

# FOCUS

## • THAT HOLIDAY BLITZ

There's no hiding place from the post-Xmas media blitz by the British holiday industry. TV screens, papers, magazines, billboards, they're all blazing out tantalising temptations for the summer of '86. In business terms, well over one million holiday units remain to be sold, and with no more £5 gimcrack stunts, there's no more free publicity. But the trade is bullish. With basic prices for basic hols at a decided low, few people with the choice will risk another British hoi after last summer's dismal weather. Few people overall will do without any sort of holiday - the annual escape has long ceased to be a luxury, and many other things will get sacrificed for that fortnight's break.

What do British people want from these holidays? The ads screech all the 'Ss'. Sun, sand, sea, some sort of sex. This theme seems irresistible, and why not. But time was when going abroad meant more than that formula. Indeed the first organised British packaged trips emerged mid last century through Mr Thomas Cook. His loyalty was to the temperance movement, and his hols were supposed to lead away from the booze. Then in that busybody Victorian manner, he meant to 'improve'. His trips to places like Egypt were intended as an appeal to the mind, education through leisure.

This old idea of travel broadening the mind has been well junked. By those on the Left as much as others. Socialist and communist countries too aren't interested in Westerners experiencing their political systems. Sure, you can join work brigades in Nicaragua and such like, but that's marginal. These countries really want your hard foreign currency. And that means competing in the conventional travel market place.

You can visit Cuba on an expensive package and stay in Varadero, well away from Havana and bluntly, an upmarket tourist compound. Luxury hotels, a magnificent beach, 'folktheme' cabarets, tables groaning under fruit and food the average Cuban would never see. You need know nothing nor have any contact with Cuba's revolution, you're simply on an exotic Caribbean island holiday. This summer you can buy a £1000-

plus visit to the Bolshoi via Concorde. The Black Sea coastal resorts of Rumania and Bulgaria claim you can get all the Costa del Sol offers at cheaper prices. And hell, the last citadel falls this year with North Korea gingerly opening up for its first tourists from the West (via Regent and for well over £1000).

By and large, British Labour supporters, socialists and trade unionists prefer it this way. They leave their politics behind in the Gatwick departure lounge. How many of us can honestly claim we've made real efforts to meet people who aren't waiters or chambermaids? It's a strong feature of our British insularity that even those of us who should know better treat foreign holidays as just that, not as places with their own resident populations, their own political ways, their own genuine cultures.

With our tan lotions and sunglasses, we don't want to know any more. And that's a real shame. Malta is a small island, with strong British links and a beleaguered Labour administration. They've been pitching their hols for some while now at British working folk. The island has a string of affable Labour Clubs which implore tourists to drop in, share a drink, have a meal, talk about their interests. But as one Labour club manager told me; 'So many British just want to get drunk, get dizzy in the strong sun and they regard us as dagoes'. He spoke in sadness not anger, and with some incomprehension.

And what of holidays in the Third World - those deliciously unspoilt and cheapish places? I'm somewhat torn here. Between the gross insensitivity of being white and rich in societies to whom I might as well be from Mars. And the fact that my money might be of some use. That is if the air fares and hotel bills don't just go straight back to a European conglomerate. The Gambia is currently a popular spot for winter sun. It wasn't long ago when the Edgar Rice Burroughs Inc company nearly bought the whole country up, intending to turn it into 'Tarzania', a theme country.

Tourism as we know it doesn't mean nation shall speak unto nation. And that works both ways. I live near Westminster and all year round the streets are full of visitors scurrying in and out of coaches, hunting down the Abbey, Buckingham Palace etc. Any time I try to engage such folk in conversation, they lurch back in some surprise, and not because I look strange. If I did look strange, like a Beefeater or a Chelsea pensioner, they'd understand that and no doubt take my photo. But that aside, there's no contact, it's not wanted, it disrupts the packaged experience of the modern holiday.

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