The mechanism may have worked, but it was hardly fair. ' Cancelling out the past was justified as a way of achieving reconciliation. The division born during the Civil War and boosted during the terrible post-war period had to be overcome. Proof that it had not been overcome, and remained latent, was that one side—that of the losers—was forced to forget as a condition for taking part in the new game,' says Morán.

Most Spaniards now believe democracy was somehow inevitable. Spain had become much wealthier. Its traditional class structure was broken down by the move from the countryside to the city. An urban middle class was in place by the time Franco died, ready to demand democracy and make it work.

Franco’s legacy has not fully disappeared, though.

One of the things that helped prepare Spain for democracy was tourism. This took off, and then boomed, under Franco. It made an indelible mark on the country that persists today. The pink-skinned tourists brought with them not just money but the mores and attitudes of democratic northern Europe. The wind of change that blew south with the first package tourists was symbolised by something that, when first seen on a Spanish beach, shocked and delighted people in equal proportions—the bikini. To find out just how those two little pieces of cloth had changed Spain, and how the hordes who arrive every summer continue to do so, I would have to head for the beach. The Spanish costas, in all their terrible, garish glory, awaited.

Four

How the Bikini Saved Spain

The route along the lower half of Spain’s eastern coast has been travelled many times by invaders and colonisers. They have come south from Europe, north from Africa or, in pirate or trading ships, over the Mediterranean horizon. The place names along the coastline that stretches north from the semi-desert of Almeria at Cabo de Gata provide constant reminders: from the Carthaginian Qart Hadast, now Cartagena; to the Romans’ Valenta and Dianium, now Valencia and Denia; and, in far greater number, to Moorish settlements with names like Alicante (Al-akant) and Alcoy or Benicassim and Beniali.

Driving north from Almeria I am reminded, once more, that this is Spain’s driest, dustiest corner. Every time I come here, I am shocked by the harsh, unforgiving nature of the landscape. Even Old Castile, with its parched, yellowed lands, has nothing on it. Water is the local gold, fought over by neighbours, villages and towns. The politicians in Madrid invent, and then scrap, pharaonic systems for diverting the rivers of northern Spain down to this parched corner of the country. Ancient irrigation systems, Roman or Moorish in origin, allow the soil to perform the miracle of growing things. The plants traditionally grown here give an idea of the almost biblical nature of the place. There are acid-sweet medlars, almonds, carobs (which supposedly kept St John the Baptist alive in the wilderness) and, inland at Elche, ancient plantations of date palms that transport you straight to the Arabian desert. The mountains here are all rock. They rear up in great, glittering shards or loom, hazy, grey and menacing, in the distant, pulsating heat.

It all sounds very uninviting. Nineteenth-century travellers were advised...
to skip this part of Spain. But one adventurous British lady, Mrs Ramsay, came up this coast by train in 1874 and sternly ticked off fellow travellers for choosing ‘to pass this lovely country by night.’ She found, at least to the north of Valencia, that the railway passes close to the sea, which stretches its calm blue expanse away to the horizon: not a sail breaks the loneliness; the ripple washes lazily into sheltered sandy coves; the rocks are covered with heath, palmitos (dwarf palm trees), thyme, and all kinds of aromatic herbs; and the stately pines give a peculiar repose to the landscape. Certainly, the arid climate did not stop this coast attracting the attention of the great Mediterranean cultures. Four centuries before Christ it produced La Dama de Elche, the most spectacular sculpture of the Iberian, pre-Roman culture. The elegant Dama wears what look like elaborately carved cart-wheels over her ears and boasts what must have been the best lips in antiquity.

This is also one of the far-flung outposts of flamenco, where it was sung in local mines. So, I thought, it was still appropriate to have the full, fibrous voice of singer Camarón de la Isla filling the car with, alternately, his pain or alegría as I turned north after a long road trip east from Seville. With Camarón keeping me company, the dusty landscape slid quickly past. A few hours later, I was a quarter of the way up the coast, passing Alicante.

A few miles north from Alicante a thin, mysterious, pole-like structure began to emerge over some distant hills. As the kilometres ticked by, it remained virtually unchanged in size. I realised that I must be looking at something a long way off in the distance. Eventually, the pole began to thicken and, cresting one of the hills along this bumpy coastline, I finally realised I was reaching what the Moors called Beni-Darhim (the son, or followers, of Darhim). The gradually broadening shape ahead of me was Spain’s tallest building, the Gran Hotel Bali. It stood like a proud, raised finger on the edge of a place whose current name is not only easily recognised, but has become a modern legend of its own—for this, finally, was Benidorm.

If anywhere in Spain symbolises the country’s latest invasion, this is it. A fresh invading horde, sun-hat and sandal-wearing northern European tourists, has rampaged its way along this coast over the past forty years. The horde has made Benidorm its capital. This time there has been no resistance. The burghers of Benidorm have rolled out a welcome carpet of concrete, tarmacadam and brick. Jointly they have vandalised what was once one of the most beautiful spots on the Spanish coast.

Even those of us who are instinctively appalled by Benidorm, however, cannot help but be awe-struck by what has happened here. For locals it is a genuine miracle. The closest thing I have to a Spanish family, one side of my partner’s maternal family, comes from Tárbenas, a village of six hundred people stuck high up in the mountains above Benidorm. The genetic codes of the peoples who surged backwards and forwards across La Marina—as this part was known until a tourism marketing department renamed it the Costa Blanca, the White Coast—are imprinted somewhere in that of my own children.

Tárbenas was once a Moorish village whose inhabitants, given no other option except exile from their home of six hundred years, became moriscos—nominally Christian converts—after the Reconquista. Even that, however, did not save them. In 1609, Felipe III ordered the moriscos out of Spain. Today’s Tarbeneros are descendants of the seventeen families imported from the island of Majorca to replace them. They still make the same, soft, paprika-flavoured sobrasada sausages of the Majorcans and speak a peculiar dialect of Catalan, which is mainly Valencian, but is still coloured by words of Majorcan.

My children’s great-grandfather, Salvador Ripoll Martí, was one of many emigrants who left this stretch of the Mediterranean in 1916. He headed to the Americas, building a life for himself in New York and then in his wife’s country, Panama. He returned to live out his retirement and, finally, die here in La Marina.

He was buried in the cemetery at Tárbenas, alongside his brothers and sisters and the generations of Ripolls and Martís who had eked out a living from the almonds, the oranges, the lemon trees and the medlars of these austere and desiccated hills. It was from this graveyard, during a night-time stroll, that I first set eyes on Benidorm. This was the early 1990s so the Hotel Bali was still just a hole in the ground. But, there below me in the distance, I could make out the glistening, glaring lights of what one Spanish writer refers to as ‘the great tourpolis.’ Its sudden appearance seemed to me to make a dramatic and violent intrusion on Tárbenas’s otherwise undisturbed, mountain-top calm.

Few in Tárbenas would have agreed with me. For Salvador Ripoll Martí’s relatives who still live there, and for those who moved down the hill and into the bright lights, Benidorm is a modern marvel.

There is no better symbol of that Benidorm miracle, with all its glaring
faults, than the Hotel Bali. Fifty-two floors, 186 metres high, the Bali is at its most spectacular at night, and from a distance. Then it looks like a massive, silver knife, projecting beams of light up into the clouds. By day, close up, it is a dull, grey, concrete and glass giant. "We kept waiting for them to paint it," quipped a drinker at one of the Union flag-bedecked, Sky TV and all-day-British-breakfast bars—with names like the Pheasant Plucker, the Jolly Sailor and the Bridewell—that surround it, when I visited.

The building of the Bali was an epic affair. It was put up gradually over fourteen years by a group of local hotel owners who poured their annual profits into it. No loans were taken. The Bali was built on the back of a boom. On good years it rose steadily upwards. On excellent ones it went still faster. That alone made it, by the standards of the construction industry, one of the strangest buildings to have gone up in Europe in recent decades. It is an accurate symbol of modern Benidorm. The Bali is ambitious but pragmatic, big but boring, great but gruesome. It is, in short, what it, and Benidorm, was designed to be—a vast container for package tourism. And Benidorm is to package tourism what Las Vegas is to gambling—the undisputed capital of the world.

As you draw closer to the town from the south, the Bali is joined in the distance by an army of skinny skyscrapers. They look like a hundred matchsticks standing on end. Some are so thin and tall that one wonders whether a strong gust of wind might not blow them down. A typhoon that blew through this plantation of cement poles might, one imagines, leave it looking like a forest after a violent storm, the buildings uprooted and lying on the floor in a jumble, like so many spillikins or jackstraws.

It is also, however, the high-rise capital of southern Europe. Neither Paris, nor Milan, Rome, Athens, Barcelona or Madrid can compete with its 330 high-rises. No wonder locals have dubbed it, in deference to New York, BeniYork. In Europe as a whole it is out-skyscraped only by Frankfurt, Moscow and Greater London. Paris and London are the only places in Europe with more hotel rooms than Benidorm, which has some 38,000. If Spain is a global superpower in tourism—and it is—then Benidorm is the towering symbol of that status.

Staying in the Bali the night after it had opened, I found myself riding up and down its glass exterior lift, drawn to the nosy-parker view of the front rooms of apartments in a dozen other skyscrapers. The lifts here are, on their own, a reminder that modern Benidorm exists for, and because of, foreigners. ‘Stand away from the doors when closing,’ the lift ordered me, in an English voice which, in my memory at least, had a light Manchester accent. ‘Las puertas están cerrando,’ it repeated—the Spanish vowels mashed flat by the very same English voice. A designer who pitched to work on the lay-out of bedrooms told me he was asked to think of ‘an English butcher’s wife’ when coming up with ideas.

Fifty years ago, this was a modest beach-side village, a place of sailors, fishermen and farmers who patiently tended almond, olive, carob and citrus trees. My children’s grandmother first came here, on the way to visit her father’s village, in the 1950s. She found a three-mile-long, double crescent of almost virgin golden sand and rolling dunes. In those days, the village sat on and around a rocky outcrop that divided the two beaches, Poniente and Levante. Small fishing boats, the tarrafas, hung with four large lanterns each to attract fish at night, bobbed in the water or lay drawn-up on the sand. The men often spent months away from home, as sailors, officers or captains on coastal steamers and transatlantic ships or working the almadraba, the complicated maze of nets laid out to trap tuna fish. The system of diverting the fish into a small killing zone, the ‘copia,’ where they could be killed with iron hooks and harpoons, was perfected under the Moors. Archaeological evidence was once found here of pre-Roman jars for storing the valuable oil in which tuna was conserved. The Iberian settlement where the jars were found has now, inevitably, been buried under concrete. Benidorm, like Spain, would rather look forwards than back. A few archaeological remains were hardly going to survive the gold-rush fever of tourism.

The almadraba was a massive, complex task, a piece of maritime engineering with more than 1,000 kilometres of rope, netting and cables, fixed by hundreds of anchors, rings and gates, used to create a single maze covering some six square kilometres of sea. The men of Benidorm were almadraba experts. They would be called for from as far away as Tunisia and Sicily to lay the nets as the fish migrated south in the early summer and returned north in the autumn. The women, meanwhile, tended the olives, the almonds, the lemons, oranges and carobs.

Benidorm attracted relatively few visitors. In 1950 there were four or five small fondas, pensions and hotels for the odd commercial traveller or for families from Madrid or Barcelona who came to spend the summer. A handful of holiday villas belonged to wealthy families from Valencia, Alcoy and Madrid.
'We didn’t call it “turismo” back then, we called it “veraneo,” summering. We got the word “tourism” later, from the Swiss,' the man who was mayor in the 1950s, Pedro Zaragoza Orts, told me when I visited him on his eighty-first birthday in Benidorm.

Zaragoza is the father of modern Benidorm. When I met him, this largely unreconstructed Francoist was still fighting fit and a passionate defender of what had happened to his village. To find him, I had needed to negotiate my way through the town centre’s bustling, overcrowded streets, following a man dressed in a flowing, spangled blue cape and glittery top hat. The man was steering a perilous-looking vehicle from a driver’s seat perched on top of a ladder some fifteen feet above the wheels. A loudspeaker blasted music and publicity for a nearby water park.

Zaragoza’s office was tucked at the back of a nondescript, modern arcade, in the small, chaotic town centre. 'I was born here,' he said, pointing to one corner of the office. 'My mother died there ten days afterwards,' he added, indicating another corner. He was pointing to places that, like most of old Benidorm, no longer existed. His old home had been knocked down long ago to build this drab, functional block and, one assumes, make some money for his family.

Zaragoza’s appointment as mayor had little to do with democracy and everything to do with the Franco regime. A certificate showing his appointment as provincial head of Franco’s Movimiento Nacional sits on the office wall where, when I went to see him, he still did a bit of lawyering.

What Zaragoza has never been, however, is conservative. He is proud of the Moorish and Jewish blood that, he believes, must run somewhere in his veins. He has an almost Messianic view of tourism as a way of promoting understanding between peoples and cultures.

He is also one of the few Spaniards alive to have had an excommunication process started against him. The blame for that lies with the bikini. 'Without asking permission from anyone, I signed a municipal order authorising the wearing of bikinis,' he explained. 'So the archbishop started an excommunication process. In those days, excommunication was a form of civil death. It meant you could not take entry exams for official jobs, nor become a university student. You became a leper in society.'

This was in 1959, when the first fruits of his dream that Benidorm might become a tourist resort were beginning to ripen. Tall, blonde northern Europeans were arriving in their caravans or off the first package holiday flights to Valencia airport. To the dismay of a clergy which already considered beaches a moral danger to the nation, they also wore the, then voluminous, two-piece swimsuits known as bikinis. The Civil Guard would sometimes order them to cover up, especially if a bikini was spotted off the beach. An English woman was fined for slapping a police officer who insisted she put a shirt on.

Zaragoza’s friends in high places turned their backs on him when he took on the all-powerful Church. Two government ministers backed the excommunication campaign. So, one day, he got up at 4 a.m., stuffed some newspaper down his shirt to keep out the cold and got on his Vespa. He rode it for the nine hours it took to get to Madrid and went to see Franco.

‘He was the only one who helped me. He asked me how I had come, whether by train or airplane, and I said no, on a Vespa. That surprised him,' Zaragoza explained. 'He told me to go back to Benidorm. Eight days later his wife appeared with the Minister of Governance and his wife. They reconfirmed my appointment as mayor, gave me an insignia to wear on my jacket so that I could enter El Pardo (Franco’s Madrid palace) whenever I wanted and stayed for four or five days. After that, Franco’s wife, Carmen Polo, would come in the spring or the autumn. She would stay eight days, or fifteen days, in my house,' he said. The Caudillo, or at least his wife, became Benidorm’s leading patron.

The Archbishop got the message. The excommunication process was dropped. The bikini stayed. Some see this, at least symbolically, as a defining moment in recent Spanish history. It marked the beginning of a timid sexual revolution and helped take the Catholicism out of National Catholicism. The tourists, more importantly, had the power to outface the Church. They brought not just money, but the seeds of change. They also brought the fresh air of democracy. There was no turning back.

General Franco was there at the key moment. Without the bikini there, quite possibly, would have been no modern Benidorm and, in fact, precious little tourism at all. At this stage, had Spain not welcomed it, the nascent package tourism could easily have put its roots down elsewhere in the Mediterranean.

Bikinis would eventually make it past cinema censors in 1964. By 1979, with Franco less than four years in the grave, Spain’s beaches—and Spanish women—had gone topless. Today even some municipal swimming pools have nudist zones.
In Benidorm, these days, things can occasionally go so far the other way that they get out of hand. I found this out the day Mercedes, who works in the news department of state broadcaster TVE, called me to say that an e-mail being circulated amongst her colleagues was provoking loud, uncontrollable outbursts of laughter. As it involved my compatriotas in Benidorm, perhaps I would like to see it?

And so I came into possession of a news article from *Levante*, a serious-minded local newspaper, the contents of which, I was sure, Zaragoza would disapprove. The article quoted from a report by the town’s police. At 3.30 a.m. on a hot August night, they had been called to investigate strange noises emerging from *Levante* beach, in what was referred to as the ‘zona inglesa,’ ‘the English zone.’ There they discovered a group of 200 people cheering on the activities of a señorita and four men, three of whom were penetrating the señorita. Sexual squeamishness not being a Spanish thing, both the police report and the newspaper explained in precise detail how this feat was being achieved. Ages, names and nationalities were dutifully recorded. The fifth member of the group, I was informed, was filming the others while ‘waiting his turn to enter into action.’

The police report identified the woman and one man as British, while the others were Swiss and French. They were persuaded to stop what they were doing. No one in the crowd, however, would admit that they had had their sensibilidad berida, sensibilities hurt, or would bring charges. Uncertain what to do, the local police patrol bundled the five into their wagons and took them back to the station. The incident, however, was far from over. When the wagon doors were opened, the señorita and the cameraman were found to have recommenced the activities interrupted on the beach. They were reaching the peak of their excitement, thereby, in the official words of the police report, ‘bringing to an end their brilliant performance.’

Spain is a tourism superstar. It attracts 53 million foreign visitors a year (16 million of them British and 2.3 million of them Dutch). One in twenty come to Benidorm or the rest of the Costa Blanca. More than 11 per cent of Spain’s economy runs off tourism. Some of the credit for that has to go to the old dictator. The same families who turned small plots of beachside farming land into hotels in Majorca, the Costa Brava or the Costa del Sol are now building or running resorts from Cuba and Santo Domingo to Jamaica, Bulgaria and Tunisia.

In 1950, still in his twenties, Zaragoza began to draw broad boulevards on...
the map where only olive and almond trees stood. Benidorm, like much of this coast from Valencia south, had an ancient agricultural watering system inherited from the Moors. But it had no running, domestic water supply. Drinking water was sold by a man with a mule that dragged a huge cask on wheels. Water wheels were still being used to move water in the fields. Waste was carried out of people’s houses in buckets and tipped into the sea or onto the earth. 'We asked ourselves what we had. The answer was not agriculture. It was too dry here. But we had the climate, we had our own, liberal temperament—the result of years of sailing the oceans—and we had the sand on the beach,' he explained. 'It had to be tourism.' Little Benidorm—as neighbouring towns like Alcudia or Denia with Greek or Roman pasts like to remind them—did not even have any significant history to sell. One of Zaragoza’s first jobs, indeed, was to invent a town shield. Then he got on with the task of inventing what is, in effect, a new town.

Zaragoza claims the transformation of Benidorm, which followed six years of intense planning, was achieved by consensus. He likes to point to the fact that his original fantasy boulevards, eighty metres wide, were eventually halved in size. These boulevards swept imperiously through small plots of land carefully handed down from generation to generation over centuries. Many people thought he was mad. But he piped water in from fifteen kilometres away in Polop—though that took until 1960 and needed a group of fifty-seven villagers to pledge to pay for the loan needed to buy a distant estate with a good well. He got the imaginary boulevards approved and, most importantly, decided that, when it came to fresh building, height would be no block. A piece of land could get planning permission on the basis of volume, of so many cubic metres of building per square metres of land. Zaragoza picked up a book to explain. 'The building volume could be used like this,' he said, laying the book flat. 'Or it could be used like this, or this,' he said, placing the book first on its spine and then, holding it upright, as if sitting on a bookshelf. 'And if they did it that last way, there was space for gardens, for swimming pools, for tennis courts, or for car parking,' he said. The match-stick high-rise was born.

In fact, this may have been more by accident than design. Zaragoza’s dream was of a middle-class garden city with small tourist hotels. In 1950, however, a man called Vladimir Raitz founded a travel company on London’s Fleet Street which he named Horizon. It took a group of British tourists to Calvi in Corsica in an airliner which, for the first time, was fleeted especially for the passengers. The package tour was born. Second World War Dakotas, lying around unused, were soon pressed into service. By 1953 he was flying people to Spain and took 1,700 of the new ‘package tourists’ abroad. 'I am pleased by what I have achieved,' he said in 1993, by which time 12 million British people were flying abroad every year. 'But I am upset by what has happened in some destinations.'

Benidorm’s defenders, and there are architects amongst them, say this embracing of the high-rise is the key to its success. It was inspired by the same movement that was replacing the bombed-out streets in London, Paris and Berlin with high-rise blocks of flats. It may seem crowded a hundred metres up, but, by the standards of the rest of the Spanish costa, it is light and airy on the ground. It also has the advantage, for a tourist resort, of packing a lot of people close to the beach.

And that, after all, is what Benidorm is about. Its high-rises are so many tourist canisters, filled up, flushed out and filled up again, week in, week out. It is an efficient system.

It may be a massive eyesore, but spread those tourists out horizontally—the way they have done in Marbella or, further down the coast from Benidorm, in Torrevieja and numerous other spots—and they go on for ever. If Benidorm, with its twenty-four square miles and 12.3 kilometres of coastline really does account for 5 per cent of foreign holidaymakers (38,000 hotel rooms of some 700,000) in Spain, then, in theory, the rest could be plonked on an island the size of, say, Ibiza. Alternatively, more of them could still be shovelled into little Benidorm—where building land is by no means all used up.

Benidorm’s beach is still beautiful. But now you have to hire a top-floor suite at the Bali if you want to appreciate just how majestic those twin curves of gold are. Most visitors are left to glimpse it through a thicket of buildings. The beach is cleaned every night by machines which churn up and filter the sand. This system is now used all over Spain. A recent newspaper report tells how a woman who fell asleep on a beach was swallowed up by one of the machines. A sign in one, older, beachside hotel overshadowed by the Bali, reminded me that Benidorm’s reputation for the cheap and shoddy would never quite go. 'Clients are reminded that reception has a special thinner available to help you remove grease or tar from your feet,’ it read.

Zaragoza’s dream of a pan-European, middle-class holidaying utopia does not quite live up to closer inspection. For Benidorm is, for British
tourists at least, a great, and mostly working-class—or lower-middle-class—
institution. This is Blackpool, or Skegness, on the Med. It is a nice, warm, fa-
miliar, safe place, full of pies and chips, British cooked breakfasts, English
drinking holes, Sky television and the sort of entertainment once provided by
working-men’s clubs. With time, paella and sangria have stopped being ex-
otic. They have simply joined the list of British holiday staples.

I tried walking down Levante beach asking British people why they were
there. ‘Because I’ve been coming for seventeen years,’ was one reply. ‘The co-
median in the clubs are great,’ was another, referring to the British stand-ups
who come here to work the summer season. And, what is more, they truly
loved it. In the mid-1990s the town hall managed to find a British couple who
had visited seventy-two times. I have never seen it, but I feel sure that some-
body, somewhere is selling long, gooey, pink sticks of Benidorm Rock.

Foreign visitors might be surprised to know, however, that this is also a
big resort for Spaniards, with a large community of ‘ex-pat’ Basques and a
large number of second homes for those from Madrid. It also has a reputa-
tion, amongst Spanish pensioners, for being the best place in Spain for pick-
ing up members of the opposite sex.

Benidorm has also become a huge joke. British newspapers occasionally
come here to sneer. I know this because, as a correspondent, I have done it
too. But I also have a creeping respect for this carbuncular miracle, this
sick, garish tourism machine that sells one thing, and one thing alone—the
pleasure of a two-week holiday away from the accounts department, telephone
sales or the factory floor. No one is forced to come to Benidorm, yet
5 million visitors do every year. When Spaniards think that someone has
spotted an opportunity and made the most of it they say he is ‘ni tonto, ni
perezoso’—‘neither stupid, nor lazy.’ Perhaps that should go as a motto on
Benidorm’s fake shield.

I asked Zaragoza what he thought of criticism that Benidorm was an ugly
blight. ‘I don’t know if Benidorm is more or less attractive to look at than it
was, but it is definitely more liveable,’ he replied. ‘We have running water,
we have asphalt, we have hospitals. We didn’t have them before.’

The thought of criticism, however, soon made him angry. The critics, he
said, had mostly never set foot in Benidorm. He had heard, on the radio, a
town councillor from Marbella warning that that glitzy rich-man’s resort on
the southern Costa del Sol was going to rack and ruin. ‘He had the nerve to
say that it was going to end up like Benidorm. I rang him up, but he would
not come to the phone. They’ve got forty wealthy people who go there, and
the day they all go off to Morocco—which they might—they are sunk.’

Were there really only forty families in Marbella, I would not have been
sitting, a couple of months later, in the traffic jam on the road that runs
east-to-west, more or less along the beach, towards Málaga. This is the old
Herculean Way. It was used, in ancient times, by travellers from the south.
Now it is clogged up by people from all over the world. It ends, or begins,
where the twin Pillars of Hercules rear up at the mouth of the Mediter-
ranean. Legend has it that Hercules, busily completing his twelve labours (it
was the tenth), travelled along it on his way to steal the oxen of the three-
bodied giant Geryon. He put the pillars up as a memorial to his difficult
journey. One version of the tale also has him splitting the mountain be-
tween them to let the Mediterranean and Atlantic meet. The Pillars are, of
course, the Rock of Gibraltar and, at what sometimes seems like spitting
distance, Morocco’s towering Jabal Musa, where a last offshoot of the Atlas
Mountains runs into the sea.

A new toll motorway was opened a few years ago, further up in the hills,
but nothing gets rid of this traffic jam. It is as much a part of Marbella’s
summer as the constant rumours that Saudi Arabia’s royal family has
decided to make one of its rare visits. The family owns a huge palace complex,
which includes a replica of Washington’s White House, on what is known
as the Milla de Oro, the Golden Mile. The palaces sit, empty and aloof,
with the people of Marbella watching anxiously for signs of activity.

In a way, however, Zaragoza was right about the forty families. Marbella
has two kinds of summers. There are the normal bonanza years, when the
place fills up with minor Spanish celebrities and politicians, with Scandi-
vian yachtsmen, British golfers, Dutch tennis players, Russian and Italian
mafiosi or those seriously, even professionally, devoted to their own tans and
scalpel-aided good looks. Then there are the bonanza years when half a
dozen Saudi Boeing 747 airliners touch down at Málaga airport. The
monarch descends (the former King Fahd, in his wheelchair, used to be
lowered on a mechanical goods ramp) and the deluge begins. The rest of
what Zaragoza calls the forty families, the immensely wealthy gulf sheikhs
and assorted billionaires with mansions here, are likely to follow suit, if they
are not already here.

All, suddenly, is excess. On Fahd’s final visit in 2002, a fleet of five hun-
dred brand-new Mercedes hire cars appeared on transporters from Germany,
just to cope with the needs of his household. Fahd stayed for seven weeks with a retinue of some 3,000 people. Several hundred five- and four-star hotel rooms were block-booked for the period; half a dozen vast, multi-decked, gleaming, presumably teetotal, gin palaces were moored in the port at Puerto Banús; an entire floor of the local hospital, of which he is a generous benefactor, was reportedly placed on standby for the sickly monarch. His visit was said to have injected some 70 million euros into the town. Unfortunately for Marbella, it was only the fourth time he had come here to the palace complex he named An-nada, The Dew. When he died in 2005, the town hall declared three days of mourning.

Marbella is the other extreme of Spanish tourism. If Benidorm is buckets and spades, fish ’n’ chips and stand-up comics, Marbella is designer boutiques, ostentatious wealth and the lap-dancing clubs of Puerto Banús. But if Benidorm is, however horrific, a monument to hard work and determination, Marbella, with its triumphal arches, boastful monuments and brash, ornamental opulence, is a monument to corruption and uncontrolled greed. Benidorm blights the landscape, Marbella simply rapes it. Much the same can be said for the rest of the Costa del Sol.

Unlike Benidorm and the Costa Blanca, the Costa del Sol has always attracted visitors. Well before Britain’s criminal classes discovered, in the 1960s, that the lack of an extradition treaty made this the perfect hideaway in the sun, adventurous travellers were making their way to the beaches near Málaga. They were attracted by its port and a climate that rarely sinks, even in winter, to below 13 degrees centigrade, (55 fahrenheit). It was, in fact, during winter that visitors from the north would arrive in the 1920s, fleeing the rain-soaked, chilly weather of Britain and the north. Summer tourism was not really invented until the 1950s when, as one contemporary observer noted, northern Europeans began to ‘roast themselves on the beach throughout the torrid August days in a way that fills the local inhabitants with concern.’ The first tourists, as tourists do, stuck out like sore thumbs. ‘The ladies are conspicuous for their hats, shopping-bags, shapeless coiffures, and resolute expressions, features that are all absent from the Spanish woman,’ the same commentator, a British woman who had settled here a decade earlier, observed with obvious distaste.

The writer Laurie Lee arrived here in 1934. He was just nineteen and had reached Vigo, in Galicia, several months earlier by boat with just a handful of shillings and a violin. He wandered across the country by foot, occasionally joined by Spanish tramps, busking with his violin, a remarkable journey set out in As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning. Approaching Málaga from Cádiz, he walked along the coast, sleeping on the beach, occasionally immersing himself in the silent sea.

The road to Málaga followed a beautiful but exhausted shore, seemingly forgotten by the world. I remember the names—San Pedro, Estepona, Marbella, and Fuengirola . . . they were salt-fish villages, thin-ribbed, sea-hating, cursing their place in the sun. At that time one could have bought the whole coast for a shilling.

Far out to sea, through the melting mist, would emerge a white-sailed fishing fleet, voiceless, timeless, quiet as air, drifting inshore like bits of paper. But they were often ships of despair; they brought little with them, perhaps a few baskets of poor sardines. The women waited, then turned away in silence. The red-eyed fishermen threw themselves down on the sand.

In the late 1950s, Torremolinos—just down the coast from here, near Málaga—joined Benidorm, the Costa Brava and Majorca as one of the Meccas of the newly-invented package tourism. Before the Civil War it had been a hang-out for bohemian British and American artists. A retired British major installed himself in the town’s Santa Clara castle, pursuing his own eccentric form of spiritual, contemplative endeavour. He eventually gave all his money to the poor and handed the castle over to his gardener’s family on the condition that they let him live his final days in a bare, whitewashed room overlooking the sea.

An idea of what has been lost here can be given by two other British travellers. Writer Rose Macaulay stayed at the major’s castle, already transformed into a hotel, in 1949. There she met the only English tourists encountered during a long trip around the country. She swam out to sea at night and looked back to see ‘here and there, a light.’ Nowadays she would see nothing but light. The economist Marjorie Grice-Hutchinson, who lived here with her German farmer husband, rode her horse along the deserted seafront in the early 1950s. She swam on a beach where ‘you never see anyone . . . except an occasional coastguard and his dog, and can float for hours on the calm water, revelling in the spaciousness of sea, moor and vega, and exulting in the illusion that this vast world was made for you alone.’ It was a time, impossible to imagine now, when the sands were
thickly studded with pinky-white, strong, sweet-scented *Pancratium maritimum* lillies.

A few years earlier, in Marbella, a German aristocrat and entrepreneur, Alfonso de Hohenlohe, made a bid for the opposite end of the tourism market. He wanted to attract the type of Rolls-Royce-driving travellers who went to Cannes, Nice or Sardinia. He set up a beach club and hotel. Around it clustered new hotels, shops and restaurants catering for the very rich. Marbella grew, slowly and serenely to begin with, then frantically and uncontrollably.

The arrival of Fahd, and the building of his complex of palaces and mosques at El Rocio, sealed Marbella's status as a Mecca for wealth in the 1970s. Uncontrolled greed, and growth, set in. It is still growing today, a fast-expanding sprawl of *urbanizaciones*, erasing everything in their path. Even Hohenlohe would flee the ensuing nightmare.

'If I could destroy the horrors of Marbella, I would do. But I suspect I would need a lot of dynamite,' he said in one of his last interviews. 'Marbella enjoyed a simple sort of luxury, not at all pretentious, something appreciated by cosmopolitans—which does not mean those with most money. Today there are many rich *catetos*, oafs, who do not understand the meaning of sobriety.'

Sobriety is the last word one would associate with modern Marbella. It certainly does not describe the man responsible for the twenty-first-century version of it, the corrupt, medallion-wearing, millionaire property developer, football club owner and all-round thug, Jesús Gil y Gil. Fed up with paying backhanders to previous Marbella town halls while still having some of his property deals blocked, Gil ran for mayor himself with his Grupo Independentiente Liberal, or GIL, party, in 1991. He pledged a heavy hand with beggars, bag-snatchers and hippies. He also promised greater freedom to build. Some expected a 'fairer' system of corruption, too. The people of Marbella liked Gil's offer. They repeated over two more elections. 'I am a liberal dictator,' Gil once declared. If ever a people have deserved what they have got, it is the Marbellis—though the original race is now buried, if not under concrete, at least under the weight of Spanish and other immigrants.

Gil was already infamous in Spain. He first hit the headlines when he went to jail in 1969. A hotel he built near Segovia fell down on a conference of insurance agents, killing fifty-eight of them. Gil had tampered with the architects’ plans and skimmed on construction materials. He later went down on bended knees to beg clemency from a government minister. General Franco's regime freed him after 18 months. Gil eventually returned the compliment by placing a bust of the Generalísimo in the foyer of Marbella's town hall. His political discourse in the 1990s included occasional references to 'Jewish-Masonic plots.' 'I once said that we lived better under Franco and I am now more convinced of this than ever,' he declared a few years before his death in 2004. At local elections in 1999 Gil won 90,000 votes in the Costa del Sol. His area of control spread to the Spanish north African enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla and to other towns between Gibraltar and Marbella.

Gil perfected the system of running a town, and improving his personal fortunes along with those of friends and collaborators, through corruption and speculation. The more or less colourful Costa del Crime British crooks made way for big hitters from Russia or Italy. Men like Russian Leonid Terekhov, head of Moscow's hard-nosed Medvekovo mafia syndicate, arrived. Guns appeared. Frenchman Jacques Grangeon, a Marseilles drug smuggler, was gunned down with his wife Catherine in their Marbella villa. Tit-for-tat killings came with the laundered cash and no-questions-asked policy at the town hall.

Corruption spread. The chief judge at the local court was forced to leave after it was revealed that her brother, a wealthy Marbella businessmen, was doing deals with the same Italians whose cases were before the court. Her father, meanwhile, turned out to have been the court's senior clerk. Several British people awaiting trial were among those who claimed during the 1990s that they had been told a cash payment would secure a 'not guilty' verdict.

When 15,000 pages of paperwork relating to seven Gil corruption cases involving 60 million euros of municipal funds disappeared from the local court, police went to visit court clerk Francisco Calero at his suspiciously luxurious apartment. While the police were searching his cupboards, Calero ran out of the apartment and up onto the building's roof. Then he hurled himself off. He took Gil's secrets with him. Fear, or shame? Whichever it was, Calero's demise was an example of death by corruption.

Gil's verdict on the court papers being served on him continually was that they were useful to him as *papel higiénico*, toilet paper. Anti-corruption prosecutors from Madrid eventually put Gil in their sights. But the medallion-wearing man whose size saw him nicknamed 'Moby Gil' continued to duck
and dive. He threatened, bribed, cheated or simply defeated his opponents in court. He surrounded himself with loyal thugs. My only brush with him was to park beside his, already double-parked, chauffeur-driven car for a couple of minutes at Madrid’s Barajas airport. A large, aggressive chauffeur appeared, a suspiciously baggy jacket covering the bulge in his chest. He suggested I might like to move elsewhere. I ignored him and raced into the airport to grab a waiting friend. The look on his face when I came out, however, told me that only the presence of two small children in the back of my car had saved me from serious reprisals.

Eventually, however, Gil was banned from public office. His reaction was to step back into the shadows and appoint others to represent him. One of these, Julián Muñoz, eventually rebelled. Muñoz had ambitions to become a Jesús Gil himself. He was ousted in a town hall rebellion fixed by Gil in which the political parties of those involved seemed to have nothing to do with the way they voted. Some claimed that a rogue British financier, who fled London in the 1970s and made millions on Marbella real estate, was behind it all.

One hot summer’s night, I turned on the television set to find Gil and Muñoz involved in their final showdown. This was not being conducted on a politics or news programme but on Salsa Rosa. This late-night TV show is normally devoted, loudly and argumentatively, to updating its viewers on the sex lives, affairs of the heart, broken friendships and plastic surgery of second-rate celebrities. Spain has no muck-raking tabloid press. There is no equivalent to Britain’s Sun or Germany’s Bild. But there are at least half a dozen of these shows on Spanish television. A similar number of so-called prensa rosa, or ‘pink press,’ magazines are for sale on the news-stands. Here the cheque-book confessions of those famous for being famous are gone over in minute and, often, imaginary detail amid shouted bouts of accusation and counter-accusation. All the so-called ‘journalists’ on this particular programme really wanted to know was whether the reason for Gil’s decision to oust Muñoz had been that he could not stand his girlfriend, the folkloric singer and gay icon Isabel Pantoja. She had previously been known as ‘the widow of Spain’ after her former husband, the matador Paquirri, was gored to death by a fighting bull. But the battle soon got nastier than that. ‘You are a bandido,’ shouted Gil. ‘You are a liar and cheat,’ spat Muñoz. ‘They are both probably right,’ commented El Mundo newspaper the next morning.

Gil’s Marbella is often held up as an example of the perfection of a system of corruption that is a temptation to all Spanish town halls. Most land needs to be reclassified from ‘rural’ to ‘urban’ before it can be built on. The power to do that rests with the town hall, which raises a tax on the new buildings and sells licences. Much building land is, anyway, owned by town halls themselves. They are now so dependent on income gained from construction that, if they stopped building, some would lose between fifty and sixty per cent of their income. There may also be a second, underhand tax. This is the one that must be paid to the mayor, the councillor in charge of urban planning, their political party, their pet project, their wife, children, testafiero (front man) or whoever. Nobody can say, for sure, how often this tax is raised. Suspicious Spaniards assume it to be commonplace. If that is really so, then an unbreakable cycle is formed. The personal and political interests of both the developer and the politician meet, as do the spending habits (and funding) of the town hall. All they need to do is keep on building.

Stand on the busy beachfront in Marbella, or anywhere along the Costa del Sol, and this soon becomes apparent. The beachside development is moving rapidly up the hills, devouring everything in its path as the chain of cement joins up and down the coast. Year after year I have watched the growth and seen the last few islands of green along the coast disappear. Towns have been joined together, like some giant dot-to-dot drawing, by lines of apartment blocks. Where the beach is already blocked, there has been a steady march inland.

The voices of Spain’s environmentalists, meanwhile, are drowned out by the sound of cement mixers and pile-drivers. Golf courses have become the latest drain on already scarce water resources. Some eighty-nine of these are projected along the Costa over the next five years. Each will consume the equivalent of a town of twelve thousand people, according to the environmentalists.

The building boom is fuelled, in part, by the proceeds of the drug trade with nearby Morocco and, further afield, with Colombia. A recent 250-million-euro police operation against money-laundering saw entire urbanizaciones confiscated by the courts.

The result of the boom is a brand new Mediterranean megalopolis, a single stretch of building extending down the coast for a hundred miles, from Nerja in the east to Sotogrande in the west. Although 1.2 million people formally live on the Costa del Sol, there are actually believed to be some 3 million residents. Many are foreigners with few interests beyond their own...
house, the golf course and a handful of friends of the same nationality. There is something very American about this car-dependent ribbon of growth as it defies you, like a small Los Angeles, to discover its centre. If it continues adding, as it currently does, almost fifty thousand houses and apartments a year, it will double its population once more in fifteen to twenty years. There are even predictions that the Costa del Sol megalopolis will, eventually, become Spain’s largest city. Unfortunately, as the traffic jams show, it is not something that has been planned for.

Jesús Gil is by no means the only corrupt politician to have disgraced these climes. The clearest proof of a link between drug money, politics and costas construction came when the Socialist mayor of Estepona, Antonio Caba, was sentenced to five years in jail for helping launder the money of a Turkish heroin-trafficking syndicate. Caba, elected on the promise of cleaning up the alleged corruption of a previous mayor, had, in his private lawyer’s practice, helped Turkish drug smuggler Levent Ucel launder more than one million pounds through local real estate. Ucel, at the time, was also under investigation for the murder of his own wife. Little surprise, then, that the voters of Estepona, at one stage, turned to Jesus Gil’s GIL party.

Figures for the amount of black cash being laundered in the costas’ on-off construction booms are impossible to calculate. It includes not just ‘white’ cocaine and hashish money, but also the ‘grey’ money of small European businessmen who buy houses with cash never declared to their own tax authorities. It would be nice to think that all this money, wherever it came from, trickled down to the people of the Costa del Sol. But it circulates, instead, in the upper spheres of developers, construction magnates and the comparatively rich, northern European buyers. ‘One wonders how a province with the highest unemployment rates and one of the lowest incomes per capita in the country can have the highest rate of business societies per 1,000 inhabitants and a growth of 1,800 per cent in the construction of new private housing in the last five years,’ a recent university study asked out loud. The study, produced by a brave few individuals at Málaga University’s criminology institute, pointed out that the costas were on a ladder of corruption. If nothing was done, they warned, it could lead to the creation of an established mafia economy.

Their report was, however, greeted with almost total silence. Nothing has been done to end the dependency of town halls on builders and, ultimately, on their clients—the tourists. Indeed, questioning tourism in any way at all is met with almost total incomprehension. To ask a Costa del Sol politician whether they approve or disapprove of tourism and construction is to ask a villager in the sierras of nearby Jaén or Córdoba whether they approve or disapprove of olive trees.

At the provincial police headquarters in Málaga I went to see Chief Inspector Fernando Vives, the man who had been searching Francisco Calero’s flat when he hurled himself from the rooftop. Vives headed a team of just eight police officers whose job it was to tackle financial crime on the Costa del Sol. ‘It is like fighting an army of elephants with a few ants,’ he admitted. Some major money-laundering busts since we met suggest either that his ants are working remarkably hard, or that their numbers have been boosted. The impression remains, however, that only the tip of the iceberg has been dealt with.

Vives was a sensitive cop. ‘All you can see along the coast are cranes and more cranes. A large part of that money comes from illegal earnings,’ he says. ‘The Costa’s geography—its hills and woodlands—are being destroyed. Nobody imagined it would be like this.’

Vives said the hashish traffic from Morocco alone was at about 350 tonnes a year. The presence of Gibraltar, with twice as many offshore companies as its 29,000 residents, had helped create the opportunities for crime and corruption. The same routes, and the same international gangs, are increasingly turning to cocaine.

The problem is made worse by British and other expatriate residents. Most cannot be bothered to register as citizens of their new home towns, robbing the area of other funds awarded on the basis of how many people live there. Some 300,000 Britons are estimated to live here. That makes this Britain’s fourteenth-largest ‘city,’ larger than, for example, Cardiff, Belfast, Southampton or Bradford. However, fewer than one in ten British residents are registered. Costa corruption is as much the result of those who come here, enjoy the Spanish weather and hospitality but refuse to accept any responsibility for the place they live in, as it is of crooked politicians and construction companies.

The Costa traffic jam seemed so interminable, that I decided to give up on my attempt to reach Málaga on the coastal road. I turned around. I eventually joined, instead, an even worse jam on the motorway that has been sliced through the hills a couple of miles inland. First, however, I decided to try to find a shortcut through one of the urbanizaciones whose often gated
and guarded entrances are strung along this road. It was a baffling experience. I recognised little that was Spanish here, except the gardens overflowing with bougainvillea and oleander. The array of architectural styles on display was bewildering. There were Moorish palaces, huge great Basque caseriones, Mexican haciendas, rows of nondescript three-storey terraced hutsches, gleaming glass and stainless steel modern apartment blocks, low-slung bungalows and wood-built houses straight out of the Swedish forests or the Canadian prairie. American-style condominiums, and golf courses, were sprouting up in the surrounding countryside. This, one visiting American journalist observed, was a place 'whose gaudy architecture makes Beverly Hills look staid.'

I felt lost. It was not just because I could not find a way back out of this maze—which turned out to have only one entrance, preventing any through road spoiling the residents' peace while making no contribution to unsnarling the chaos on the coastal road. Eventually, I decided that I was not in Spain any more. This was really the outer suburbs of a coastal city in Florida, Australia or any of the white-dominated suburbs along South Africa's Indian Ocean coast. It was, essentially, a new place. It had been invented out of nothing and answered to nothing more than its residents' desire to live a life of leisure.

Spain is a country of small, tightly packed towns, cities and villages. Spaniards like to live piled up on top of one another. Their natural meeting place is the crowded street, the busy bar or the plaza. It is a life of close physical contact, of loud, sociable bustle. Benidorm, I decided, has that. But here the only place people can be seen, tanned and blonde, is in their cars, as they head for the tennis club, the golf course or the out-of-town shopping centre, the new Spanish malls. Even the narrow beach, although busy, seems to be a minority interest. Its role has been replaced by tens of thousands of swimming pools—adding to growing problems with water.

This, however, is the new model for Spanish tourism, and not just on the Costa del Sol. Package tourism, the gold mine on which Benidorm was founded, is giving way to budget airlines and on-line booking of private villas. The money that changes hands often does not even come to Spain or the rest of us are British,' came the answer. It had not occurred to him that British, in Spain, meant foreign.

I find the package holiday tourist at Benidorm, or the drunken 18–30 revellers battling their way up and down the streets of Ibiza's San Antonio district easier to understand than these new, semi-permanent immigrants to the costas. I know package holidaymakers are here for the fun, for cheap booze, to watch their kids play with buckets and spades and to shed their normal skin for a while or, at least, to change its colour. They seek a temporary transformation, a chance to forget the humdrum of their normal lives.

But the residents of the urbanizaciones feel to me like a different tribe, as strange as the Visigoths, the Moors or the Vandals must have been when they first arrived on the Iberian peninsula. I realise there is an element of possessiveness, even arrogance, in this. Having, however, made repeated attempts, and repeated failures, at understanding this tribe, I eventually turned to someone better equipped for interpreting the social structures, belief systems and rituals of other peoples—an anthropologist.

It was years since I had read an anthropology book, so I was excited to get my hands on Karen O'Reilly's The British on the Costa Del Sol. O'Reilly had followed the great traditions of Bronislaw Malinowski, Margaret Mead, Evans-Pritchard and Pitt-Rivers in immersing herself in the world of her strange and exotic subject. This was to be 'ethnographic research involving long-term participant observation.' But, instead of choosing to live amongst the Trobriand Islanders, the Nuer of the Sudan or the natives of Papua New Guinea, she had disguised herself as an ex-pat on the Costa del Sol. Where others had mud huts, canoes and pig-swapping ceremonies as their raw material, O'Reilly had the Royal British Legion, timeshare touts and the Anglican church coffee mornings in Fuengirola. Her hardships included sitting through an Old Time Music-Hall sing-along and hearing people insist that
As a result, a community whose history can be traced back before the

Her research turned out to be depressing. The Brits came to Spain to get
away from a country they saw as rotten with crime, immigration, broken
communities and a failing health service. They fooled themselves that they
were living a Spanish lifestyle, but spoke little or no Spanish and remained in
their ghettos. Some, after more than a decade, spoke fewer than twenty
words of Spanish. 'They... retain the Little Englandism, the isolationist
tendencies, the island mentality, the “natural” racism or nationalism of Great
Britain, while denying that they do,' she concluded. They were, she decided,
‘betwixt and between.’ She might have said ‘neither here, nor there.’

Where the urbanizaciones are not graveyards in the winter, it is often be-
cause those living there are, themselves, close to the grave. Again, Spain has
become America or, at least, Florida. It is the last refuge of a greying popu-
lation, come to stretch their northern European pensions, and their final years,
in the sunshine and supermarkets of the costas. In some places they now out-
number the local population. Whereas those who install themselves in
France’s Dordogne or Italy’s Tuscany often do so in a spirit of
cultural inquisitiveness, these people seem to have been attracted only by sunshine.

There are noble exceptions. Spain’s first hospice, built outside Málaga, is
a tribute to its British founder. ‘Torrevieja football club has a loyal British
following, ‘the Torry army.’ It is almost impossible, however, to find a place
where, as a group, the new colonisers have provided anything more than
money.

In a last-gasp attempt to find some new immigrants who were actually in-
volved in the place they lived, I went to Teulada, a small town just a few
miles from the coast, half an hour’s drive north of Benidorm. As I headed
for the town hall, I passed a shop front that boldly proclaimed: ‘Funeraria,
Undertakers, Bestattungsinstitut.’ I popped in. These

In Teulada, more than a third of the 6,000 names on the electoral regist-
er are foreign, most of them British. This will soon rise to more than half.
As a result, a community whose history can be traced back before the

The immigrants were setting up English butchers and German pastr-
ys. A ghetto mentality had set in, he said. ‘They stick together and have
their own bars and shops. If you go into one, they look at you strangely.
That’s not the way we do things here. We leave the door open to every-
body.’

Deputy mayoress Sylvia Tatnell, half-British and half-Spanish, defended
the immigrants. ‘It is very difficult for elderly people to learn a new lan-
guage,’ she said. ‘But if you go to the Moors and Christians Festival you will
find a third of those taking part are foreign.’

A few weeks later, at midnight on a summer’s evening, I was standing
amongst a crowd of people looking out at the beach in Moraira. We were
here to watch part of the Moors and Christians Festival that Tatnell had

thirteen-century Christian kings snatched it from the Moors must now
learn to cope with a new—some say devastating—sort of conquest. For
here, the ex-pat community, tired of their villas overlooking the sea at
Moraira being placed at the bottom of the municipal list of priorities, have
organised themselves politically. They have, in effect, won control of the
town hall.

The villa owners had brought with them a thoroughly British, ‘not in my
backyard’ approach to development. As soon as their own villas were com-
pleted, they did not want any more to go up, spoiling the view or the gentle
countryside, neatly laid out with low vines, running down to the sea. They
had put a massive brake on further development, electing a Spanish mayor
who knew his job was to say ‘No!’ to the succulent proposals put his way by
developers. The mayor held separate meetings for them in English, German
and French.

Teulada immigrants were obviously getting involved. That, however, did
not please everyone. I found a local town councillor, Vicente Marzal, look-
ing depressed. He had just formed the People for Teulada Party to fight the
next elections on what could only be described as an anti-immigrant ticket.
His complaints were the familiar stuff of changing European communities
from Bradford to Marseille. ‘People call me racist, but I ask the foreigners
whether they would like it if a Turk was running the town hall where they
come from and most agree with me,’ Marzal said. ‘Very few of them speak
Spanish, let alone our dialect of Valencian. I don’t understand it; they live
with us but don’t want to speak our language. They don’t do anything to in-
tegrate.’
wanted me to see. These are celebrated throughout Alicante and date back more than three centuries in some places. Groups of townsfolk form filas, or groups, of either Moors or Christians. Once a year they dress up and 're-enact' the conquest of Spain by the Moors in 711 and the Christian Reconquista that ended in 1492.

Tonight the Moors were invading, or at least, a handful were arriving on the beach in a couple of local fishing boats backed up by a small yacht, while a hundred more awaited them on the beach. The Christians, meanwhile, had taken up position on the natural, exposed rock ramparts of the fortress. All were dressed in exotic outfits that seemed to have come from the wardrobe department of the 1961 Hollywood version of El Cid—the Christian men doing their best to look like Charlton Heston, the women like Sophia Loren's strong-willed Ximena.

Elaborate firework displays feature heavily in local fiestas across Valencia and up into Catalonia. Tonight was no exception. Nobody in Moraira could have slept as the noisy battle raged. A bloodied El Cid character wandered across the beach on a horse—past the lifeguards' chair that had been left centre-stage—and fell off, mortally wounded, at the foot of the castle ramparts. A loudspeaker played ersatz Arab music full of trumpets, timpani, horns and wailing chants. Not a cliché was missing. The Moors got down on their hands and knees and prayed. Then a troop of dancing girls wearing semi-transparent gauze dresses came on and did a seven veils number that was all bare bellies and gyrating hips. The Christian and Moorish kings exchanged gruff, manly, melodramatic lines over the PA system.

'Identify yourself or I will give you a hiding,' blustered the Christian. 'I am the chief of the all-victorious Moorish horde... My hand is impatiently stroking the handle of my sword,' the Moor replied. History never got more kitsch, but the sun-tanned crowd was enjoying it.

A middle-aged British couple beside me were passing comment. 'Oooh! Do we have a disagreement?' the wife said as the protagonists strutted angrily on the sand. Then a dead Christian tumbled down the ramparts. 'Oh dear, is he rolling down those rocks?' asked my neighbour. 'That's not very comfy, is it?'

Eventually, the Moors won their battle amid amplified shouts of 'Ala is great! Ala is victorious!' The Christians shuffled off and the PA system announced: 'Thank you for coming to the nighttime invasion of Moraira. Tomorrow at 7 p.m., the Reconquista.'

The crowd filed back into town. A pile of fresh vomit on the pavement made me think that the British must be here in force (Spaniards hold their drink). A group of ten-year-old children, meanwhile, threw little bangers at one another and squealed in delight in the square at 1.30 in the morning. They were a reminder that I was in the province of Alicante and was not likely to get much sleep.

Still, I was impressed with the Moraira immigrants. By getting involved with their adopted land, they had ensured that this was a much nicer spot than virtually anywhere else I could find on the costas. The new immigrants are lucky that Spaniards show no real animosity. (Marzal's party in Teulada failed to win any seats). This is despite the fact that, at least in the early days, Málaga's psychiatric wing for young people quickly filled up with stressed-out waiters. A 1971 study recorded that 90 per cent of non-chronic mental illness in rural Málaga was amongst teenage boys who had gone to work on the costas. In moments of gloom, Spaniards sometimes refer to themselves as 'the waiters of Europe.'

When Spaniards want to laugh at tourists they call them 'guiris.' One humorous definition described the British sub-species as: 'Famous for their punctuality, they can be counted on to start singing football chants after just five minutes of drinking, and start head-butting everything in sight.' Little has changed, then, since Sir Edward Cecil led an ill-fated strike against Cádiz in 1625. He was forced to flee after his troops got so staggeringly drunk in a particularly well-stocked bodega, or wine-cellar, they had captured that they were unable to fight.

A serious study of guiris was carried out by anthropologist Nadja Monnet. She found that they 'provokes laughter, are subject to jokes and can be easily fooled.' Perhaps that was what happened to George Sand when she fled to Majorca with her lover, the composer Frédéric Chopin, and her two children in 1838, looking for 'some faraway retreat where there would be no mental illness in rural Málaga was amongst teenage boys who had gone to work on the costas. In moments of gloom, Spaniards sometimes refer to themselves as 'the waiters of Europe.'

When Spaniards want to laugh at tourists they call them 'guiris.' One humorous definition described the British sub-species as: 'Famous for their punctuality, they can be counted on to start singing football chants after just five minutes of drinking, and start head-butting everything in sight.' Little has changed, then, since Sir Edward Cecil led an ill-fated strike against Cádiz in 1625. He was forced to flee after his troops got so staggeringly drunk in a particularly well-stocked bodega, or wine-cellar, they had captured that they were unable to fight.

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Spain—or turn parts of their island into little outposts of Germany. Nor could she have foreseen that Majorcans, scared by soaring property prices and seeing traditional, rural culture under threat, would be the first Spaniards to take to the streets to protest at some of the results of their self-created tourism boom.

Quite what will happen to the Majorcas, Marbellas and Benidorms of Spain, no one can tell. The package holiday is in crisis. Cheaper rivals, meanwhile, are appearing in Tunisia, Turkey and elsewhere. There is talk of blowing up old hotels, or converting them into apartment blocks. Meanwhile, a whole new generation of euro-Spaniards, children of foreign couples studying at local schools, is growing up on the costas. Already one finds them manning bars and selling real estate, slipping easily between one culture and another. Some families moving out of London are choosing Marbella as their base, rather than Essex or Wiltshire. Freelance parents work from home or weekly commute back to the British capital from Málaga airport. Britons own 450,000 properties and are said to be buying upwards of 30,000 costa homes a year. One report said to be circulating amongst property developers suggests that 800,000 Germans wish to retire to Spain. The waiters of Europe look set to become Europe’s geriatric nurses. Whatever happens, the revolution that started with Benidorm and its bikinis is bound to bring even more, huge changes.

Dirty money and corruption are part of the price Spaniards pay for the wealth the tourists bring. The danger, as those Málaga University investigators pointed out, is if they spiral out of control and give rise to a mafia economy. Spain has a recent history of flirting with the kind of deep corruption that can shake the state itself. It has also shown, however, that it knows when to pull back. Two contradictory impulses, both very Spanish, are at play. They are anarchy and order. The struggle between the two has, on occasions, been titanic.

Five
Anarchy, Order and a Real Pair of Balls

It is August. Most of Spain has shut down for the traditional month of holidays. So we are sitting beside the swimming pool at Carlos’s house in Sanlúcar de Barrameda, where the broad, muddy Guadalquivir River runs into the Atlantic near Cádiz. The kids are splashing in the water. There is a bottle of cold manzanilla wine on the table. Several more are chilling in the fridge. The Spanish rap of ‘La Mala Rodríguez,’ ‘The Bad Girl Rodríguez,’ is blaring out of his music system. A mountain of shrimps await their turn to be torn into with sticky fingers. They are to be dunked into the mayonnaise Carlos is making, the mixer in one hand and the phone wedged between ear and shoulder as his mother gives step-by-step instructions from Madrid. Spaniards, I am reminded once more, take their leisure—and their food—seriously. Their mothers, as always, are on hand to help. Life could not be much better.

Carlos, however, is still working. He has just set up his own company designing, amongst other things, corporate newsletters. The mayonnaise done, his mobile phone goes. He looks happy. A big client has just come his way. The woman in charge of corporate communications at a major company has made clear, however, what she wants in return. ‘It’s great,’ he says enthusiastically, after hanging up. ‘I’ll do all their magazines. All I have to do is employ her son. He wants to be a designer. I’m sure I’ll find something for him to do. Even if he’s useless, it will be worth it.’

They call it enchufe. It is the art of being ‘plugged in’—of having, cultivating and using contacts. It is not generally as crude as this. At its best, in