead fan provides only the minimum of cool draft as it rotates, the clicking as it turns sounding like a hyperactive cricket.

For the first couple of nights I was irritated beyond sleep, but on the third night I reframed my thoughts. As I lie under the thin sheet (a single sheet on a double bed), I mentally picture the clicking of the fan as it turns being the wheels of an old steam train, carrying me to new and distant adventures; the four a.m. call to prayer is the sound of the exotic, the east, a land of mystery, with the undulating, melodic tones of the *muezzin* counterpointing that of those in the more distant part of town. It works, and I sleep well, at least for a couple of nights until finally, I decide that I really do want to be on to adventures new, preferably ones without a clicking fan and early morning alarm call.

Map: [The Blue House, Jodhpur](#)

A Letter From The Dark Side

New Delhi, India

After barely thirty hours in New Delhi I feel like the lost alien, ET, pointing at the stars and saying "home". I now think of the Thai as exemplars of disciplined driving, exhibiting a light touch on the horn, placid in their approach to visitors, peaceful and quiet in their conversation - although I'm not sure how long it will last when I return to Chiang Mai, which, at the moment, can't be soon enough.

Down the corridor of my hotel an English girl is screaming at her Indian husband while their baby bawls. Not having the most placid of temperaments, I went to add my bawling to that of the baby. Between sobs, the girl told me that they had come to India a week ago because her husband's mother was very ill. Sadly, before they could get there, the mother died. At the funeral, she was ostracised by the family and her husband subjected to verbal abuse because he had married a non-Hindu.

It was enough that they had to get into debt to visit, his mother had died before they arrived, and the treatment the family subjected them to, but no-one would even look at their new baby, never-mind tickle it under the chin or use all the 'coo-coo' language you associate with these occasions. Imagine how the poor young mother felt. I can't.

For some reason, their return flight had been cancelled, and they had to re-book for a couple of days later. None of the family would allow them to stay with them, so they had to stay extra nights in the flea-pit we were sharing. Not expecting the additional expense, and having had to pay for extra days' accommodation, they had no money for food and had begun arguing between themselves, something they apparently never did at home. Fortunately, they had a flight that was leaving the next morning.

They were abject in their apologies, but relaxed a bit because they had someone they could talk to for the first time in days. I was equally abject in mine and slipped them a little bit of money so they could feed themselves until they got home. Her smile was the first she had experienced in a week, she told me.

It's now 20.22 and I'm trying to drink myself into a stupor, the only opiate I have to help me sleep in a windowless box that passes for a hotel room. Thank God for A/C but waking at 8 am in total darkness does not suit my character.

One of the few light moments of the day was when I visited the Red Fort this morning, where, it being a weekend, there were long queues at the single entry gate open. Entry for Indians is five rupees, 500 rupees for foreigners (£6). For some reason, a few local Asian countries, Thailand

included, have a special entry fee of 35Rps. When the ticket lady asked where I came from I said Thailand. She stared at me with a doubtful look and asked for some identity. (Being English I can't say I really show much resemblance to a Thai.) Fortunately, I had my Thai driving license in my wallet, which she accepted. On the strength of my western features, I was ushered through the empty entry lane for 'high value' tickets, i.e. the expensive ones foreigners are forced to buy, and despite the querulous looks I got each time when they saw I had a cheapo, I avoided the snaking lines of the locals. I can't say the license has ever done me any good in Thailand.'

I came across the perfect acronym for India – I'll Never Do It Again! The old saw that the more you travel the more you appreciate your home may well be true.

Wrong sides of the track

Hanoi, Vietnam

I came across an article in the Guardian about the supposed furore surrounding the police in Hanoi closing access to the famous 'train street'. By chance I was there a month earlier at around the time a train was due, so decided to see what the big draw was. I'd read a load of guff from tourist publicity, repeated *ad nauseam* by bloggers, that t'ween times of trains passing by, family life would take place on the tracks; mums would hang the washing out between buildings on either side, grandpas would smoke a pipe and relax, kiddiwinks invent their own games using the rails and sleepers, and quite probably some of the larger pieces of gravel scattered between them.

A total load of *cojones*.

Not a single building along the half-mile section of the track that runs up-close-and-pretty-uncomfortable to the railway line isn't commercial; ninety-five percent bars, the rest tourist-orientated somehow or other. Not a grandpa on a front step, not a kiddie playing games, and you could barely walk a couple of metres without bumping into someone smiling inanely into the selfishie machine on a stick, or the backside of someone bent over trying to get that really iconic image of their friend sat on a rail. Alongside the track, people of all ages sat supping their beers or staring at their phones. Another hackneyed 'must-have' photo to go along with the other 'must-haves' that most of their friends will have anyway.

I was amused by the writer's reference to dodging the trains that rumble through daily. There's only two trains a day and no place to dodge to, but as far as rumbling... The trains may not go lickety-split, but there's no rumbling about it, and you really want to get out of the way of these big suckers. Pretty nifty and *veery* long, taking about two minutes for the

whole train to pass, for which you would have to get there about an hour earlier to grab a seat and make sure you had enough space behind you to flatten against when the big event occurred.

Particularly amusing, or saddening, depending on how you look at it, was a comment from Harriet Hays, a British tourist, “People come from all over the world to Hanoi just to see the train go past.” All I can say to that, Harriet my dear, is if the best you can do is come to Hanoi to sit by a railway track for an hour waiting for two minutes of rail excitement, then you must live a very sad life indeed.

You can’t blame the locals for wanting to make a few extra *dong*, now can you, especially when you have an ‘Instagram-famous’ place, as the writer of the article calls it, literally right on your doorstep. But having read the article I feel great sadness for the young artist I saw painting a wall, which I took to be a mural at first but turned out to be a soon-to-be-opened tattoo shop. A lovely piece of work, which I hope she got paid for before the police made their announcement and put up the barriers.

Map: Hanoi Train Street

Questions, questions, questions

Hanoi, Vietnam

Bach Thao Botanical Garden, a small park with a lake, ten minutes bike ride from my hotel. A peaceful place if you can mentally block out the roar of traffic and blaring of car horns, the inevitable soundtrack of life in SE Asia.

One of the certainties of being a foreigner in such a place as this is that you will be accosted by some usually well-meaning local who, a. wants to engage in a few minutes chat, or b. is a student (often in multiples) who would like you to answer a few questions for a school project.

“Hello. Where do you come from? What’s your name?”

“Hello. Thailand. John.”

It’s obvious I’m not Thai, although I live there, and most SE Asians struggle with saying Derek, so I make it easy for them and pick a simple, easily recognised foreigner’s name. I used to say I’m English but live in Thailand although I lived in Spain for fifteen years, but as I saw their eyes glaze over with incomprehension, I started delivering the shorter version.

A few minutes ago I went through the routine with a young lady as she passed the bench I’m sitting on that overlooks the lake while I read. Minutes later I hear someone shout, “John,” but forgetting that was my pseudonym for the day, I keep reading, suddenly realising it’s meant for me. I look around and see said young lady passing by with a couple of friends. She smiles and waves; I smile and wave back.

The trio of maids has barely passed by when another young woman appears at my side. "Excuse me for disturbing you, sir," she says politely, "but I'm testing my new camera. May I take a photo of you?"

Her 'new' camera turns out to be a 35mm film Canon of about forty years vintage, a bit knocked about, but a good piece of kit. Apparently it's her first outing with it, her first film, and her first image of a foreigner. I felt for her that the first foreigner she comes across is a bald, wrinkled, portly old bugger, although I prefer to think of it as her first venture into character portraiture, and what better example could she get than yours truly? Fortunately, she won't see the image for a while, until the film is processed, one of the joys and pitfalls of the old days, when you were never certain of the result, but just occasionally it was a gem.

Not ten minutes after I'd settled back to my Kindle, a group of five students ask what I think of Hanoi. My usual approach with this question is, "Sorry, I only arrived this morning so I haven't had a chance to see anything yet," which seems to suit on most occasions. I'm asked to take a photo of the group, and take the offered phone, while they pose in the standard way of tilting their heads to the side and making a V with the fore and second fingers, the palm facing out while holding it alongside their grinning face. I tell them not to do that and they look shocked, but I explain that it ruins photos so could they please just put their hands in their pockets, or do something else with them. They laugh but have no idea what to do with their hands. I take the photo anyway and they scuttle off, probably deleting it as they run.

At least my next span of reading lasts just short of half-an-hour, when I look up and see another group of students hovering over me. I'm ready for this, so before they ask, I say "Yes, okay, I'll take a photo of you, but no 'V' signs," and put my hand out for a phone. They look bemused.

"Thank you, sir, but we don't want a photograph taken," says a young chap nervously. "It's our Full Moon Festival and we would like to ask you to sample the special cake only made for this festival and tell us what you think of it please."

Got caught out on that one, didn't I!

I take a piece of cake from the decorative box it's presented in and take a small, cautious bite.

"It's a strange flavour, one I've never tasted before, but it's nice," I say, knowing I can't tell them the truth, that it's soggy mush with a taste I'd probably equate with drain sludge had I ever been tempted to sample it. They smile, nod, and move on to the next sucker, while behind their backs I drop my slice into the lake, hoping it won't do any harm to the fish.

Map: [Bach Thao Botanical Garden](#)

Pride – or in this case being a smart-arse – cometh before a fall

Da Nang, Vietnam

An hour ago I rented a bicycle for while I'm in Da Nang for the next few days. To get a decent feel of it I took a ride to the beach and along the prom, where I parked both the bike and myself for a while to enjoy the lapping waves. It was peaceful and moderately quiet, and a respite from the clamour of the city.

Happy to be on two wheels again I set off on the two-kilometer ride to my hotel, determined to show the locals that their reputation for horn-tooting, careering, rule-ignoring motor-scooter riding (laughingly called motorbikes in SE Asia) would not quell a chap who has dodged the worst of Chiang Mai, Marrakech and Valencia. A dart up the strait from the beach, over the hump of the Dragon Bridge, a quick swerve right into the one-way traffic at the end of its tail and a slither around a sharp left a hundred yards down the road, aided by no'but my arms indicating a turn and a raised hand to show that this boy wasn't to be toyed with.

I slipped past the entrance to my road and skittered through the traffic at the next crossroads to pick up a couple of cold ones at the local Vinmart. Back on the bike, head down, back through the crossroads, determined not to give way as the lights were about to change, allowing hordes of Vietnamese to surge forward like the off at a Formula 1. I touched the back break a tad – and the bugger locked! Arse over tip I went, right in front of the revving crowd, a tumble that tore the cheap Vinemart plastic bag open, sending my beers rolling down the road, leaving me looking like nothing more than an old-fogey foreigner who can't handle a bike in rush hour.

A couple of motorbike riders were charming, one helping me up and holding my bike and the other gathering up my beers while I sorted myself out. 'Pulled too hard on the brake?' the first one asked with a smile, while I tried to pack the cold beers in my short's pockets, not wanting him to see the half-consumed, half-bottle of red wine in my small chill bag, a boon to the imbiber on the move but not when you are trying to save what shred of pride you have left.

It's only the third or fourth time I've come off my bike in decades of riding, but least on the other occasions it wasn't practically under the wheels of a charging phalanx of Vietnamese motorbikes. As I have been won't to say on so many occasions for so many reasons while in S-E Asia, 'Nobody died'.

Silence is golden – but not in Da Nang

Da Nang, Vietnam

'Everything Will Be Okay', seen on a T-shirt. "Are you sure", I ask the lady wearing it? "Sure," she said, "okay for me, okay for you, okay for everyone."

The café opposite my hotel is as noisy as hell; women chatting at volume, kids crying, coffee grinder screeching, music a cacophony far above my usual acceptance level, blaring out of the speaker above my head – but at least it's decent music for a change –. The decibel level is getting outrageous, the high ceiling, large open space, and tiled floor amplifying the sound as it bounces around the hard surfaces.

Yesterday it was peaceful and quiet, hence my return. But it's a pleasant, modern place, the staff are nice and the barista even remembered from yesterday that I don't like foam on my coffee, which possibly shows how few foreigners come here. It was nice he remembered, but I still got foam anyway.

I think I've come at ladies' morning chat hour. A group of seven ladies sitting beside a full wall of glass at the front of the cafe, perfect for throwing sound back into the room, have a friendly but shouting dispute, hitting levels that almost make the window they sit beside vibrate. Reverberating off the tile floor and formica and marble serving counter, their joyful disputation skitters through the café, causing people to unconsciously raise their voice so their own conversations can be heard, adding to the raucous assembly.

During a relatively quiet moment in serving, a member of staff decides to do a bean grind to see them through the next rush, just as someone orders an iced drink that needs to be shaken, not stirred, in cocktail style, in a plastic shaker filled with crushed ice.

A pre-school girl plays a game of pushing a chair across the floor, an only milder form of the nails across a blackboard screech, but this being SE Asia, mum thinks her little darling is so clever at inventing the game. This farang, who, after all, only came in for a quiet coffee, thinks the little darling needs a slap on the arse.

Time I left.

Doing a runner

Ho Chi Min City, Vietnam

This afternoon my companion, Kai, and I came out of the beautiful Thien Hau Temple in Saigon's Chinatown at almost exactly the same hour on the same day as I did last year. As happened last year, just as I walked out the temple a tremendous storm started, and like previously I was able to flag town a taxi almost immediately. And there the similarities end.

The rains were huge, some of the worst I've experienced, but it never ceases to amaze me that in that sort of weather, motorbike and scooter riders here – as in most places in SE Asia – tend to go faster, working on the premise they want to get home quickly, I suppose.

After about twenty minutes drive and only a few minutes from our rented apartment, the driver had to make a left turn at a crossroads, not noticing the man on a stationary motor scooter directly in front of him also waiting for the traffic to clear so he could turn left. I'd noticed him from the back of the taxi, so he was pretty obvious. The taxi drove straight into the back of the scooter, bouncing it and the rider further into the junction.

The taxi had barely stopped when I shouted to Kai to get out of the car and run. Anyone who has lived in south-east Asia knows that if a foreigner is involved in an accident, even if he is sat in the back of a taxi as we were, he or she will be blamed. Even if you are a by-stander who witnesses an accident and goes to help you will be blamed and skinned for as much as everyone can get out of you. This is not as far-fetched as it might sound.

By then the rain was coming down in torrents, but we ran like shit of a shovel and were soaked by the time we'd even crossed the road. I didn't know I could move so fast at 71! At the end of the street I tried to wave a taxi down on the other side of the road to get us away from the area. As I ran across to the car, without looking either left or right, I ran straight into the side of another taxi. Fortunately, there was no damage done to either myself or the taxi, although it was a shock to both of us. If I'd stepped off the kerb a millisecond sooner I would have been under his wheels. I just waved to say I was okay and ran on. We grabbed the waiting taxi and got the hell out of dodge as quickly as we bloody well could, by which time the traffic at the junction was building up and struggling to get around the taxi and flattened motor scooter.

By the time the second taxi got us home it was still teaming down, so I thought sod this, I'm going to the little supermarket on the corner to buy some beer to steady my nerves. We couldn't get any wetter.

And the minor silver lining is that instead of a taxi fare of about £6.20, which the outward ride had cost, the fare to the second driver was all of 48 pence. The balance was spent on beer.

Riding the Rails - Yangon Circular Railway

Yangon, Myanmar

Between six a.m. and five in the afternoon, the trains of the Yangon Circular Railway leave platform seven of the city's Central Railway Station off Bogyoke Aung Sang Road, alternating their departures in a

clockwise and anti-clockwise direction. For three hours they collect and deposit commuters, between 100,000 and 150,000 daily, clacking their way in a loop through thirty-nine stations on a twenty-eight-mile circuit, for which you will pay the princely sum of 200 kyat – 11 pence.

I settle myself onto the 9.20 a.m. train as it prepares to leave the station in a clockwise direction. Vendors move through the central aisle, working the passengers with baskets and trays filled with a bewildering selection of goodies. If you need a fix of betel nut, a man with a portable kit slung over his shoulders will make you a fresh quid. A dozen quails eggs to snack on, a toothbrush or disposable lighter? A lady with a plastic basket balanced on her head will serve you. Elegantly dressed in traditional white high-collared shirt and checked sarong, a charming vendor with a winning smile will prepare you a delicious snack from his tray of small pancakes, shredded vegetables and bottles of mystical sauces.

Snack-man sells out by the time we reach Isein, where he leaves the train. I watch him cross the rails to a vendor on the opposite platform who has a pile of samosas heaped high in a pyramid on a metal tray in front of him. The itinerant salesman re-loads his tray and sauce bottles, readying himself to catch the next train going in the opposite direction, anticlockwise around the city. Round-and-round, day-after-day, selling his snacks to the same faces on a daily basis as they commute their way to work and home. He sees me with my camera and puts his thumb up, waving as our train pulls out of the station.

This is no time to stay in your seat and let the world go by, as life inside and out is always on the move. I prowl the aisles.

Have your camera ready for Danyingon, one of the main stops almost half-way around the circuit. On the station platform on either side of the track, a large fruit and vegetable market glitters in bold Technicolor under a steady downpour, where a young man sits under a large black umbrella behind his display of pumpkins and melons, staring off into the middle distance, lost in thought. Freshly boiled corncobs for snacking; peeled and sliced mangos for juices; mounds of fruit and vegetables, most of which I don't recognise, for housewives to pick and haggle over; skewers of sausages and bananas gently grilling – a snapshot of life on the rim of a great Asian metropolis.

Nearby, a group of four ladies in pinks and blues huddle under umbrellas, waiting for the next train to save them from the driving downpour. As we're waiting, a male vendor shouts at me and points to a woman peeling mango. He calls to her, she looks up and sees me and smiles making the 'V' sign, raised index and middle finger with palm facing outward. This sign, usually held somewhere around the face is ubiquitous throughout Southeast Asia, with no definitive answer to its origin. I take a photo and return the 'V'. She bursts into a cackle, shared by almost everyone else on the platform.

As the train clacks on, small moments of no great importance add delight to the ride; the thumbs-up and toothless grin of an old man sat next to a wooden station shed and the pretty smile of the young girl stood at his side; the man who shouted 'Move!' at me as he threw an enormous bunch of plastic-wrapped lilies through the cabin door and his smilingly profuse grin as he thanked me for dragging them in as he threw up two more bundles; the wave from the elderly lady under the big black umbrella protecting her from the monsoon downpour as the train slowly pulled out of Migaladon.

As the journey continues through countryside drenched by the monsoon, small pockets of colour occur: the sparkle of the gilded stupa of a village temple framed by blue roofs of houses balances the dour ochre of bamboo homes set against the verdant green of rice paddies. People come and go; vendors patrol the aisles, villagers doze on their way home, passengers hand out and pick up plastic containers, string bags, and cardboard boxes of this-that-and-the-other as the train stops for a few minutes at tiny halts barely marked on a map. The gentle roll of the coaches creates a somnambulant rhythm, the halts awaken briefly before dropping into a doze again. I stay on my feet, wandering up and down the aisles, waving at kids splashing in the flooded channels by the track, commiserating with elderly ladies as I put out my hand to help drag them on board – and they do it a damned sight quicker than I do!

If impatience grabs you, jump off the train at any station and grab a taxi back into town, but the Yangon Circular Railway is one of those experiences to simply relax and go along with, smile at the locals, snack on simple food, and take a happy-go-lucky breather from the bustle of the city.

Map: [Central Railway Station](#)

A Bicycle Made For Two

Luang Prabang

I'm sitting in a small restaurant in the heritage area of Luang Prabang in Laos. There has obviously been a lot of money spent restoring some of the traditional beautiful wooden houses and those from the French era, with wide verandas, slatted shutters – known as *jalousies* in India and *mallorquin* in Spain – silk cushions on teak recliners. But so much is façade. Open the doors and windows and behind the mask of restoration, you all too often see the mess and squalor of much of Asia, as if the continent suffers the advanced stages of Diogenes syndrome (also known more descriptively as senile squalor syndrome). But this is a judgement of western eyes.

The restaurant is on a very quiet crossroads on a very quiet street, no more than one vehicle passing every three or four minutes and even then they are usually motor scooters, with a car every ten minutes or so.

I look up and see a young Caucasian man crossing the road toward me, tablet in one hand, smartphone in the other, and headphones underneath his baseball cap – a typical neo-techno who can't be without his mobile technology, even when walking the streets in a fine drizzle, always needing to be talking to someone. As he passes I hear him reciting phrases, repeating those he is presumably listening to through his earphones; a language class on the hoof.

A young Chinese couple pass by on a bicycle, he at the front, pedalling, she sitting side-saddle on the pannier seat above the rear wheel, like a scene from a 1950s Italian art movie set in Rome. With one hand he steers the bike, with another he holds an umbrella over his head. Hers is protected by a large, floppy straw hat with a pink floral ribbon. She giggles and pulls at the tail of his white T-shirt, apparently oblivious to the rain. It's unusual to see young Asian people without a smartphone in hand, texting or flipping through Facebook even on the back of a bicycle. She smiles and is clearly happy just to be wandering the streets of Luang Prabang while her boyfriend does the work.

The Lao have a different approach altogether. If there are two people on a motor scooter, the person on the passenger seat holds the umbrella slightly forward, tilted at a shallow angle to protect passenger and driver. If the rider is solo they will hold the umbrella in one hand and steer with the other, a difficult task for the inexperienced but part of life if you've been doing it since you were twelve, even if the legal age limit is fifteen. If a child is on-board during the rain they will usually be standing on the driver's footrest, holding onto the handlebars, making it easier for mum or dad to angle the umbrella to protect them both. I'm dazzled by a scooter with four passengers that whizzes by, child standing, lady driving, with another lady parked well back on the seat, sandwiching a second child between the adults. Passenger lady holds the umbrella tilted forward and driver lady simultaneously steers and holds the front of the umbrella forward against the wind and rain. This is in drizzle, Lord alone knows how dangerous the manoeuvre would be in the torrential monsoon rains, which, given the heavy black clouds, aren't too far away.

It's 2.30 pm and the most raucous noise is that of the oscillating fan fixed to the pillar by my table and a cockerel whose body clock is out of sync. The muted sound of Lao music drifts from a few buildings away, cheerful and danceable, even for an old westerner like me, although obviously in the steamy heat of monsoon I don't 'get down and boogie'.



Hồ Chí Minh

Thế mà hay !!

MESSY studio

Chát Vọng Sống

Đừng ngại vẽ!

HỘI HOA PHÁP

★ PHƯƠNG Thuận hip - Cảnh đời chờ chiều II ★

Cách làm clay

Cái Trống thiếc

Đ. Q chính chuyện

ART TODAY

ANIMAL JOKES

ore With The...

★ PHƯƠNG Thuận hip - CẢNH ĐỢI CHỜ CHIỀU ★

1001. THƯ TÌNH HAY.....

CÁC MẮC.

Painting Today

Funny Stories

CUỐI TUẦN TẬP

PHU Sinh

Good Jokes

Kit Bata Lã

DINH Q. L.

Đinh Ph. T.

THÉP ĐẤT ÔI T

Tiffany C

MISCELLANY

In God's waiting room

I'm dead. Or at the very least, in God's waiting room, which is marginally better than a comment made about a seventy-eight-year-old Aussie friend who has been carved up so many times that Michelin use his chest as a template for maps, and who was told by a friend that far from being in God's waiting room, he had God's boarding pass. Not subtle, but pretty on the button.

The reason for my assertion is because of a slideshow I came across on MSN.com, *50 Signs of Poor Health No One Over 50 Should Ignore*. The fact that I'm on the insalubrious side of seventy only heightened the urge to find out what I should have been aware of for two decades. And by God, I've got all of them, other than vaginal dryness (No.25).

As I've been bald since my mid-thirties I'm not too worried about hair loss (27), and confusion (29) has ere been a failing, to the point where I'm confused about why I'm even writing this – or could that be memory loss (1)? I can't remember. And does getting up to pee three times a night count as incontinence (2) or merely reflect the comment by David (gosh, I wish I could remember the rest of his name) on getting old, "The washer in my penis is broken, leaving urine to dribble long after I've zipped up my pants"? (And I'm not impressed that while almost all the slides show sad people being poorly, the incontinence image showed a pristine toilet, complete with toilet roll and bog brush. If you are that incontinent I'm not sure how sparkly the floor would be.)

Gallstones get a mention (6), of which I have one, (Sedaris, that's his name, David Sedaris!), and which one of the better-known local private hospitals in Chiang Mai wanted to charge around £2,700 to remove (working on the premise, common here, that as a foreigner I was rolling in dosh), but which the specialist at the government hospital told me was so small it would probably 'pass' naturally and charged me a £1 consultancy fee.

Vision loss (8, although I'm still wearing the same strength glasses I was originally prescribed at thirty-six, half a lifetime ago) gets a look in related to a brain tumour; 'If this is the case, you may keep bumping into things on the side of the body related to the vision loss,' which I have to admit has happened on a number of occasions, usually related to large amounts of alcohol having been taken, which could also account for slurring speech (9), difficulty walking (10), personality changes (11), and shaky hands (16). See what I mean?

Meanwhile, I'm sitting here crying into my ginger tea worrying about the gradual degradation of this admittedly over-weight and wrinkly body of mine. Perhaps I should just end it all now and let the local teaching hospital have my corpse for a bit of practice, for which I carry a card giving them permission to do so, not for any compassionate reasons, simply so my sons don't get stuck with the funeral bill.

On a final note, a short story about a friend, once a comedian on cruise ships. Never the healthiest of people, having been a life-long smoker and drinker with side trips into all kinds of noxious and illegal substances, he visited the ship's doctor one day about fifteen years ago, not feeling too perky. Three days later he went back for the results of a bank of tests. "Just keep doing what you're doing," was the doc's advice. "You mean I'm okay?" asked my friend. "Nope," said the doc, "you are totally wrecked, giving up anything now isn't going to make the slightest bit of difference."

Having your two penn'orths worth

I'm researching an article to back up an interview I did a couple of years ago in Porto, Portugal, at the splendidly idiosyncratic antiquarian bookshop, Livraria Charmine de Mota, that has over one million books and publications in stock, the largest collection in Portugal. Because of this, I'm subconsciously spotting articles about the antiquarian genre. I've just been reading an article about the discovery of a 500-year-old library catalogue. Interesting in its own right, but the erudite comments have caused me some glee. I particularly like...

"I'd love to read Zeno of Citium's Republic. It is reported to have contained such doctrines as: "if you are hungry, eat your parents"; "men should walk around naked so that they can be assessed by partners"; and "all goods and sexual partners should be common property".

I don't think you can say fairer than that, now, can you?

I especially like the moniker of one respondent – UnashamedPedant, a name I think perfectly suits me, and which at some time I intend to plagiarise.

I also quite like the comment 'Don't let the Vikings off the hook regarding Jarrow' by BranwellB, even though I haven't the slightest idea of what he's talking about, and who cannot raise a giggle at the very British comment by beckythatcher11, 'Any chance there's a lost Biggles there? I've read them all and would love a new one.' Only a Brit would get it. And don't even try to work out the story behind the line, "How came you here, my dark princess, masquerading as a trade unionist?" Wha...???

The penultimate quote, a 'Fun Fact' from imayank10; "Photius commissioned two Greek brothers from Thessaloniki, Cyril and

Methodius, to translate the Bible into the language of the Slavs. The Cyrillic alphabet is named after the elder brother. The followers of Cyril....." and that's about as funny as it gets. I prefer the witticism of beckythatcher11, and will continue to wonder if there's a manuscript from Capt. W. E. John, the creator of the war-time air ace, the hero of every boy's dreams, mouldering away in some attic.

And the last word to Dowling198110 "If the books were lost it is probably because they were a bit rubbish." Doncha just lurve academe!

Aggreviated English

One of the banes of a journalist's life is that there is always someone willing to prove you wrong. Usually I don't enter into the debate, accepting that everyone has a right to their say even if it's contrary to mine. It's not their fault that they are wrong.

I made an exception to the rule a few years ago when someone sent an email to the Costa Blanca News, the main English-language newspaper in Spain, for whom I'd written an article about Spanglish. Contrary to what you might think, this is being recognised as a genuine developing linguistic form, and the article was a serious attempt to explain the current situation, backed up by research and reasoned argument stolen from elsewhere. But there is always one dickhead, isn't there, and in this case he's called Northill.

The basis of Mr. Northill's reply was that my article was uninformed and contrived, being that it did not deal with the hybrid 'language' used by the ex-patriot community on the Costa Blanca, something he quite correctly described as 'a bastardised conglomeration' – which could equally include the ex-pat community and the language – and unfortunately about the only point we agree on.

I was very sorry my research didn't satisfy Northill's rigid criteria. Unfortunately, I didn't have such a person as his good old barman friend from Todmorden in Yorkshire, an English county not renowned for its pleasant rendition of the language, who was currently 'mine host' in a bar in Calpe. Obviously a font of idiomatic study, Northill quoted him as saying "*Quiero un fat lippio?*" when threatening an overly boisterous customer, and translated by Northill it into 'Would you like a smack in the mouth?' Unfortunately, Mr. Northill appeared not to have had enough knowledge of the Spanish language to know that '*Quiero*' refers to the person speaking, so his friend was actually asking for the overly boisterous customer to smack *him* in the mouth. But Mr. Northill's comments did make me think of something that hadn't crossed my mind for years, something, for want of a better phrase, I called 'Aggreviated English'.

My first experience of Aggreviated English came from our local fruit and veg delivery man, but before I tell you about his particular form of 'aggreviation', let me explain just what the term means. It's not simply an abbreviation of the language, nor is it just an aggravation; it's a combination of both, an abbreviation which aggravates – hence 'aggreviation'. It's probably a lot simpler to give an example rather than enter into a linguistic discourse.

When I was a boy living on a council estate just outside Newcastle-on-Tyne in the north of England, Jimmy Ball delivered the fruit and veg on an old cart pulled by a tired old dobbie name Trudy. Jimmy could be heard approaching because of his call, starting as a low growl in the throat but ending with a high pitched bellow – 'Hurookinapperyetomarays'. It never occurred to anyone to ask what he was actually saying, we just recognised it as Jimmy's call and went to fetch the canvas bag we kept the vegetables in. I probably wouldn't know even now had I not seen Jimmy sitting over a pint in the local pub a few years after he retired, by which time I'd acquired enough teenage confidence to ask him what he'd been shouting all those years. He seemed genuinely surprised that I should ask.

By then my ear was becoming attuned to the simpler forms of aggreviation; the rag-and-bone man's 'Raaagbo', starting loud and dropping rapidly, ending on an abrupt 'o'; the newspaper vendor of the Evening Chronicle at Haymarket Bus Station in Newcastle, who had a strange hiccuping sound in the middle of his 'Roooonico-o', but Jimmy's was much more prolonged and intriguing. The phrase he'd been spouting as he travelled around our streets for almost three decades, totally unaware that no-one understood a word of what he was saying, was 'Cooking apples, ripe tomatoes'. Not the most earth shattering of pronouncements, but I was glad to have found out at last.

As a further example of this new discovery in lexicography, where does the 'H' go when Essex man drops it? I can tell you. It packs its bag and heads North up the A1 to be welcomed with open arms by the Geordie Pub Singer, where it joins forces with 'A', as in 'hat', to add a whole new set of sounds to the muzakal repertoire.

Frank Sinatra's classic 'My Way' now begins 'Hen nowa, hthe time is neara, hits time to face the final curtayna.' (It must be sung to get the full effect, so try it again.) A further aggreviation is added if the singer is a devotee of the late Nat King Cole. Cole was renowned for stretching the vowels in his songs so that 'Blue Moon' became 'Bluuue Moooon'; perfectly acceptable when he sang, and in keeping with the tune, but when the GPS tries to Cole it he has neither the vocal dexterity of the 'King' or the breath control. Sinatra's classic now becomes 'Hen nowaaaaaaaa, hthe time is nearaaaaaaaa, hits time to face the final curtaynaaaaaaaaa.' with a wavering warble in the final 'aaa's' as he runs out of breath. (There is a Southern version of this syndrome where the 'h' and the 'a' are replaced

by 'hu' pronounced as the 'u' in 'gut'. Thus – 'Hutake me to the moonu, an let me play humong the starzu.')

These days there are dictionaries available for every form of terminology, so why not an *Aggreviations-English Dictionary*. It could include regional variations; for example, 'Knava, [k'nava], can I have', 'Divnaa, [div'naa], (Northeast), I don't know', 'Issmecompuo, [Iss'me'compu'o] (Manchester), it is my computer.' It could lead to a whole new world of understanding. Or, more likely, it would lead to a whole new world of aggression when we realised exactly what it was someone had said to us.

As a working-class character in a television play once said, after suffering a diatribe from a haughty upper class bit of totty, 'Sorry darlin' I didn't understand the insult.' Perhaps it's better that way.

What a carve-up

Chiang Mai, Thailand

I've just signed the forms to donate my body to medical science. This isn't an altruistic gesture, it's simply to save my sons the cost of shipping my carcass back to the UK or paying an arm-and-a-leg to have something done with it in Thailand. They are preferring to see it as some sort of noble gesture on my part but I suspect they are more than grateful that the old stiff won't be as big a pain in the arse in death as he has been in life.

And 'stiff' isn't necessarily what the carcass will be when the ambulance arrives to cart it away. I live alone, have precious little social life, and I always say that if I paid only for the phone calls I received I'd have a bloody small phone bill. I suspect that one day I'll simply cark it and the only way anyone will know is when the smell of rancid meat starts seeping out into the stairwell. About five weeks, I'm told. Three if we have another summer like the last one.

Frankly, I don't care. Once I'm gone, I'm gone, whether I'm carried out in a box or ladled into a bucket. It's all one to me. But I did have a momentary shimmer in my certitude while I was flitting around the internet, trying to find out what to do when I first donated in Spain and came across a photo in Levante, one of Valencia's dailies. In all the other articles I've read on the subject if there was a photo it was usually of a reclining corpse covered with a white sheet, or a group of studious students engrossed in some skeletal part. But not in Levante, oh no, they cut to the chase, do those boyos.

There was the cadaver, arse up in the air – or at least it would have been if the arse hadn't been split open to expose the whole of the inside, which,

curiously enough, are mostly a pale shade of yellow once the guts have been removed.

I know that to become highly-honed medical specialists, ham-fisted students have to practice on something, and the piece of meat that constitutes my body at the moment is probably as good as any, but it all seemed so inelegant. No more inelegant than having your insides lifted out and dispersed as life-enhancing transplants, I suppose, ('harvesting', as they euphemistically call it), but I think I'd rather have maintained the image of some caring young thing carefully wielding a scalpel as they furthered the cause of medical knowledge than the thought of me arse up on a dissecting table posing for a newspaper photographer. Somewhat lacking in dignity, don't y'know.

Six years later, in Chiang Mai, Thailand, it was the same rigmarole; find the signing-on place to register and get my card, (next to the mortuary at the local teaching hospital, although there were no stiffs in evidence when I visited, and I believe there's a worldwide shortage for practicing on). When I snuff it, the police will inform the hotel (before ransacking my room for anything worth selling; the Thai police have a bit of a reputation for that, and I'll not be there to complain), the hotel will inform the British Embassy, who will inform my sons, who will be invited to the annual soiree at a local temple to celebrate my passing, by which time I will have been reduced to a bag of bones and slimy bits and dumped in an incinerator. Done and dusted.

As far as I'm concerned, once I'm gorn I'm gorn. It will save my sons a few bob and an awful lot of paperwork.

The bear necessities of life

It's curious, the things we think are important in our lives, the Bear Necessities of Life (according to the Jungle Book) we add to our stockpile in times of crisis and lockdown, as we are in at the moment.

I've bought a couple of six-packs of toilet rolls, a few more bars of soap, dried goods and cans, although I doubt we'll be short of food, given the number of supermarkets and small food shops in Chiang Mai that are allowed to stay open and serve take-away. Any shop selling non-necessaries will be closed, so while I'll probably have no problem getting my packets of soup, where am I going to buy my pens?

As besuits my work, I'm an inveterate note-taker and go through pens like a dose of salts. I doubt they are high on the Tesco Lotus procurement list, and I'm pretty sure I'd get short shrift at my local takeaway if I ask for one *pad thai*, one chicken *khao soi* and a five-pack of Biro's. You see my point?

I've never understood people who make notes on their phone or tablet on the move. I'm strictly a pen-and-notepad sort of chap when I'm working, substituted by a decent quality notebook when I'm sitting scribbling somewhere. A notebook is fine when I'm sat still, but I won't use anything other than the flip-over, spiral-bound, reporter/secretary notepads while I'm working, and they are very difficult to get hold of outside the UK. I've tried a couple of American versions, but they are a different dimension and too fiddly to handle.

Non-spiral-bound users don't understand the trickery of their use. Unlike most notepads, where you write on one side then turn the page to the left (to the right if you are writing in Arabic) and write on the reverse side, like a well-tuned sports car the spiral-bound is built for speed. You write on one face, with the spiral away from you, flip the page over and write on the next page, not the back of the first. When you get to the last page of the notepad you simply flip the notepad over and work your way back to the front. They are also excellent for adding supplementary notes because you can write them on the blank page as you check them later. Clever, innit!

I was making notes in Anima Garden near Marrakech, in June 2019, when a visitor stopped beside me and said, "It's a long time since I've seen that." "Yes," I replied, "they are really difficult to get hold of. I have to have them sent to Spain from the UK," thinking he was referring to the notepad I was using. "No," he said. "I mean, it's a long time since I've seen anyone actually writing notes with a pen on a notepads."

Sometimes being a Luddite can be worthwhile.

It's not so long ago there were guides written about hotels, cafes etc., that offered paid-for wifi; then free wifi, and now the world seems to stop when we've no access to it – which is now, sat at a cafe in a park by the Ping River in Chiang Mai, which has neither power nor wifi connections. I've forgotten the cable that connects my phone to my laptop, and now I'm cast adrift in the world of Luddite pen and paper. But at least it's temporary. I'll be back home soon and can breathe a sigh of connected relief, unlike when I left my laptop in New Delhi airport a couple of years ago and had to use p&p for a whole ten days, although it took me a while to even find a notebook in Jodhpur.

But truth to tell, while I was pretty ticked off at leaving the laptop in New Delhi, I enjoyed writing the stories that came to mind on various verandahs and balconies as I wandered on through Pushkar's camel fair, where the camels had all gone home, and Jaipur's raucous streets and deadly traffic, before giving up on the country and heading home two weeks earlier than planned, to the relative quiet of Chiang Mai. INDIA – I'll Never Do It Again!

I'm the only person I know who still uses the flip-over, spiral-bound, secretary/journalist style of notepad. I enjoy the aspect of physically

holding the pen and feeling the tip gliding across the page (can you call the flowing point of a roller-ball a nib?), but I also find it almost impossible to make notes on anything else. Most of the short stories I write have been first written in a notebook, and for probably about ninety-five percent of anything else has been written in a spiral-bound. Sitting in a graveyard in Antalya, Turkey, 'chatting' with two deceased ladies; describing the contents of a tiny balcony at the back of an apartment in Sofia, Bulgaria, where, if I'd walked about fifteen metres to the front of the building I would have had the glorious Cathedral sat in front of me; a lady in a restaurant in Safranbolu, northern Turkey, delicately hand-making tiny pasta envelopes wrapped around a tomato sauce dressing, all scribbled down in my notebook. So many little stories that would never have seen the light of day if I'd had to rely on a mobile phone or tablet to make the notes.

When I read the stuff I write in my notebooks, I marvel at the diaries of Victorian and Edwardian travellers, who seem to have kept such detailed records of their journeys and experiences, carefully written with a pen and a bottle of ink, without the aid of biros or laptops. They must have spent many hours writing, detailing everything they saw or, in some cases, fabricating or plagiarising the work of others.

And then I think of some latter-day writers, whose notes are written on a tablet of some size. I've tried that on my phone, but the size of my fingers resulted in far too many corrections as I went along. I gave up. I lost the immediacy of pen on paper; which is why a pen and spiral-bound notepad is ideal for me. It's easy to handle, fast to use, and for safety's sake I've taken to photographing each page at the end of the day in case the notebook gets lost. And I would never resort to speaking notes onto my phone, either. I tried voice transcription software but the result was almost unintelligible most of the time, which is probably down to my speech mannerisms and use of foreign words. Artificial intelligence might be clever, but has no understanding of nuance, and makes too many guesses at words for my liking. Artificial, yes, but I'm not sure about the intelligence bit.

But more than just putting notes on to paper to record events, reading them also seems to revive the memories far more than writing them on a keyboard does. When I read my hand-written notes later, I can actually feel myself in the place or situation I've written about. Photographs help, but they don't have the same emotive experience of reading my notes. I take a lot of photos to illustrate the work and to act as *aide memoirs*, and they are great for that, but it's the written word that sparks me, that brings to life not just the memory of the experience or situation itself, but the emotions that went with it, not something that words on a screen can ever replace.

New Orleans, here I don't come

I'm planning a trip to Turkey when the airways open up, and I recalled a visit to the superb Rahmi M Koç Transport Museum in Istanbul in 2017. On display was a Douglas DC something-or-other, one of the earlier propeller-driven models with seats not a lot more than canvas slings. When I looked inside it fascinated me to remember that I flew in one of the next generation, barely fancier, from New Orleans to London via Gander in Newfoundland, the only way you could get across 'the pond' in 1967.

It was during my time in the British Merchant navy. In those days, when you signed on a ship your contract was for six months, even if the voyage was intended to be only a few weeks duration. I was the most junior officer on the ship, an Assistant Purser with Thos. and Jno. Brocklebank, one of the longest established shipping companies in Britain, but I still had the gold braid to prove it.

On this particular voyage we went through the Red Sea during the Six-Day War, only allowed to sail during daylight hours or risk being blown out of the water. India, Ceylon (as it was then, although I much prefer its original name, Serendip, the origin of the word 'serendipity', an aptitude for making desirable discoveries by accident) and various other Asian countries were part of the trip. I recall a stop at Trincomallee, the deepest natural harbor in the world, with a delicious sounding name, somewhere I'd planned to visit in March this year, before Covid-19 erupted. Somewhere around our unloading in Trinco, we were told that our next stop was New Orleans, with 24 hours in Durban to take on bunkers, although we weren't allowed to leave the ship while in dock.

Wonderful! The city of crawfish *etouffee*, gumbo, jambalaya, not to mention exquisite architecture and jazz. But, as in much of life, there was a catch.

Being in lockdown is tough, but imagine being closed up in a floating metal box with twenty other people for 21,247km for a couple of months, ninety-nine percent of the time with nothing to look at other than a vast expanse of ocean, good weather permitting. But what the hell; how often do you get to visit New Orleans?

Five weeks into the crossing, when the most exciting thing you could do was cry, we were assembled on deck for an emergency drill. Not uncommon, but as we'd had one a week earlier, we knew something was up. Drill over, the captain said he had an announcement to make. Three days before our arrival in New Orleans, our six-month contracts would expire, giving us one of two options; we could either sign on again for another six months without knowing where we would go, or sign off and be flown back to Blighty from New Orleans. Not only that, but because the

contract ended before we arrived, a new crew would be waiting to take over and would need our on-board accommodation, so we needed to have our bags ready for instant change-over the moment we docked.

We'd been away from home for six months, been through a war zone and spent a mind-numbing ten weeks at sea. Everyone except the Glaswegian bosun opted for signing off, and even he admitted that ten weeks at sea on the way back to India was preferable to a return to Glasgow. But he wouldn't get to see New Orleans either.

Immigration for ship's crew in those days was a couple of representatives of the Immigration Department coming on board, setting their papers up on a table while we formed a queue in front. As we handed over our identity cards (a naval passport) we were asked a string of questions, many of them pointless, one of which was, "Has your mother, your sister or your wife ever been a prostitute?" (As if we were going to say yes.)

Way back in the waters of time, the bosun, then a young deckhand, duly stood in line to have his ID card stamped. "Has your mother, your sister or your wife ever been a prostitute?" the question was asked, the immigration officer not even bothering to look up. When there was no answer, he did so, only to see a massive, Glaswegian-sized fist coming toward his face, which it connected with, sending the poor young official base over apex, hitting the deck, with blood spurting everywhere.

"Ah'll ha nay wee ponce suggestin' the ladees o' ma family aar prostitoots."

While still being officially on British territory, there wasn't much immigration could do, other than brand his ID card with some form of persona non-grata imprint, banning him from entry into the US for life. "Never did like the slimy little feckers, anyway," he told me, thirty years later.

All the rest of us saw of New Orleans as we were bussed to the airport the night we docked were strings of street lights and advertising hoardings.

As I said earlier, in those days the only way to get to London from New Orleans, 6,567 kms away, was via Gander Airport in Newfoundland, where we refuelled for the long hop. This was in October, and all I remember of the place was snow flurries and cold, but we arrived at Heathrow tired but none the worse for wear. We didn't have even the basic facilities most people would expect now; those luxuries were way beyond our imagination. (I've only once since then travelled in a propeller-driven commercial airplane, on a private flight in the Canary Islands – it felt like proper flying.)

Dawdling on these thoughts, I did a search for Gander Airport for old time's sake, and came up with photos that shows a modernist architectural gem frozen in time. Opened in 1959 by Queen Elizabeth, the

International Departures Lounge reflected the glamour of mid-century air travel and featured furniture by world-famous designers, with a striking mural by Canadian artist Kenneth Lochhead, and floor tiles reminiscent of Piet Mondrian. It's how it would have looked when I passed through it 53 years ago, although I don't remember it and would probably not have appreciated its beauty at the time.

Lost in translation

I was going through my notes from decades ago and came across a snippet from when I was in Atlanta at the time of the Olympics in 1996. I was staying at the home of a charming southern belle by the name of Anne, in her 70s at the time.

Anne had a lovely home, full of memorabilia of her time as a *grande dame* of Atlanta society, and as we were sitting on her plant-festooned veranda one evening she said, in her languid southern drawl, "Derek, darlin', you know ah hayve a daughter, named Amalia; we gave her a purty name, nothing Gorgia, you understaynd. A real beauteh, even if ah do say so mahself. But y'know, she's havin' a relationship with a German man, a nice fella I do admit, an she's happy, but they don't have sex together. Ah believe it's what's called a Teutonic relationship."

A splendid malapropism, delivered with style.

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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