

Sea-view.

Hans Op de Beeck

I haven't taken a holiday for years. The word 'holiday' gives me a slight sense of unease; words like 'leisure activities' and 'sight-seeing' flash through my mind, memories of long walks in the woods under an overcast sky come flooding back. I can smell wet socks, I see myself lining up with other tourists in front of some obscure medieval castle with an equally obscure history...

Whilst I understand the value of walks in the woods and medieval castles, it is difficult for me to isolate a specific period in which to devote myself exclusively to such pastimes. A holiday always gives me the feeling of programmed loafing and impermissible sloth. It is not that I am never lazy, but I prefer to be lazy in unguarded moments rather than in a specific period reserved for the purpose in my diary...

In the year 2003 I was sitting at the kitchen table with my tiredness, a close friend, when my partner came and sat down next to us. Sighing, she said "And now we're going to have a week away, a week doing absolutely nothing, just us two and our son... and sun, sea, waving palms and that sort of thing..." Needless to say, sun, sea and waving palms have never been my cup of tea.

It reminded me of when as a small boy I heard my grandmother talking about her trip to Benidorm in Spain. She had brought back souvenirs, kitsch dolls in billowing, pink and pale-blue dresses under a glass dome. She showed me faded Polaroid photographs my grandfather had taken of my corpulent grandmother, posing cheerlessly in a setting of – yes – sun, sea and waving palms... You could see from those Benidorm snapshots that the mushrooming skyscraper architecture of the fifties and sixties was already marring that part of the coast. I was still too young to find it ugly and not yet old enough to see beauty in the ugliness. To me it all looked wonderful: to an innocent lad from a provincial town, those photographs were as impressive as the Manhattan skyline.

At school during my teens I heard the word "Benidorm" uttered with scorn. I learned what was wrong with the place and discovered that my grandmother was not quite the globetrotter I had originally thought.

Benidorm, that was insignificant, working-class holiday kitsch, an ugly joke that had got out of hand; literally the last beach resort for chocolate-brown bronzed OAPs.

So imagine my surprise a few years ago when my mother, yes, *my* mother, told me she and her husband and another married couple were planning a holiday in Benidorm. “Be-ni-dorm”! I repeated, and I spat the word out like a mouthful of contaminated food.

I thought of the faded Polaroid photographs and imagined how my mother would be photographed, like her own mother before her, posing cheerless against a backdrop of sun, sea and waving palms...

But let us return to a year ago, when I was sitting at the kitchen table with my partner and my fatigue... “If we do take a week’s holiday”, I said, “why not in Benidorm?” In the autumn I would be working on an art project in New York relating to entertainment and amusement, so a visit to the Walhalla of leisure-time consumption at its worst, the place where Brits, Dutch, Belgians, Germans and the occasional lost Spaniard fraternize in their mutual desire to do nothing, seemed the perfect destination.

And so it was. We went the whole hog and chose a typical tour operator and a typical ‘all-in’ Benidorm package: plane, bus to and from the hotel, hotel room, restaurant, drinks at the bar, swimming pool, entertainment evenings, bingo... all included.

To me it sounded more like the name of a Barbie playground, but our hotel really was called the Magic Crystal Park Hotel, a carbuncle of a building with corridor after corridor of rooms all with salmon-pink doors and shiny gold handles.

On arrival we noted that most of the hotel guests were either young thirty-somethings with children (we fitted perfectly into that category) or senior citizens, retired schoolteacher types. The Brits were in the majority. Most were overweight, the women peroxidized, the men tattooed, the boys sporting soccer shirts and the girls fluorescent separates that bared the navel.

It soon becomes clear that anyone in search of that ‘extra dimension’ can forget it in this tourist trap devoid of history, devoid of places to explore, museums, music and theatre and any architecture worthy of the name. A place where everything is transparent, crystal clear, unashamedly tasteless and mediocre.

From a reflective distance and even from an aesthetic point of view, a place as dull as Benidorm is interesting. A place like that says much about the extent to which social change can be engineered and about the humanization of space. About how man tries to tame, mould and structure open spaces to the needs of consumption, leisure activities, programmed amusement, and also pursues what has since become an utterly obsolete image of what a holiday paradise

should look like. What I mean is, those palm trees on the beach do look very much as if they have been planted there... Now that almost everyone is able to afford to fly to far-flung tropical islands, Benidorm has become a poor substitute, even for the sun-sea-and-waving-palms brigade.

But it is in Benidorm that the absurdity, the tragicomedy and the emptiness of life is most aptly portrayed. On the beach you see magnificent *tableau vivants* of little groups of OAPs lying motionless and in silence, their eyes closed and their faces pointed at the sun, their grey locks of hair dancing in the wind.

Another image that has stayed with me is the tall octogenarian who sat staring into space in the foyer of the Magic Crystal Park Hotel dressed in a Superman outfit; the embodiment of the tragicomedy of Benidorm.

There is of course much that is decadent about that bizarre resort; all those 'all inclusive' hotels where an insane - a baroque - quantity and variety of tasteless, ready-to-eat, mass-produced food stands steaming, taunting you to pig out, simply because it is all 'all inclusive'. The tourist here feels little embarrassment, even though he, or rather she, insists on going topless at the age of eighty.

Apart from the beauty of the ugliness, apart from the absurdity of that strange, new folklore, Benidorm also provides insight into the harrowing emptiness behind the decorum: the finiteness of things, the mortality, the vacuity.

Like the morning after the night before, when you switch on the light in the room where the party was held and see that sobering still life of stale beer, of indefinable heaps, bones picked clean, soggy pizza boxes and overflowing ashtrays. The decorations that had looked so festive the evening before, now hang dejected and incongruous almost like the aftermath of a drama. That is the melancholy that follows a party. It is the flip side of gaiety.

It is this melancholy that descends upon Benidorm when the sun *doesn't* shine; then suddenly the snapshot no longer tallies with the reality, and the good humour evaporates. When it rained we heard surly, bad-tempered young parents suddenly let fly at their children. Scores of all-inclusives began looking around in very obvious boredom, chain-smoking, or abandoning themselves with rather too much aggression to the fruit machines in the dark amusement arcades, where the children in particular take refuge when the weather takes a turn for the worse. In Benidorm, as on the Belgian coast, the low-ceilinged amusement arcades are packed with uninspiring little cars hurtling to and fro, small helicopters for the tiny tots and droning and flashing gaming machines for the older ones.

Many of the things you find in Benidorm, you find at every beach resort. All that is Spanish has been skilfully erased. The Brits, Dutch, Belgians and Germans have their own bars, their own shops and – yes – even a version of their own newspaper printed in Spain. The idea seems to be to make everything as chummy, as convivial and gregarious as it is at home. And gregariousness is a strange thing...

As a person of culture, you will of course find gregariousness irksome. Gregariousness implies a sense of community, and communal feelings don't belong among an elite. For example, there came a time when it was not *done* for artists to go along to the chummy theatre foyer or to the designer eating place or artists' café. Instead, they went along to an ordinary working-class bar decorated in poor taste, or not decorated at all; it was not gregarious, but it was at least *real*. The funny thing is that one emerged disappointed, because of course it was not long before that bar also became gregarious, because gregariousness is not a question of taste but something you take with you.

Benidorm has no history and so everything is fake. For example, you can go on a number of lukewarm outings, such as to the nearby mock castle for a spot of jousting with real fake knights. In a bid to create a place with history, one evening the kitchen staff at the Magic Crystal Park Hotel dressed up as Roman soldiers, yes, Roman soldiers! The more adventurous lads can enrol for a 'jeep safari': the notice publicizing this not-to-be-missed outing suggests "A day out with Indiana Jones?", and underneath is a photograph of four badly parked jeeps in an arid landscape. Safari? Is there perhaps a very long-in-the-tooth lion roaming around, its services now surplus to the local circus's requirements? Do we really need a jeep and a safari suit down the road from Benidorm?

Another folder recommends a trip to the most *picturesque* village on the Casa Blanca. No, never trust that word 'picturesque' – unless you want to find yourself wandering around in a cheap watercolour.

There is also a curious mountain bike trip on offer: it is thirty-eight kilometres long, but the whole route is downhill, I read in bold letters, and the road surface well asphalted.

Yes, in fact the danger seems to have been taken out of everything in a bid to provide tourists with innocuous entertainment. So much so that you feel the stuffing has been knocked out of the place; the town is spineless. On the surface there is nothing to suggest conflict, surprise, indefiniteness, danger, tension, mystery, unpredictability... all those things that give a town oxygen, which make a town worth seeing.

Here you traipse back and forth from beach A to beach B. Perhaps it is the absence of the 'flow of life' which makes you feel you have arrived at a sort of entry point, an end point, a dead-end

street. Whereas in airports and large towns, real life (and not just the tourist) flows continuously in and out, here everything is stifled by linearity and demarcation.

In Benidorm you are no longer in transit; in fact you come to a standstill. That stagnation began to weigh heavily after a few days, even if we had come prepared for a week of brainless relaxation. When you take a week out in say *Barcelona*, then at least you are in *Barcelona*. Even if you don't do a thing, you feel alive. Life whistles around your ears. I have been known to take the train from Brussels to Paris simply to have a cup of coffee and a chat with a French friend. Not to comb the city's art institutions, but just for a cup of coffee and the buzz of the city around us. Nothing more, nothing less. But what buzzes in Benidorm?

But who am I to speak in such deprecatory terms? Is it not above all the confrontation with one's own relativeness, one's own mediocrity, one's own mortality that hits you in the face there?

Perhaps we should wish for nothing *more* than the nothingness of Benidorm's unimaginable Zen.

From when I was a toddler, my mother took me and my little brother and sisters with her on holiday to the Belgian coast. Practically every school holiday. Year after year. Sea-view after sea-view. Mother must have made some secret pact with that fickle stretch of the Belgian landscape. Was it the semi-wet sand into which her heels sank, the salty taste in her mouth, the smell of the seaweed left high and dry on the shore, the biting wind around her ears?

She lives by the sea now, but I would like to believe that she is not looking for the *stagnation* of Benidorm. All she wants is the sea. Wherever it is. For her it's about gazing at the water. She simply turns her back on the mushrooming skyline; that is replaceable, unimportant.

It is the sea-view, the unattainable horizon, the ebb and flow of the tide.

There she is at peace, with the nothingness and the nowhere.

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