

### *Absconding*

As 2016 begins we reflect on the busy period now behind us. On Christmas Day we had a great time with Craig, Lee, Ethan (28 months) and Drew (5 months). Lee's mum did most of the cooking - thank you Linda, you are a star!

Stuart (39) and Mathew (5 years plus, going on 15) arrived on Boxing Day and left on 2nd January. Our Kiwi cousins David and Denise arrived the next day and also left on 2nd January. We hosted our friends for Hogmanay. Our house was filled with chatter and laughter for day after day and in the background our dishwasher hardly stopped gurgling.

We feel that we have done our bit for 2015 and plan to fly to the Canary Islands, scunnered with the rain that has fallen almost every day during November and December. We booked this trip back in October and now our holiday is upon us. The Bonthrons are absconding. This year we will stay for 12 nights, not our usual seven, and try to top up with sufficient Vitamin D to avoid colds and sniffles as our long dark Scottish winter drags on. This will be our fifth visit, our fourth time in January. Over the years we have been to Lanzarote and Fuerteventura, but this year we are heading again for Adeje in the south of Tenerife, mainly because last year our airport transfer taxi driver told us that this south-western corner of the island suffers less than ten days per year with rain, rain which falls mainly in November.

By late on Saturday morning we find ourselves alone for the first time in many days. In a flurry of diabolical energy we clear away the Christmas decorations. I vacuum all floors and stairs, swipe surfaces with multi-surface wipes (a newly discovered obsession!), help Margaret to stack away glasses and crockery and ready the beds for Paul and Judy coming for our Celtic Connections weekend, which will start on Saturday 16th January, the day after our return. Then, now on the starting blocks, we dash across to Netherlee to wish Craig and family a "Happy New Year!".

Finally we face up to packing for our trip. This is always a fractious time as we try to find clothes that fit my ever-expanding hulk. After a tense fifteen minutes, I make my escape and leave Margaret to pack everything for both of us. I dart downstairs to check-in online.

By dint of a rather peculiar evening meal of bits and bobs, by supper-time our fridge is almost empty. It looks very strange, as if it belongs to someone else.

Before we head for bed I order a taxi for 6.00 am and set both alarms for 5.15 am. In theory we are now both tired enough to sleep. In typical fashion I fall asleep within two minutes only to surface suddenly, wide awake some fifteen minutes later. Margaret is still sitting up in bed, quietly reading her Kindle.

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

"So, no luck yet?' I mutter, rolling over and snuggling down.

"John, you have no idea what it's like. Your snoring is like a 747 taking off. How do you expect me to get to sleep? Try to stay on your side, not on your back, that seems to help."

There is a tiny smirk on her face. Ungenerously I slowly begin to think there has been foul play, that Margaret has jabbed me or kicked me awake to shut down my snoring, a regular ploy which I sometimes sense, sometimes not.

'Did you thump me?'

She shrugs her shoulders unapologetically.

(Actually, Margaret also snores, but gently, almost melodically. I almost enjoy it, find it reassuring that she is actually asleep and not lying awake beside me, merely hoping to slip over into the Land of Nod. However this parallel snoring from my loved one must never be discussed and so I expect this revelation may not survive her First Reader edit. *(Oh yes it did!)*)

The rest of my night is dozed away, never quite 'under' as I was before my rude awaking. I look at the clock many times. I sense that Margaret is asleep. I decide to try to get back to sleep by reading, a ploy which almost always works quickly. I lower the bedside light onto the floor before switching it on, so as not to disturb my princess. I read for a few minutes, fall asleep, waken, read again, and fall asleep. I am a nocturnal yo-yo. Time passes. I begin to doubt the alarm clock is actually working properly. Does it need a new battery? Should I get up and face the rigmarole of fitting one, re-setting the time and the alarm. Before I can decide, I am asleep.

I am driven awake by my aching bladder and see that it is now 5.05. I sense Margaret is awake, lying quietly in the dark beside me.

"Boun Giorno, Princepessa."

"John, if you are getting up, switch on your bedside light and switch off the alarms. Please."

I swing myself round and up and head down to the loo for relief and to shave and shower. I return fully dressed, ready to travel and find Margaret making last minute checks, running through her mental checklist, firing orders at me to make sure the house safe, all bins are emptied and warning me that she has dispensed bleach down loos and drains, making the house ready for our return. As always in these situations, Margaret is in charge. Margaret likes to be in charge. And I like that Margaret likes to be in charge. If she waited for me to organise us we would falter, badly.

With no food left in the fridge, we have already decided that we will breakfast at the airport. Standing in the porch at 5.45 am, we are ahead of schedule. Our taxi arrives out of

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

the murky rain almost at once. As I close my cab door and search for the seat belt he launches into his tale of woe. Our young man is around forty and he informs us he is from Pakistan. Now that the pressure is off and we are safely on our way, I feel dopey and drowsy, happy to play a non-speaking part. Margaret offers the occasional word of encouragement to him, but none is required; he is releasing his stream of consciousness upon us, whether we like it or not.

"I'm just here from Newton Mearns, you know. It was a right cock-up, I can tell you. I phoned him from the town and told to him "Twenty minutes, OK?" He says "No OK, I want you here now, OK?" I say, "OK, OK, I am coming to you at once, twenty minutes, OK?" So I am there in eighteen minutes, outside his house and his wife says "Sorry, he is no here. He got another taxi." I call him on his mobile and he says that when I said twenty minutes he called another cab and it comes in ten minutes. He says I was late but I was no late.

Anyway, I am hating it to drive in the daytimes. The bloody traffics in the daytimes is driving me bloody mad, so it is. It's the roads, you see, they are just too wee for the too many cars. In Pakistan, when they build any road, even a wee local road, they make another reservation on both sides so they can make the road widers later when there is more traffics. I mean in Pakistan they have been doing this for fifty years or more, since traffic was invented. I am taking myself home to Pakistan next month, to get away from this bloody rain. My God it is raining every bloody day for year, in this place. I am not telling them I am coming, my Mum and my family. No, no. I never tell them that I am coming to see them. It is the big surprise on them, when I just drop in on them for three months. I used to fly away from Manchester but now I am flying away from Glasgow with Emirates to Dubai. It is being so much easier to me. Ah God, I wish it was time for me to go to Pakistan. It is too bloody cold here.

Anyway, I am hating it to drive in the daytimes. The bloody traffics in the daytimes is driving me bloody mad, so it is. It's the roads, you see. . ."

We hurtle on through the darkness and are deposited at the remote drop-off point at 6.05 am. We walk through a fug of second-hand cigarette smoke as our fellow travelers greedily top up their nicotine levels ahead of their upcoming endurance tests.

Thankfully we reach the smoke-free sanctuary of the main building but we can still smell the smoke on the people milling around us. From the display we discover there will be two early morning flights to Tenerife. We think our flight leaves at 8.25 am. Confusingly there is a flight leaving at 8.35 am but it has the wrong flight number. This is a Thomsons Holidays flight. It seems that our Thomas Cook flight number leaves at 9.10 am. We note that it 'boards' at 8.25 am. We are here three hours ahead of our flight is due to trundle off its stand. We see that we must check-in with Thomas Cook at Terminal Two. This is a ten minute walk away. As we pass from T1 to T2 I spot a dark corner with a group of fifty or so gasping smokers topping up. Several are smoking two cigarettes simultaneously. Some are already dressed in beachwear, men and women chattering in the swirling rain to indulge their habit. Above them a sign proclaims, "NO SMOKING IN THIS AREA".

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

We run the gauntlet downwind of their smoke cloud and join our first queue of the holiday. We are too early for the TC check-in desks which remain closed while a small bevy of TC checkers-in gab to each and sort their make-up. Passengers around us are mainly cheery, exchanging banter talking to one another as if they are well-kent faces. Children are acting up, crotchety, girning. Some are clearly school age and even some of those are sucking on dummies, still in fleecy jim-jams. Ever other passenger is, by my reckoning, overloaded with luggage. How many items of clothing and how many pairs of shoes have they brought with them? We have opted for a single hold suitcase with a limit of 20kg. It is a wheelie type, red, and although a fairly recent purchase already looks more than twenty years old. Back at home it weighed-in at 15.6 kg. We have one small rucksack to 'carry on' and Margaret has her rucksack handbag with its many, many zippy pockets. Clearly the Bonthrons are under-luggaged. I see people looking at us, staring disparagingly at our single red case in shocked disbelief. They raise their hands to cover their mouths but this does not mean I cannot hear their sniggers. Suddenly the four TC check-in desks open and the queue at once bunches up, everyone afraid someone will squeeze in ahead of them. I think, "Hey, hang loose there, folks! Don't worry; we are all booked on the same plane. And we have two hours and thirty-five minutes until take off."

The Priority Boarding and Gold Travelers forcefully and smugly push their way past us and enter the express lane. We, the mere mortals, shuffle slowly in turn. Then it is our turn and the check-in girl, clearly suspicious of our lack in the luggage stakes, insists I must have my rucksack weighed. She is clearly disappointed that is less than half the allowable limit. We know from experience that they are trained to harvest extra charges by seeking out heavy carry-on items as extra hold baggage. She pointedly looks at my huge tummy. Does she think I have swallowed some luggage?

Free of our red trolley case, we decide to go directly to the security check. This time we almost run past the bedraggled bunch of illicit smokers in their beach shorts. We reach the security area and join another queue. The time is 6.50 am. The line is slow, the atmosphere sombre, subdued. I watch others being ordered curtly to remove belts and shoes and I do so in advance, cursing the shoe bomber of long ago. As always when I am in the security area I feel an upwelling of unexplained guilt. We see the explosives testing box with its bright Cobalt Lite badge. This equipment was made by our son's company and Stuart pulled rank to fly up from Oxford one afternoon, stayed with us overnight. Next day he calibrated the device and trained key GIA staff in its use. Sadly we have no explosive-like substances with us. I would have liked to see this piece of kit in action.

I pass through the full body scanner and see the smirks on the faces of the youngish man and woman who check the display. "You too will be old, shriveled or bloated and saggy one day", I curse them in my head.

Re-booted and re-belted we check we have cleared everything from our trays, re-pack our rucksacks and prepare to run the gauntlet of the ladies proffering perfume, jewelry and other expensive trinkets at special prices unobtainable on the High Street near you. How can

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

these men and women look so glam and seem so cheery at this unearthly hour? I want to share their medications! Eventually we weave our way through this twisty track. I see a flock of addicts queuing at the entrance to an area hidden behind blank screens and realise that this is to comply with the new legislation regarding the 'non-advertising of tobacco products'. At the pay desks people are filling large plastic bags with duty-free purchases. These bags will be carried aboard to stuff in the crowded overhead lockers - no charge, and no complaints from the airlines! It is a conspiracy of commerce.

Finally we reach the food and shopping mall and seek solace in breakfast. Everything is as expensive as it is disappointing. We plan to abhor the in-flight food offerings, (and succeed). This breakfast gunge will be our last food until after 19.00 when we eat dinner in our hotel, part of our half-board package deal.

I sit out the two hours until boarding like a zombie. I am not alone in this and as I look around I spot many, many zombies. The main difference is that this zombie is not fiddling with a smart phone or tablet computer.

Nearby there is a large noisy 'family and friends' group with two ten-year-old boys who are gyrating around them in unpredictable orbits, causing havoc. The boys are running, chasing each other, ranging freely far and wide, sometimes throwing themselves to the ground, screaming out to each other, whizzing toy cars through the legs of passengers walking nearby. During this wait period among the zombies, two teenage girls detach themselves from this group and make multiple trips to WH Smith for fizzy drinks, crisps, chocolate. They munch and slurp as they move and I assume they are breakfasting. One of the senior males drinks pints of lager. Unlike the other adults in this group who are overweight, bulging out of their summer tops and skirts, the lager drinker is rake thin. As I wait out the time to boarding I count: he downs six pints of lager without a visit to the loo - amazing. Margaret wanders off to browse the shops. I do not yet understand her shopping agenda, but this will soon be revealed. I recall that many years ago, she actually bought something from an airport shop. It was a very nice top from a Dorothy Perkins shop. I rotate my head and check. There is no DP shop in this part of the airport.

Time passes. Our gate number is displayed. We are advised that our flight is (already) boarding. We hitch our bags, wander forward, and visit the loo. There are TC people at the gate but it is not actually boarding, so the flashing sign is just a ploy to get us here early. We find a seat among the few provided. It is evident that a great many seats that used to be in this area have been deliberately removed. I think this is something to do with flights to New York when passengers are forced to 'stand in line' for further and final pre-boarding security checks.

We are called to board by seat row number. We find our seats, directly over the starboard wing, our very own Bonthron wing. It is 8.40 am. Very few people board the plane during the ensuing fifteen minutes. I advise Margaret that the plane is almost empty, that we should be able to spread out, hopefully. She is already settled by the window, her head down, reading her Kindle. The late surge arrives, festooned with duty free. Boarding anarchy breaks

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

out. I spy around thirty children. More than ten of them are most definitely of primary school age.

Thankfully six-pint-man and the Denis the Menace boys are not amongst us. By 9.00 am the plane seems almost full. I watch a Dolly Bird Granny (DBG) as she flits from seat to seat, apologising profusely to those she sits beside. Clearly she has an issue. She settles on the aisle seat beside me still clutching her many bags and spends her time craning out into the aisle, looking to the rear, signalling to someone in a version of semaphore. I stare woodenly ahead, unwilling to become involved in her dilemma. Then she leaps out of her seat gathers her bags and races off forward to buttonhole a stewardess. The plane is about to move, overhead lockers are being slammed shut and DBG is scolded back to sit beside me. Mercifully, just as the pre-flight briefing begins, DBG is ushered away towards the rear of the aircraft. Doors are closed, engines are wound up, ailerons are squealed and thumped, brakes tested and we are pushed back from our stand into a dreary, drizzling gloom. I predict that no one in Glasgow will see the Sun today.

It is 9.20 am, more or less on time. Tiger Tim our Tenerife pilot advises: "Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Your holiday begins here and we are leaving right on time". Now minus the flighty DBG, I move to the aisle seat, close my eyes and hope for sleep. We thunder along the runway, thumping and bumping on the concrete runway then soar up through the clouds. Soon we are clear above them and the sky is now a brightening grey-blue.

We are advised that there is one single toilet at the front of the plane and three at the rear. We must always use the toilet nearest to us, even if this means we have to wait for half an hour. There will be a drinks service followed by a meals and snacks service. At all times when we are not queueing for the loo we must remain seated with our seat belts fastened because Tiger Tim is also a stunt pilot and liable to perform a loop the loop just to keep everyone on their toes. It is just the luck of the draw if we get thumped by a stray trolley during Tim's bit of fun. If we feel sick we must barf in the wee bags, even if they leak. Whatever happens we must never vomit down the toilet pan as it will instantly clog and we will be punished by being forced to drink gallons of crap coffee.

Our hostesses work tirelessly, advising, cajoling, and selling to us. This continues for several hours and people stand behind their trolleys, trapped on their way to or from the loos and clinging tightly to the eats around them, tensed against a sudden stunt manoeuvre.

Unexpectedly, the chief stewardess announces: "See us, we ur knackurred an' we huv tae huv a wee break, aw right? So, yees ur on yer ain fur hauf an oor, aw right? If yees want tae get up an wander about that's OK wi us, cos we ur up here in the back, strapped in cos this is the safe-ist bit o' the plane if it kresshes, aw right?"

The rodeo commences and our fellow passengers mill back and forth, hand down carry-on luggage, then re-pack it. A group of ladies start an impromptu line-dancing class. I doze off and hear noises coming from far, far away. Time passes. I am roused suddenly to wakefulness by my bladder. There is a group of ten queueing for the single loo at the pointy end. I glance

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

behind and note only two continents waiting at the blunt end. I do quick mental arithmetic and head for the stern, breaking the 'you must use the nearest' embargo by asserting to myself that it simply must be the nearest.

With a happy bladder I try again to sleep. Margaret is over there, by the window, head slumped forward, fast asleep. How can she endure all these hours without a loo visit?

Time passes. Rubbish is collected. Then even more rubbish is collected. Then even more rubbish is collected. Do they drop it off at Tenerife or fly it back to Glasgow? We are exhorted to straighten our seat backs. A hostess moves along places my naughty tray in the upright position and vigilantly checks my seat belt and my flies. We are again advised to study the emergency card and the duty free brochure with a huffy reminder that if we spot anything we really want then tough, the trolleys are locked away for landing. But we must remember that these unbeatable offers will be available to us on the return flight only if they are not out of stock.

Tiger Tim speaks again:

"Good morning from the bow. Down there, in thirty minutes or so, you will have to wait on our Spanish numpty pals trying to find ladders tall enough so that you can disembark onto the hot concrete ribbon onto which we plan to land with a great big horrible big bump which could cause a tyre to explode and wipe us out, ha, ha ha. No, no, no, just joking boys and girls, grannies and grandpas. Relax, the whole thing about doing a loop the loop was a just a joke, OK? Now here we go, OK? For those among you who are religious, pray like f\*\*\* because I've suddenly got a hellish migraine and my co-pilot Nigel's tummy spasms are back again. Even if you're not religious think of praying anyway, you never know, do you? Well, bye, bye. That's it from us, I'm switching to autopilot while I go for a pee and if it's smelly in there, there will be hell to pay. Ha, ha, ha, just kidding!

'Now, go awn, go awn, go awn, and have a lovely holiday, you lucky, lucky, b\*\*\*\*\*s! OK?'

### ***Transfer Limbo***

Our arrival gets off to a bad start. After several false sightings our tired old suitcase was, factually, the last out of the hatch onto the luggage reclaim band.

We take our transfer voucher to a very tall young man displaying a Thomas Cook clipboard. He bats us in the direction of a Tenerife Taxi Transfer Service (TTTS) window. I wait impatiently while the young Spaniard behind the counter speaks and listens on his mobile and scribbles furiously on his notepad. Perhaps he is writing down 'sure things for the four o'clock at Haydock'. He disconnects, looks up and seems mystified by our presence. I present our voucher and he smiles malevolently and jerks his thumb to a second window two along which also displays the TTTS sign. I grunt my thanks and move to this desk. Margaret moves to stand opposite, guarding our red case.

Behind this TTTS counter an unshaven man (UM) in his fifties is speaking on his mobile phone. I see him glance up at me but he refuses to 'engage' and I am obliged to again wait impatiently. A tall, rotund, swarthy and bearded gent approaches (Beardy) and leans on the counter, playing with his phone, perhaps texting. UM acknowledges him with a roll of his eyes, shakes his head and continues to mutter intermittently into his phone.

Eventually Beardy shuffles away and Unshaven Man (UM) snatches our voucher, studies it, searches his four page list, twice, finds our names, scores through it with a black Biro and a ruler then snaps:

"Where hotel?"

"Costa Adeje Palace H10. Two persons, please."

" \*%#! Wait over there, no, there. Wait, I tell you, OK, OK?"

I looked across to "over there, no, there" to see a thirtysomething couple leaning on a barrier surrounded by barricade of large suitcases.

I step over to where Margaret is standing which is but a few paces from UM's counter and summons my angry face which I hope will convey "I am very annoyed to have to wait again and I will soon get stroppy."

Time passes. Margaret estimates 15 minutes. I again approach UM and ask for an estimate of how long we might have to wait.

"\*%#! % #^%#! Maybe ten minutes another, maybe less."

"We have already waited 25 minutes," I exaggerate.

"\*%#! \*###. I do best to you but all taxis away, wait, wait, over there, no, there. No! over there, no, there.'

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

"John. We should move back, we are in the way of all these folk heading out to get buses and taxis. We should be over there, beside that other couple, like he said."

"No, my dear one, I don't want to give him the satisfaction of us moving out of his field of view. He will just forget us if we do, let someone skip the queue."

We bicker but I stick to my guns and refuse to relocate to 'over there, no, there', despite the fact that we are being buffeted by the flow of the lucky people who have taxis, buses and hire cars awaiting them.

And now as I type this I ask myself, yet again, "Why is it with her unerring intuition that Margaret always knows best?"

(Later in this epistle you will learn why this was a foolhardy place to hover and that 'over there, no, there' was good advice.)

Beardy returns, UM says something. Beardy, turns, looks at us, says something sotto voce, which both he and UM find hilarious. Paranoia surges through my veins like molten metal.

"I'm going to speak to that Thomas Cook rep."

"John, I might have moved when you get back."

I approach a group of three TC reps who continue clutching their clipboards to their chests like defensive shields, chatting to each other, refusing to acknowledge my annoying presence. From left field another, different very tall young man (I dub him The Beanpole) approaches this group and I cut him off, confront him, wave my voucher at him. I explain to The Beanpole that we are being ignored by the taxi firm. He peers down at me from around seven feet, his eyes hard, disdainful, unsympathetic. The Beanpole considers which of his many 'spins' to use on me, selects one and delivers it in a nasal Mancunian whine.

"Well sir, unfortunately TTTS is a separate entity. When you booked a taxi transfer, you entered into an independent contract with them and we are not responsible for their issues. Our job was to fly you here and, as you can see, here you are. You flew from Glasgow, right? You were on time, right? And hey, that problem with the disembarking stairs was not ours, you see Thomsons were using them both. Look, I know, I know, we've told the airport people hundreds of times they should have extra stairs for us. But you have to agree, we at Thomas Cook did actually get you here on time, you must surely acknowledge that as a fact. So, returning to YOUR problem with TTTS, I'm sorry there is absolutely nothing we can do, you'll have to take it up with them directly, all right matey?"

The Beanpole waltzes around me and places himself on the far side of his pals. I want to argue but I am struck dumb by The Beanpole's diatribe. (Indeed, I can often be brilliant at arguing on paper when I have time to think things through, consult Margaret, and so on, but here, in the cauldron of commerce, with folk squeezing past me and running their wheelie cases over my toes, I falter, again.)

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

I am frozen because I have a flashback to an email message which flashed briefly during the booking process back in October: "Thank you me for booking with Flexi-trips". This puzzled me at the time. Still, I am certain that we definitely booked and paid our money via the Thomas Cook website.

I hear a titter and a quiet but shrill soprano voice say, "That was brilliant Frankie, you are the best, you really are." I think this comes from a small busty girl with multi-coloured afro hair. I see her glance round at me with a broad smile on her face which drops before she looks away quickly. As I stomp off I hear loud guffaws.

Margaret carefully checks all the paperwork and assures me that the 'airport transfer' was automatically included in our booking, all as set out in the printout of the PDF from Thomas Cook. I turn to take this up again with the TC reps but the entire group has vanished.

I spot another young man approaching who is almost as tall. I dub him The Lesser Beanpole (TLB). TLB has in tow another couple who look very like us in age, dress code, and demeanor. TLB guides them to the TTTS counter where UM and Beardy smile. Beardy springs immediately into action, their humble servant. Incensed, I listen in. They couple sound Danish to me, with guttural and sing-song mix. After three series of The Bridge, everyone we used to think sounded German or Swiss now sounds to us as if they are Danish or Swedish. Beardy immediately hustles the Danes away, even helping them with their four cases. I step forward directly into the path of TLB and note his badge says "Philip White".

"Phillip, we have been waiting here for nearly an hour." This assertion is nearly true if we include the baggage hall wait. "Phillip, your even taller colleague tried to fend us off with an excuse that Thomas Cook . . . . "

As I continue with my diatribe, I watch his face, see his dark brown spaniel eyes dull over. He is bored but not yet disdainful. Then, as I continue to spout with increasing pomposity, I detect a knowing smile forming at the corners of his mouth.

"Yes, John", my psyche ricochets in my empty noddle, "at last! Bullseye! Phillip the Lesser is on my side in this debacle. I am in the right place, at the right time, with the right person, a man who commands the attention of UM and Beardy and who will magic up a taxi for us immediately." I feel a great warm heat flush through my tired old body and think, weirdly, "if Phillip were female, a Philippa, say, perhaps I could hug him/her in gratitude."

I plough on, get it all out about how poorly resourced, and poorly managed this taxi transfer firm TTTS is, ending with..." and I have a good mind to go straight out there and get a white taxi. There is clearly no shortage of those, is there, Philip? Look! Dozens of them, just waiting around, empty. That Danish couple got one without any trouble. I'll just charge Thomas Cook for it. This is a ridiculous mis-match of resources and a very poor advertisement for Thomas Cook, and a very poor start to our holiday, this on top of our case being the last off the reclaim belt. Well Phillip White, surely you must agree?"

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

I had it all out, at last. I was feeling so much better.

Phillip White waited, raised his eyebrows, studied my document again, slowly, nodding and tutting quietly. Then he raised his sad eyes and set his face to 'blank' and delivered his killer blows, gently thudding me into submission.

"Mr. Bonthron, what an unusual name! "White" is so boring, actually, but almost anonymous, don't you think? And, importantly, people trust the name "White". Inexplicable, actually, but in my experience, true. Helps attract young ladies, ha, ha, ha. Well, Mr. Bonthron, back to YOUR problem. Actually I am not with Thomas Cook, but as you can see our outfits are similar, I give you that. Yes, this taxi transfer problem is always worse on Sundays. It's to do with football, from England, on television, they say. I hate football actually. Now Basketball, that's another matter. I'm sure your remaining wait will not be too long now, though. And of course you will understand that those white taxis you refer to are public hires, and so you would have to pay for one yourself, if you decide to choose that option. I doubt Thomas Cook will be willing to recompense you, but you could always try."

"But that Danish couple? What about them?"

"I think you mean the couple from Scotland, from Dunfermline, which is in Fife I believe Mrs. Imrie said. Mr. and Mrs. Imrie are among our Gold Star Travelers and their package includes an *immediate transfer*, no waiting. If you will please excuse me, Mr. Bonthron, I must fly, no pun intended, as I have another flight to meet. Do have a nice holiday. "

I return to Margaret, reported my faux pas. "No, John," Margaret says with a wan smile, "you have been duped again. That lad Phillip White was definitely in a Thomas Cook uniform, and he had a Thomas Cook clipboard, down by his side, hiding it from you!"

The TC reps are absent. Perhaps they have finished for the day?

We watch an English couple in their thirties with two small children arrive at the UM's desk, ushered directly to UM by a lady TC rep, the dumpy afro hair girl who had mocked me earlier. This couple are not Gold Star Travelers and UM repeats the rigmarole he used with us and pointed past us, telling them to wait "over there, no, there". As Dumpy tries to squeeze past me I block her, repeat my tale to her. She shrugs her shoulders and replies, also in Mancunian, "There'll be a taxi for you all soon, don't worry. Carlos says they are all on their way back to us now, luv, all right?"

I wrongly assumed that UM is Carlos. I approach again and say, "Carlos, how much longer do we have to wait?"

UM looks over his shoulder at Beardy who says, "\*\*#%^%^% \*< \*&!\*{!"

They say nothing and stare at their mobile phones. I return to Margaret.

Another glitzy/blinky couple drift into view. At first take I think they might be around the fifty mark, or maybe tired fortysomethings. Glam Girl's wrists jingle-jangle with

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

hundreds of bangles. She is gliding in a loose flowing and diaphanous ankle length white dress with a plunging neckline into which dangle many necklaces, these plummeting into a deep well-tanned chasm. I jerk my eyes away as she turns to check if I am ogling her. In her wake follows her Mahogany Man Friend (MMF) who hauls two huge cases, slowly, tiredly, dreamily. MMF may or may not be younger or older. He has a permanent smile (surgery?) and pearly white teeth. I check Glam Girl again and suspect that she may have soared up into the sixtysomething age group.

They have EastEnder accents. "Transfer to the Cleopatra hotel please, darlin'."

UM utters his standard response, "\*%#! Wait, over there, no, there. Wait, I tell you, OK, OK?"

"I hope this in not going to be as a long a wait as last year, darlin'. Coz I'm not having that again. You got five minutes and then I'll strip naked, OK, darlin'?"

"\*%#! 15 minutos massimos, promeeses."

Mahogany Man Friend leans on the counter, rests his head in his hands, closes his eyes and appears to be meditating.

Beardy's mobile phone rings and he chunters good news to UM in Spanish.

UM appears disappears through the door in the far wall behind the counter and suddenly reappears by my side, ushering me, and shouting: "Comezess at Carlos, go wid him, my big friend, comezess at Carlos, outsiders, everyones."

Glam Girl pokes MMF sharply with a pointy elbow. (It's a female thing!) "Come on, Dek, wake up, darlin. Look, it worked, we're getting a cab, my sweetie."

"Sure, sure, Stella, sure, sure, darlin'."

I wonder still if what happened was purely a coincidence or if Stella's threat to strip naked spurred them to act. I quickly dismiss this as a future personal strategy. I see now Dek is quite smartly dressed with shiny pointed black shoes with a noticeable heel. Perhaps they enjoy Flamenco, I muse.

In the car park, amidst hundreds of white taxis desperate for a fare, we gather around Beardy. A tall greying man approaches, offers Beardy a cigarette and they both light up. This new man is Carlos, and reinforced by several deep draughts of nicotine rich fume, he shakes our hands, male to males only, and advises, "Waiting heres, please. Thankings to yous. A taxi is sooness, fifteen minutos maximos."

Beardy and Carlos distance themselves. Carlos, out of earshot, makes a mobile phone call. Whatever the news is, it makes them both happy and smiling they light up replacement cigarettes from their stubs. Carlos moves away from the safety of the car park pavement into the swirling stream of taxis and minibuses which constantly arrive to pick up other clumps of frustrated travelers just like us who are dotted us. At least we are not alone in our suffering.

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

As we stand under a merciless sun blazing from a cloudless sky it is only now that I realise that UM was being kind, keeping us indoors, in the air conditioned area. For the first time since last night, Margaret smiles. This is what she came for. Dek and Stella sit on a small wall, unzip a side pouch in one of their many suitcases, retrieve a small shiny cigarette case and light up pre-prepared roll-your-own cigarettes. The aroma is pungent. Stella catches me watching, bounces one leg on her knee and smiles knowingly, inhales deeply before allowing the smoke escape of its own volition to drift up from her nostrils into the slight breeze which disperses it in the direction of craggy mountain range of lava rock which dominates the skyline. Serenity descends upon our EastEnders and, in a second hand way, I too feel calmer.

"Are you going to the Cleopatra too, darlin'?" enquires Stella.

"No, we're going to the Adeje Palace."

"Right on, darlin'. We just booked this taxi transfer two days ago, didn't we, eh Dek? Couldn't stand the idea of the transfer bus, takes hours, eh Dek? But this is a bummer, eh Dek? Need a bit of sun to chill out, eh Dek? Desperate for long cool vodka-Coke, eh Dek?"

Dek has a non-speaking part. Now in daylight I see more clearly how deeply tanned they are. I think of the time I saw Tommy Sheridan in the flesh. Our Tommy was orange, as in 'Seville orange', orange. Our EastEnders are nearly black-brown. I launch into my tale of how long we have already waited, expounding on the clear mis-match of resources. Margaret kicks my ankle, tugs me away and I leave Dek and Stella to enjoy their fragrant escape undistracted by my babbling burble.

Again Carlos and Beardy light fresh cigarettes from the ends of the previous ones. Carlos's phone rings and he springs to life, sliding off the bonnet of a parked car which he has been using as a sun lounger, resting his weary back on the windscreen.

"Taxi she comes!" shouts Carlos.

"Taxi she comes!" echoes Beardy who has we discover, has quite a high voice when excited. Was he a boy soprano turned castrato?

They are both excited, taking on the enthusiasm of redeemed believers at an evangelical rally. An elderly minibus skids to a halt in front of us and Beardy grabs two cases from the first couple and throws them into the rear of the minibus as Carlos reaches for their many other cases.

The young couple with toddler and infant trip towards the rear of the minibus, dragging their assorted luggage and already collapsing and folding their pushchair. Beardy shoos them away, explaining their taxi is coming in "fewers minutos". Clearly the young parents are both confused and disappointed. "Surely this minibus has room for all of us?" I hear them think.

The children are fractious. My better self suggests I forgo our place in the queue to allow this needy couple to take the next taxi. Selfishly, and now in need of a pee, I manage to still my kindly tongue. I remain in this quandary while Carlos talks aggressively into his mobile

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

phone, muttering also to Beardy, They wander off. Carlos selects a different car as his sun lounge. Fresh cigarettes are ignited.

Time passes.

Unannounced a further beaten up minibus arrives. Beardy consults his list. Margaret nudges me hard in the ribs with her pointed elbow.

My lips utter the words, "Bonthon, Adeje Palace, two persons. We have been waiting well over an hour now, actually."

A child whimpers. My feet hurt. My bladder aches.

We step forward and I grab the door handle, claiming the minivan as ours.

Beardy takes our ancient red suitcase to the rear door and says, querulously, "Sola una?"

"Yes, just one, thanks."

"\*#%^%^% \*< \*&!\*{!"

## *Die Another Day?*

The death ride begins.

I cannot get the lap belt to fasten in my seat. I check Margaret is secure, hoping she at least will survive to complete the necessary paperwork to repatriate my remains. Margaret wrinkles her nose. The minibus smells of recent smoke. Before we are out of the car park we are hurtling at more than 80 kpm (50 mph), overtaking tentative hire cars then cutting-in in front of them. As we accelerate down the slip lane onto the motorway we reach 130kph (81 mph). The ancient engine and gearbox combo screech like banshees but Taxi Man mercilessly presses the pedal flat to the floor.

His phone rides in prime position in a bracket looping up out of the centre of the dashboard. He takes the call speakerphone, thus technically 'hands-free'.

"Hola!"

An angry woman berates him (in Spanish?) He responds gently, trying to explain his situation. I discern only "Adeje Palace". The disembodied voice wails. I imagine tears on her face. He tries to placate her but she has hung up or the call has dropped. Immediately his mobile rings again. Ignoring the traffic weaving around us, Taxi Man keeps his foot to the floor and squints at the mobile, checks who is calling, decides not to answer. It eventually rings off.

Taxi Man is yawning, continually running his right hand across his face then up through his lank greasy hair. He looks exhausted. He drives one handed, left-handed. His right hand twirls a disposable cigarette lighter. I guess he is desperate to light up but is forbidden to do so with passengers aboard.

Time passes.

We hurtle onwards. I consider praying to a God, any God to thank Her that we are still alive.

The slip road for Adeje and La Caleta is signed. A line of small cars and beaten-up vans snake ahead of us. They are hogging the inside lane, winking their intentions to leave at our junction. From years past when driving a hire car into this series of mini-roundabouts ahead I know the delays which build up. My bladder spasms and I am reminded of my urgent need to pee. As he swings out to overtake, Taxi Man changes down a gear and re-floors the accelerator pedal. The engine and gearbox shudder, the cylinder head gasket stretches and strains. Taxi Man's mobile rings. He forgets our predicament and squints at the tiny screen, studies the name, shrugs his shoulders, sneers and, just as we run out of road, swings right,

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

forcing his way into a non-existent gap by forcing an ancient blue van man to stand on his brakes to avoid whacking into us.

We reach the tiny roundabout where I have often waited for up to ten minutes to get a slot into the whirling traffic. Taxi Man does not slow down. Instead he hurtles onto the roundabout, ignoring a stream of cars approaching from our left. I brace myself for the collision. Nothing happens. We corner on two wheels, tyres screeching. I shift my bulk to counter the uplift, remembering Barry Sheen of long ago. Contrary to my expectations horns do not blare, no one protests this maneuver. Taxi Man is well known here, I conclude. Or, perhaps, in this strange land of odd junctions, he has right of way?

Five minutes later we are disgorged at the H10 Adeje (4\*) Palace. I search for my small purse filled with Euro coins and notes carried over from previous holidays but cannot find it. Later I conclude I have left it at home. At least that's what I hope. I proffer three pound coins as a reward for our safe delivery. Taxi Man pockets this token with a curt nod but is obviously disappointed.

"Gracias", he blows a cloud of nicotine laden smoke my direction.

I forgive him.

He has a hard life. His lady thinks he is a shit, and just like me, he has missed out on watching football on television.

### *Check-In Limbo.*

At Adeje Palace check-in we are third couple in yet another queue.

Six people stand behind the Reception desk; four youngish women, a boy-man and an older woman who is talking on a phone tucked under her left ear while she abuses a keypad and scolds a computer screen in angry Spanish. Only two of this group of six is actually on check-in duty, the others clearly catching up on 'admin' while texting on their smartphones. There are soon several other groups of people muttering behind us, nudging up into us in that semi-aggressive way we have detected throughout Europe, Only in the UK do people behave 'properly' in queues. Some of these behind us mutterers may be German, or Danish, or Swiss or Swedish or maybe even from Dunfermline,

The younger of the pair on duty, a girl, seems slow, methodical. I take her for a trainee. The man-boy is the super-confident type, spouting his diatribe at an elderly couple who are both leaning on Zimmers. We learn in time that this boy is called Tomaso and that he is a registered EU half-wit. I earwig, trying to decipher the older couples' language and decide most confidently, that they are definitely, possibly, perhaps, Danish. Whatever, the Zimmermen are failing to comprehend whatever tongue Tomaso is rapping at them like stray bullets from a drunken machine pistol. Eventually a porter arrives with a trolley to help the Zimmermen with their luggage, which like ours is meagre, only one smallish case between two. Will they have enough underwear, I wonder? They view this porter with deep suspicion, and forcefully reject his offer to transport their luggage. Porter-man ignores them, accepting orders only from Tomaso the Dolt and loads their totty wee case onto a giant trolley. Porter-man continues to ignore their anguished pleas and heads off in the direction of the lifts. The Zimmermen trail slowly after him, protesting loudly.

Suddenly another girl decides to offer check-in services. I smile at her. Nice Girl looks the kindly type. I am very attracted to her and she to me, I delude myself. But the dastardly Tomaso waves us forward and Nice Girl relinquishes my tentative hold over her and, with a beaming smile, waves us to Tomaso. I decide to accept Tomaso at face value, to try to stay positive. My bladder aches.

"Hola, Tomaso, Boun Giorno." (It came out in Italian only because I had forgotten, "Buenas Tardes", the Spanish for "Good Afternoon".)

"I am very pleasing to meets at you, excessively very, very greatly.' He glances away. "Oh, ^%#\*! Excusing at me, pleases."

The Zimmermen are back for a further round of verbal ping-pong. Tomaso races to get to them before anyone sensible can intervene and solve their problem.

We, however, have been 'taken' by Tomaso, who is clutching our paperwork. We are stranded in Check-In Limbo. I fear for my bladder.

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

The debate in Danish or German or Dunfermline-ese restarts. The Zimmermen are truculent. Tomaso is increasingly expansive, his bullet words louder and more random.

The queue swirls with the ebb and flow of people checking in and checking out. I consider incontinence pants as a future travel option.

I learn later that there are 424 rooms housing around 1,000 inmates when full. During our stay I estimate that the Adeje Palace is almost full to bursting. There is no end to the numbers checking in and out.

Time passes. We remain in Limbo.

The sun is heading for the horizon when, still very disgruntled, the Zimmermen eventually capitulate and follow Porter-man and The Giant Trolley as they trundle towards the lifts for a second time. We never see the Zimmermen again. Perhaps they were sent to Room 101?

Tomaso returns to us, a happy insincere smile beaming at 10,000 Watts.

He speaks rapidly, confidently, in what I think is a mixture of languages. He stares at our passports to verify that we are who we purport steadfastly to be. He tries again his eclectic version of Spanglish. "You are Eeenglish? Of Manchester?"

"No, Scotland, near Glasgow"

"Yes, yes, Eeenglish. I am be saying to me, "Tomaso theesez look Danish, or old Germans again." But I am wrong to you, no? Yes, you are Eenglish of Glasgow. Glasgow Rangers, yes? "UP THE GERS!" Ha, ha, ha."

I let this gibberish pass unchallenged, wondering what my Jags pals at Firhill would say at my lack of a spirited riposte.

Tomaso assigns a room, issues two plastic electronic swipe cards, takes an impression of my Caxton FX card, issues a small cardboard card with room 539 and code "T2 credit" annotated by hand, invites us to hire a room safe on payment of a €10 deposit and €3.50 per day. Margaret gives me the pointy elbow in the ribs and mutters. "No, John, that's ridiculous!" and so I decline his offer.

He offers two further cards to be deposited in exchange for pool towels and I initially refuse. Margaret again gives me the pointy elbow and says, "Take them, you never know!"

("Why?" I ask myself, "would *we* want beach towels?" Neither of us have swimming cossies with us and we hate lounging by the pool. Later, in the lift, we bicker about whether these cards will incur an extra charge. When we check-out we return these deposit cards unused. I scrutinize the bill to certify there is no charge. Margaret smirks, but holds back on the, "I told you so.")

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

(I now fast-forward: As stated, we are not pool-swimmers or sun-loungers. I do notice during our stay that throughout the extensive well-manicured grounds there is an ample scattering of recliners. I am pleased to note that each is individually labelled with a prominent notice in English, Spanish and German: "These Sun-Loungers may not be reserved in advance." Ah, yes, you guessed? At least 50% are "reserved" from first light by beach towels, wrap-around sunglasses, bottles of spray-on sun lotion and magazines and books in what is clearly German; or is it Danish?)

The Tomaso check-in experience has lasted around thirty minutes. It should have taken five, at most. My bladder is throbbing and I fear medical assistance may be required.

As we exit the scenic lift at floor five we notice at once that the corridor carpets need vacuumed. Our hackles rise. This is not a cheapskate hotel, we hope, but fear the worst.

Room 539 however proves clean and is quickly judged by Margaret as acceptable.

I seek relief from bladder pain and when the blurring clears from my eyes I find that we also have a good-sized balcony and a 'side sea view'. I like this arrangement: we avoid full sun, yet have a good view of the pools and I spot a smattering of late afternoon topless sunbathers. Sadly none are trig and trim. Indeed, most adults look like well-oiled whales, their children like dolphins and porpoises. By leaning out we can also squint at the sliver of sea, quite nearby. Minor defects are that the laminate floor is in need of repair, the pedal bin in the bathroom is broken and the bathroom is generally tired and the loo seat wobbly.

Very importantly, the beds prove to be excellent.

Despite Margaret's utter disbelief the notice explains that to allow the room safe to function we must rent an internal key to activate the lock. We are trapped. We must fork up for rental or risk carrying our credit/debit cards, passports and travel documents with us everywhere we go.

We have now been traveling for nearly twelve hours and apart from the almost inedible breakfast rolls and sludgy coffee in Glasgow airport, we have only drunk water and sucked on hard fruity sweeties.

The inner man yells; FEED ME! NOW!

### *The Great Dining Hall*

The restaurant opens at 6.30 pm and we are among the early eaters, checking in at the desk with our T2 card at 6.40 pm.

This football pitch-sized space is a vast self-service buffet with seating for around three hundred. I dub it: "The Great Dining Hall".

Unsuspecting, we are entering the world of a Dad's Army farce in which everything looks 'almost good' yet proves to be wonky, off-key. We find a small alcove with about twenty places.

The first table for two we sit at wobbles badly. We test the next table for two. It also wobbles, as does the next table. The fourth table for two is fully stable and we claim it. During the course of our stay we dine here in this alcove on more than twenty occasions. Devilishly, we hide our smirks as other couples fall foul of these Wobblers. Some complain, some thole their misfortune. Waiters produce corks from their pockets and stoop to insert stability, chortling happily. There is no thought of making permanent repairs that would spoil the fun.

Beside us there is a tree. Initially I believe it to be artificial. Then I see birds, sparrows, flitting from branch to branch. They flutter to the floor around our feet and make a 4\* living from crumbs. Later I realise that the tree stands in a small square atrium which is open at its top and connects with the Reception area some 30 meters and two levels above us. I prefer not to consider how this works from a fire safety point of view.

Margaret goes immediately to forage and I order wine, choosing a more expensive Rioja. It tastes 'different' or 'earthy' and is later judged by us to be 'distinctly odd'. We debate whether it is 'corked'. Margaret tries several more mini sips before deciding it is, for her, undrinkable. I fight my way to the bottom of the bottle single-handed. Even the very last drop is still 'distinctly odd'. Mercifully I suffer no ill effects in the bowel or head region.

I now forage for food. Both soups look khaki, unappealing. I compile a salad selection as a starter. It is tasteless. Margaret confirms her starter is also tasteless. Food is left upon my plate uneaten. It is a rare thing to see food uneaten on my plate. Likewise Margaret discards her first findings and tries again. The waiters and waitresses are alert to our situation and whip it away quickly- perhaps to be rinsed and recycled for its next outing to the salad bar?

Despite being very hungry we fail to find a morsel of anything which has 'taste'. Apart from being bland, the food is mostly tepid. I realise that since the hotel is in the mass feeding market, catering for around a thousand people at each three hour sitting, this is not a challenge I would personally welcome. However, a sparse few of our fellow eaters seem

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

satisfied, pile their plates high, even some of the French (!). But many are like us, picking and rejecting, re-choosing, every hopeful but like us harder to please. We are not alone.

We are hungry. We are hungry. This is a poor start to our holiday. It sets us 'against' the chef and his helpers. We are now ready to criticize, which is of course easier and in some perverse way, more enjoyable than wallowing in cheap praise. The poor quality of this food becomes a recurring theme during our stay.

Immediately on exiting The Great Dining Hall, we decide to check-out the menu at the more intimate in-house restaurant called La Tosca. This seats about fifty or so and claims to offer an a la carte dining experience.

We climb two steep flights of steps to the Reception area. Here there is a bar with music. A slim and attractive blond thirtysomething girl plays 'variations' which interweave well-known tunes in a slow jazz style. At first I find this enjoyable, then intriguing. We soon learn that she is an automaton, playing exactly the same repertoire at each appearance. After several nights I find I am scunnered.

I know - I am hard to please.

And so to bed at the end of day one.

It is but 9.00 pm but we agree, we are Kin-nackered.

### *Room 539.*

This first night sets our pattern and mostly we are abed before 10.00 pm, focused on our Kindles. We are soon asleep. Then awake, Kindle-ing again. Then asleep. Then awake, re-Kindle-ing. . .

Re-discovering my Kindle soon turns out to be one of the joys of this holiday. Being a regular insomniac or 'light sleeper', Margaret is a devout and avid Kindler, reading sporadically through most nights. At home I tend to read hardcopy, reading several (OK, many!) books in parallel, falling asleep, leaving my reading light "ON" to be kicked or nudged awake from my snoring slumbers, the signal to "SWITCH IT OFF!". Reading my Kindle White Paper solves this problem. But, because I often fall asleep and drop my Kindle, I have it encased in a protective cover. This case is also, allegedly, waterproof. This approach has disadvantages. The case is heavy. It is very hard to re-start, requiring a Biro or similar sharp pointed implement which must be pressed with great force. Finding the notch is difficult in darkness. I have a small LED torch which I also use to guide my nocturnal sorties to the loo where I micturate, simultaneously firing up my Kindle. Who dares to say men can do only one thing at a time!

Another wonderful advantage of Room 539 is that it has twin beds, each wide enough for two small slim people and hence ideal for my single wider body. My bed provides me with ample space to writhe to and fro. In parallel, my princess in her bed perfect and unruffled bed sleeps in scary, silent stillness. Wonderfully, we are each provided with three pillows. These wide, firm, three-pillowed beds offer a nocturnal luxury which of itself might induce me to return this hotel another year.

It will transpire that we seldom assume the stance of *homo erectus* earlier than 8.30 am. On one morning we float up into wakefulness at 9.40 am, racing through our ablutions to ensure we reach The Great Dining breakfast experience before they remove the food for recycling. We need not have worried; it was still busy and does not cease operating until 10.30 am.

## *Breakfast Boredom*

These breakfast buffet offerings prove to be as taste free and tepid as the previous evening's displays. We are hard to please. We grouch to each other, offer our usual suggestions. Continually we marvel at food which looks good enough to eat and proves unappetizing. How do they do it? How are they able to fail so consistently? Even the coffee is weak and sludgy. I try the special 'serve yourself' coffee from the machine. This muck is worse. I try drinking self-made tea a few times and give up. In the end I settle to twin glasses of reconstituted orange juice. Yes, you have it - you will find no freshly juiced oranges in this Adeje Palace! Remember - this island is part of Spain, a country which virtually invented oranges! I try a banana, grown locally: one bite proves that it is over-firm and tasteless.

I default to self-toasted white pan bread with rashers of bacon and lashings of (frowned upon) HP sauce. The fried eggs are tasteless too. I try boiled eggs. With added salt and pepper and a wee knob of butter; these prove acceptable.

This sets the pattern. Margaret eats fruit, hoping for taste.

Each morning, 12 in a row, I eat bacon butties with HP sauce.

West of Scotland Man strides the Land.

### *Privileged Dining*

After our first breakfast we race to book for *La Tosca*.

In fact there are two in-house restaurants. The other is *Sakura* (more below).

Bookings can only be made at the 'Privileges' desk. Our hackles rise. Last year at the 5\* Sheraton, (this is the hotel next to the Adeje Palace H10), we uncovered a scam called the Sheraton Preferred Guest Club which sought to encourage us to 'upgrade' in order to enjoy services which we had 'assumed' would be included.

We suffer a long wait while a very elderly French lady waves both hands to her left, repeats her problem, waves them to her right, repeats her problem, waves them to her left. . . - (let's do the Hokey Cokey). The young woman on the other side of the desk is complicit in this time-consuming process, relating over and over the same phrase in broken French (or so this seems to me) jabbing at her screen, peering hard at it, scribbling numbers on a pad, nodding her head, repeating again the Her French Phrase. The elderly French lady continues to re-position her hands and drones her own more varied phrases. It may only have been ten minutes? It felt like ten hours.

I complete my booking in under two minutes and then make a fatal mistake. I ask what joining 'Privileges' involves.

The girl explains, in her version of Spanglish, what we would get in return for an extra payment of €30 per person per day. What we might get turns out to be not a lot, apart from priority booking at *La Tosca*. However, to access this priority we must still book with this girl. I listen and wonder "how does this give us priority?" I say nothing. In addition we would be showered with free beach towels. Indoors we would have access to a free bar all day. We see this bar which is simply a poorly screened-off section of Reception. There is no hiding place if you become Privileged! Or perhaps, if you are Privileged, you must want to flaunt this? We would have free Wi-Fi, she insists. (see below). And outdoors we would have access to the Chill Out area which we have already sussed is directly adjacent to the perimeter security fence.

On our walks to *La Caleta* we, (the un-Privileged), look back into the Adeje Palace to observe what we have (luckily) missed:

Ah, the Privileged have a poolside bar with free drinks and snacks!

Ah, the Privileged are people who look like Dolly and Dek, captured at various stages of evolution from mid-thirties to mid-eighties.

Ah, Privileged women are mostly in bikinis, some grotesquely topless.

Ah, they are forced to display themselves to the passing un-Privileged.

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

With our booking for La Tosca we receive a card which allows us to dine here at a 20% discount.

It transpires, the apologetic Isaac our Maître D' explains, this 20% discount applies only to food, not drinks. This we judge as 'fair enough', since the wines are reasonable, by UK standards.

The La Tosca menu proves quite limited but when the food arrives it does have some taste.

We give it a 'tick' and vow to return, perhaps.

### *Our Digital Lives*

Tomaso the Dolt at Reception had offered confusion to our question about Wi-Fi. Our impression, confirmed to each other, was that we might only 'connect' securely in the vicinity of Reception. Privilege Girl had implied we would (only) get 'free' Wi-Fi by joining the Privilege programme.

However, and to our delight, we discover that in Room 539, after a short struggle and some heated words between us, we can connect to the Wi-Fi system directly from our room, no charge. Perhaps this is a happy anomaly? Later we find that, 'once connected we remain connected' throughout the internal part of the hotel. We did not Wi-Fi performance check outdoors.

The Wi-Fi site stated we could connect only three devices. In practice this meant three per person.

For Margaret:  
her Samsung Galaxy (Android) phone,  
her iPad  
and her Kindle.

For me:  
my iPad mini  
and my Kindle.

Wunderbar! Digital bliss!

(Last year at the Sheraton we had to pay a day rate of €3 (how mean, it's a 5\* hotel, or supposed to be) which allowed only one device connected per room and had to be reconnected for each login session. How cumbersome!)

But this is not really about us. We are Internet-lite people. As we look around the hotel, inside and by the pools, and as we wander around we see people who are clearly addicted to their devices. Mostly these are phones but there is a fair sprinkling of iPad/Tablets and laptops. And have you noticed how territorial people quickly become. Out of 12 nights we sat at the same spot 10 times, just like those around us.

In the evening, in the Reception Bar after dinner, we see a French family of Mum and dad and two daughters aged 14 and 11. Each is connected, with phones and iPads. There is virtually no chat, no sharing. We observe this for five nights in a row and then they are no more, home to France. We see another couple in their early fifties. They are plump, unattractive, oddly dressed couple. He sits with his phone at arm's length peering at it over thick glasses, poking

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

it with the first finger of his other hand. She is turned away, cooed doon with her iPad, swiping and scrolling then poking furiously. Only once in many nights do I see them converse. He nudges her back from hyperspace, points to his screen, she giggles (genuine) and seconds later they are back in their separate digital universes.

Similar scenes are repeated around us wherever we go. Couple, families, groups of friends all converse and disappear like yo-yos back and forth to Inter-Land.

There is one group of four Asian 'youngsters', two couples in their mid-thirties who break this mould. They are nearby on several occasions and spend an hour or so playing cards, exchanging banter, laughing, INTERACTING with each other. How nice. How old-fashioned.

How our world has changed in the last 5 years!

At Reception Bar, most evenings, as we sip our nightcaps, Margaret checks her smart phone. On occasion she is frequently 'gone' for fifteen minutes or more. One evening I port my iPad mini which I use mainly to scribe first versions of my stories when on holiday. This evening, when Margaret has 'disappeared', I smuggle my iPad out and begin to poke at a tale. Within seconds, or that's what it seems my ankle is being kicked.

'What are you doing? Writing again?'

'But you were on your phone. Why can't I write?'

'Because you have been at it for ages, that's why!'

'No, only a few minutes, honest.'

'No, John, when you go over there, wherever it is you lose track. No more writing when we are out of the bedroom, right?'

'But what about you, on your phone?'

'Look, John, that's completely different. It's just a few minutes at a time. Not at all like you.'

'But Margaret, look. Everyone else is doing it, look'

'No, John, you are the only one writing drivell!'

No, Margaret, I doubt that very much.'

It is very seldom I get the last word in such exchanges.

(And as I type, a post-thought: we are very used to people (passively) reading hardcopy books and magazines and, over recent years Kindles. To me this seems 'acceptable'. Why is it that the 'active' use of devices to access Inter-Land, especially when in company seem so rude? Answers on a postcard to. . .

(As a further post-thought: as you might suspect we do pay a return trip to La Tosca, mainly to escape the boredom of the Great Dining Hall. This time we recognise that we are in a minority, that those around us are the Privileged. When a new group of the Privileged enter they are greeted effusively by the waiting staff, batted to their favourite tables with cheery if ersatz banter.

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

One such Privileged lady, a singleton, well-dressed and of our own era, is seated beside us, and at once props her iPad open in front of her. I have a good view of her dining experience. From first to last she amuses herself by playing bridge against an App on her iPad to which she dedicates her right hand. All food is dealt with by her forking left hand. I am no expert but I would say she was a poor player.

I think back to my nights on the road when I travelled on business, lived in hotels, often eating alone as she is doing. Then, to fill the hours before retiring, I munched slowly, trying to make the meal last, eking it out to a couple of hours. Usually I read a book as I ate.

Surely reading is a more companionable activity than mindlessly playing bridge on an iPad?

Why not read a good tale iBooks, or the Kindle App. Or use a Kindle?

Of course, today, if I were in her shoes, I might be using this munch time to tap out another dose of drive!

## *Los Cristianos and the GBH*

Next day we leap (!) aboard the local bus to make our annual pilgrimage to Los Cristianos.

This year our bus is almost new. But it has very narrow, very hard plastic seats, and is awfy, awfy uncomfortable for a wide-bottomed mannie like me. We soon realise that we are lucky to board two stops from the terminus at La Caleta while the bus is still almost empty. The journey seems endless with many long stops at pick-up points. By two stops beyond our boarding point this bus is full, crammed full. Our fellow travelers are mainly seniors of our ilk and older. There are many locals too, with pushchairs and huge bags full of WHAT? Surely not food! I would love to find out!

In Los Cristianos we find our usual coffee stop, Cafe 5. Here the coffee is 8 out of 10 and we share an almond slice. Delicious. Our initial plan was to find a 'nice' perfume for Margaret but we see a BAG SHOP!

(Back story: Many years ago on Arran, Margaret bought a tan coloured real leather rucksack. It is now a tired old favourite and highly prized for its design; it has three zipping front pockets, a front flap pocket, a rear zipping pocket which gives high security as it rests against her back. Inside there are myriad other zipping pockets. This is the specification to match but Margaret wants a replacement that is ALSO about 15% larger so that she can carry a light cardigan with us when the weather is nice but uncertain. Ideally this new rucksack should be leather and not black; maybe wine or maroon, maybe two-tone, maybe not even leather?

(To be fair to me, I do not yet understand that this is our goal. I merely note that Margaret is looking at 'bags' and so I try to be helpful. I have been here before, many times and I re-learn that I am being 'annoying'. Margaret is a 'slow, careful shopper' who likes to consider every alternative. I would buy the first bag we see.

(This first bag shop is our introduction to what will I will soon dub as the Great Bag Hunt (GBH). Sadly, as I edit this at home with our recent sojourn in the sun becoming a fading memory, the GBH continues. But on that first day we were both naive, susceptible, fresh meat, blank pages, willing to be inveigled into the secret world of the bag salesman.

(Now, as I edit this piece, I reckon we spent over twenty hours in an "in and out of bag shops routine" over the 12 days of our GBH. Not once did we find anything close to 'the perfect rucksack'.)

Back to Los Cristianos on that first morning: we are outside the first bag shop.

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

"My name is Pedro." He breathes his rank smoky breath at us through small brown teeth fixed in a fake smile. "Yoos is nice womans, so I geevs you special price. Which yoos likes bestest? Thees ones?"

"No, not black thanks, and it's too small."

Pedro grabs a two-tone leather rucksack in beige and white. "It's an old lady's bag", Margaret murmurs to me, catching my better left ear. With a theatrical flourish Pedro opens it and hauls out handfuls of crumpled grey paper and old plastic shopping bags. He scatters them to the floor, earning our immediate judgement: "Pedro not only smokes but he is a litter lout." Never, ever, will Margaret trust this man.

"Look at thees, nice womans, thees is big, big, yoos sees, yoos sees."

Pedro is scrunching the bag, rolling it into a tight cylinder which he throws onto his small desk where it slowly unfolds, regaining a semblance of its former shape. Now he punches it inside to stretch it. Now, according to Pedro, this bag is now larger.

"Sees, nice womans, sees, sees? It big, big, now, OK?"

Margaret does what she always does in these situations. She sidles clear of Pedro, placing herself beyond me, using me as her buffer, (no pun intended!), then she edges nonchalantly for the door, leaving me to issue the coup de grâce on the doomed transaction.

"Look at thees prices, mister. What you thinks?" He opens a zip and pulls out a price tag.

"€148".

"No thanks, we didn't want to spend so much." I see Margaret step out through the door and disappear.

"Looks at thees, nice mister. Looks." He pulls over a well-used calculator and punches at it rapidly, hitting the 50% key. "What yoos thinks? No? Yoos is right? No! Ha, ha, ha! No! Yooooos is wrong!" He hits the keys again in triumph. He waves "€42" under my nose. "I makes thees prices special for yoos and yoos beautiful girl, no?"

"No thanks, Pedro. Let's leave at that, thanks. We'll think about it," I lie, and almost run for the door with him flinging sotto voce Spanish curses at my departing back.

Outside we sprint away, but soon slow down for the next bag shop. This is on a corner, a prime site. We see a rucksack in a wine colour. The young man approaches. We have not learned our lesson. We explain that we want a similar bag but larger, with more zips, more pockets.

"I have the bag for yoos, exact for yoos, nice lady, comes at me."

Foolishly we follow and he reaches down the old lady rucksack that we have just been subjected to by Pedro.

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

"No, sorry, we've already seen this one. What we want is a bag like this one my wife is wearing, but bigger, in wine or maybe green leather," I say.

"Not green!" hisses Margaret, "green is hard to wear things with!"

"Nice mister I know this bag for yoos exactly. Wait here for a quick time and I will bring this bag right to yoos, pleases."

As he leaves by the side door we race for the front door and almost run away.

"Margaret, I bet he's off to Pedro's, what d' you think?"

Bag hunting is temporarily suspended. At Margaret's insistence we travel southwards to the remotest part of Los Cristianos. The crowds thin out, numerically. The average body size remains large. We look up at the huge hotel we stayed in those many years ago. It was recommended to us by a young lady at Barhead Travel. I bet she has never been to Tenerife! Then, naïvely, we thought this hotel and Los Cristianos was "OK". That was before we discovered the other end of 'the boardwalk strip', at much quieter, more gentile Adeje and La Caleta. This huge bland hotel looks even more sad and tired than I remember from that first visit some 8 years ago.

We find a shady spot near the rocky shore and look across at the larger of the two La Gomera ferries load/unload. The steady throb of the auxiliary diesels which power the ship in harbour bounces round us and I remember again that this was a feature of our stay in this hotel. These ferries run to and fro from dawn till dusk, and there are others which travel further afield. Los Cristianos is a busy, noisy port. Now, looking back I find I have retained no fond memories of Los Cristianos or the hotel, only the fun we had with our friends Jim and Sheila, joining them in their geocaching hunts.

As the urge for a lunch snack looms, I find we are heading north, apparently we are intending to walk all or most of the many miles back to Adeje.

I am yet unsuspecting but this proves to be the start of the GBH proper. We are merely getting started. Pedro and his corner shop pal were the warm-up act.

### *Trikers, Bikers and Scooters*

During the course of this first morning at large we see our first electric two-seater bikes and trikes. Los Cristianos and its immediate environs has always been a haunt for people on mobility Scooters. These original versions are still around, simple small-wheeled, low-speed affairs. Now we witness hundreds (a fact!) of faster two-seater versions, often in small convoys. These are new from last year. Most of these new pavement bikers and not disabled although many are overweight, lazy. Intimidatingly, they zoom towards us at speeds of upwards of 20 mph. They are a menace, especially when they approach near silently from behind and insist on weaving past at high speed.

Clearly for an elderly couple where one or both are disabled these two-seaters are a boon, if used sensibly. And there is a second menace: high-speed motorised scooters. These are not new, simply more numerous and, I observe, more competitive now that they have the two-seater trikers to contend with. These scooters seem to move even faster and have amazing acceleration. The age range for these drivers seems to extend down to about 10 year olds. They are noisy, very noisy, so less of a hazard in that we hear them approach from behind. Add to this there is also a sprinkling of conventional bicycles, some also aggressive.

You get an idea of the problem. The boardwalk is nominally a pedestrian area. There are many ageds like us, people with dugs, mostly on long leads, couples with toddlers and pushchairs. There are obsessive joggers who run at us as if we are invisible and at the last second hop and skip past us. The boardwalk is BUSY, the mixed flow moving both ways. We envision a serious accident at any moment but mercifully we are spared this trauma.

As we progress through our holiday we become increasingly reluctant to 'accommodate' these pests, ignoring them when we 'feel' them behind us, refusing to make way for them when we see them approach, perversely putting ourselves in danger by making them come to a halt and wait for us to pass. Within days we are fighting back, taking every opportunity to impede their progress.

If we ruled the world, these bikes, trikes and scooters would be banned and allowed only for true blue badge holders.

And, naturally, for responsible Jags Supporters.

### *Vaapoors.*

Our hotel prohibits smoking indoors, in bedrooms and on balconies. In the past we have suffered from surreptitious balcony smokers contaminating our airspace. On one occasion we complained, insisted we must be rehomed in a different room because the hotel found it impossible to deter these offenders.

This year we are pleased to report that we have not suffered. Perhaps we have just been lucky.

In the gardens, pool areas and non-enclosed spaces, smoking is still rife.

In the streets and all along the miles of the boardwalk smokers abound.

Many shopkeepers and restaurant greeters stand outside their premises and chain smoke.

Tobacco, like alcohol, is cheap in the Canaries.

Discarded dog ends litter streets and walkways, especially around pub type bars.

What is significant this year is the rise in the use of e-pipes and vaping devices.

We have dubbed these people 'vaapoors'.

I think they look weird, bizarre, surrounding themselves with huge clouds of mist.

We have spotted one lady, a guest, who sits at the Reception bar and exhales enormous and continuous clouds of white mist. She is like Vesuvius or Etna. Her liquid concoction is held in a glass flask and appears to be a raspberry coloured. Does it contain nicotine and other harmful substances which she re-breathes around us?

To be fair, vaapoors do not discard unsightly cigarette stubs willy-nilly. And, mostly, I do not detect a 'smell' from them or their activities. I just hope we do not find in years to come that they are nonetheless killing us all by their vaping!

Smokers and increasingly Vaapoors are everywhere in Tenerife.

If we ruled the world. . .

### *Demography*

We both enjoy trying to 'spot' other nationalities around us. Sometimes it seems obvious from dress and hair colouring. German ladies do like odd red and purple combinations, if they are indeed German. I try to use accents, listen into conversations, and try to 'spot' the language. My tinnitus and associated deafness is an increasing problem, especially for Margaret. This deafness makes my earwiggling subject to gross error, I am advised. The Danish/Dunfermline incident at the airport is an example of how this arrow of identification can miss the dartboard.

My totally unscientific survey suggests that this year we have "spotted":

British:	around 30% with a fair number of Scottish voices.
Spanish/Italian:	around 30%
German/Dutch/Scandinavian/Swiss	around 20%
Russian/East European	around 5%
The rest are unidentifiable.	perhaps from Dunfermline or Copenhagen?

Within the British group as a whole I struggle to be sure they are actually British. If Brummies speak quickly I can take them for Dutch. Germans might be Danish, sometimes Dutch. Russians might be Finnish or Polish or even Portuguese.

What is certain is that the British are the worst behaved and most tattooed.

During our first days we see many families with school age children. Slowly, as January matures, these school aged children are less evident.

As our first week ends, we are mostly seeing people just like us, retirees, moving around in couples or quads. Thankfully there is a persistent sprinkling of younger couples with smaller children, toddlers and infants to leaven the mix.

### *Las Galletas*

Each year we promise to write ourselves a pre-travel checklist. This year I drop a new clanger and arrive without my driver's licence. Car hire is not possible. After a few grumbles from Margaret and repeated obsequious apologies from me, we settled to our fate. We must either walk or use the bus. Yes, we could use taxis, but why risk death when we can already see it on the near horizon?

Last year, by hire car, we visited various new places. A few we liked were beside the airport. I know, noisy you think? But no, the noise is not too bad, honest: perhaps because the runway points at the sea?

'Our bus', the Number 467, is labelled 'Costa de Silencio'. And we already know that it arrives at 'our stop' almost empty and so we are sure of a seat.

After some iPad research by Margaret, we decide on the village/town of La Galletas. It is quite a distance but we discover on boarding that the fare is only €5.40 total for both, each way: what a bargain! The 90 minute bum-numbing bus ride would require only 25 minutes maximum in a hire car. On arrival coffee is top priority. And of course one of us is desperate for a loo.

We find a nice place (La Panorama). Later, after a close inspection of all alternatives, we will eventually return here to enjoy an excellent lunch, prompting Margaret to make a positive Trip Advisor entry, (a rare, rare thing to behold! Yes, we are hard to please! And usually use Trip Adviser to snipe back at places, after the event- sneaky, eh?)

After coffee we wander around, soaking up the local atmosphere, a mixture of bold brash new and crumbling, grubby chaos. We start at the small frontal strip, fairly recently upgraded, maybe a decade ago. One tiny place stands out, isolated, a conversion of an original old building now recycled. This is *The Pink Parrot*, bedecked with a large Union Jack. This odd hostelry offers 'genuine English home cooking' including fish and chips and roast beef with Yorkshire pudding, available all day, every day.

A small blackboard has a permanently scrawled offer:

"2 for 1 Full English All Day Breakfast with toast and tea or coffee - €5.25".

There are four tables outside and a cramped dark interior. Mine host is 5 feet nothing, wearing grubby shorts, a tee-shirt and a half apron. He is 50-ish, bald, pony-tailed, beer-bellied with a goatee beard and dashes about asking, "are yees all right, love?"

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

His assistant is a laconic scruffy young man/boy in his early twenties who may be his grandson or perhaps his son. Scruffy Boy looks bored, tired and perhaps doped. Mostly he hovers inside or at the rear door off the kitchen where I suspect he stashes his Ganga.

*Humming, we pass on by, wait on the corner.* We continue with our forensic inspection of the town of La Galletas. We surmise it is a 'real town', a place where real Tenerifians live. These are the locals who work in hotels and the like along the tourist strip from Los Cristianos to La Caleta. We even recognise a distinctive mannish lady from a restaurant we nearly went into near our hotel. It is very clear that La Galletas has suffered sporadic attacks of recent investment, directed by a madman with a scattergun. This cash has created a few ugly tourist apartment blocks and restaurants exhibiting doubtful 'modern Architecture'. This may have been a response to the more coordinated attack at Costa de Silencio, more of which later.

The hidden subtext of our stroll in the sun is the GBH, but handbag shops are hard to find. It is still too early for lunch. We sit in the sun and do a bit of people watching. The wind is variable but quite strong. From time to time we are in receipt of second hand smoke from the group of local elderlies seated nearby. An incontinent dog wanders the shingle beach in the foreground, trailed by its dutiful owner who picks up the solid bits. The dog circles an attractive girl in a bikini, marking out a protective ring of pee. I am reminded of Ward Bond of long ago. Unaware, the bikini girl seems to be able to operate her smart phone in full sunlight, while wearing sunglasses. How is this achieved? Should I trawl Amazon for special glasses? The sun is merciless. The sun is merciless. I do not have a sun hat with me. I have twenty sun hats languishing in a holiday drawer back home.

To the south of La Galletas we espy the white outline of the newer development tacked onto the peninsula. We deduce that this must be the eponymous Costa de Silencio where the 467 terminates before retracing its route back to La Caleta. We decide that after lunch we shall walk to Costa de Silencio but I immediately disbelieve the internet advice that it is "a pleasant 10 minute stroll."

We take another stroll into shade to escape the sun. I find a ferramenta (hardware and ironmongery) where I indulge myself for a few minutes and buy a three toty cable ties as mementos. I love Ironmongers and I love cable ties, but that is a different story altogether.

## *The Pink Parrot Affair.*

We are both in growing need of a loo but it is still too early for lunch. We settle on The Pink Parrot, choose the only free outside table even though it is full sun, and order a bottle of water to share so that we can use their facility. Yes, it is a single facility, for men, women and disabled.

Seated beside us is an odd group, four ladies, two middle-aged, two very elderly, all grossly overweight. (Yes, I know, I know - people in glass houses, etc.) They have with them a 'soft' boy aged around 12 years. He too is huge. His mother, whom he called Mary, was in her late fifties. Earwiggling we learn that Mary has just said goodbye to older children who are now home in Glasgow. Mary explains that at last she is enjoying some peace and quiet, relieved not to have to 'run after them'. If Mary actually ran the Richter scale would need re-defined.

Mary's mother, whom everyone called "Mum", has a basic mobility scooter parked beside her chair; this is the older type, the slow, small-wheeled kind with a sticker showing that it has been hired. Daryl, Mary's boy child is half way through a large fizzy drink and a plate of chips with tomato sauce. Did I say that Mary and Mum were literally enormous? After a few minutes I reckon that the other two ladies are not Scottish. Perhaps they are Welsh, maybe even Irish and it seems they are recent holiday friends. Definitely not from Dunfermline, I'm almost sure.

(While this story played out I was thinking that "Mum" was Daryl's mother, but later Margaret told me she had had a good view of aged wrinkled face of Mum, who may have been ninety. Later, as we debated this and I sorted out that Mary was Daryl's mother when Margaret insisted, "John, it is physiologically impossible for "Mum" to have been Daryl's mother!" Below I have re-assigned "Mum" as Daryl's Granny.)

Anyway, what transpired was the lovely little tale I want to share.

A Tall African Man arrives, (whom I dub TAM). TAM is festooned with watches, beaded bracelets, and sunglasses. He hefts a small grubby, heavy rucksack. It is clear he recognises Mary and Daryl, and perhaps also Mum.

"How are-ah you today, my friends? I have not seen you for ay while, where have-ah you been hiding from-ah me."

"Aye, well yer lucky tae see us attaw, so ye ur, son," said Mary, who did most of the talking. "We're away hame soon, goat tae get Daryl back tae school, so we huv, eh, son?"

"Yes, Mary. Ah huv tae get back tae school, so ah huv."

"Oh there you are-ah my friend. I see-ah you now. You are-ah my good friend."

Daryl and TAM exchange high fives.

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

"Ah fund yoor rucksack fur ye last time, dint Ah? Sure Ah did, Mary? Member ye left it an Ah hud tae run efter ye way it, dint Ah? Dint Ah Mary? Ah did Mum, so Ah did. Ah hid tae run efter him or heedah loast it, so he widiv."

"Yes, you are-ah my special friend now, I remember this-ah very well. How about-ah pair of sunglasses. What you say, special price for-ah special friend, yes? Which ones you like best. These ones? You like the red?"

"Dae Ah get them fur nuthin? Eh? Ah saved yer bag fur ye, that bag oan yer back, wi aa it's stuff in it, dint Ah? Dint Ah Mary? Ah did Mum, Ah did. Heedah loast it if it wisnae fur me."

Daryl tries on a pair of TAM's sun glasses in red, discarding the black ones he had been wearing. The African perches on the edge of the seat of the mobility scooter, near to Mum, settling in for a sale he is sure will come.

"Ah got a pair o these red wans the last time an' Ah geed them tae Sharon fur a wee present, so Ah did. Dint Ah, Mary? Ah dont need sunglasses. Kin Ah try oan a watch?"

Mary tries a different pair of sunglasses, white ones. The ones she is wearing are black with gold sparkly letters which claim they are by Dolce and Gabbana.

"Sure, which-ah watch you like best. This blue one? You like-ah the blue?"

"Naw, kin a try the white wan? I goat a blue wan last time an a geed it tae Sharon fur a wee present."

"Daryl, son, ye dont need another watch," said Mary, "Yeev plenty-ah watches at hame."

Daryl puts the white watch back and accepts the blue watch from the African.

Daryl leans close and whispers, "Mum. Ye kin buy me this blue wan fur me, if ye wont tae."

"What dae ye waant fur this wan, son," says Granny-Mum to TAM.

"Only ten Euros for-ah my special friend."

"Ah should get that fur nuthin," chimes Daryl. "Ah saved yer bag fur ye."

Mum gives the African a €20 note and gets a €10 note in change. There is no haggling.

Mary is testing another different pair of sun specs. "Whit dae ye think, Mum."

"Aye, they suit ye fine, hen."

The older of the two 'Welsh' ladies fiddles with the large ring of beaded bracelets that TAM has placed in front of her. TAM offers to help unloose one for her to try. She asks to see a particular one. The African frees it. Mary explains that the bracelet can be worn either around a wrist or an ankle. The Welsh lady jokes she cannot reach her ankles to fasten it. The African offers to do this, causing a ripple of laughter. I notice all four ladies are dressed alike in long loose dresses which partly conceal their hefty legs.

Mum asks TAM, "son, how much for they sunglasses and the bracelet?"

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

"Let me have-ah just €10 for them both, my special friend."

Mum hands back the €10 note, again without haggling.

Another African, smaller, with greying hair, approaches with his rack of sunglasses and watches. He says something to TAM, in African, quietly. TAM makes a cheerful reply. They both laugh. The older African wanders away, throwing African banter over his shoulder at TAM.

The Welsh lady protests this kind gift from Mum, and produces a €5 note, tries to pay someone.

Mum says, "Don't be daft, hen, it didnae cost onythin. It's jist ma wee pressie tae ye, coz weel mibbee no see yees again, efter the day, wull we?"

The African clips the bracelet to her wrist, holds her hand up for everyone to admire. "But, but . . ."

Her daughter lilt, "Mam, just say "thank you, Mum. Don't make a fuss."

"Thank you all my good-ah friends. Have-ah safe trip home. I look for you-ahgain."

TAM shakes hands all round, and high fives Daryl then ambles slowly away. The little group of four elderly ladies settles back into their previous gossip. Daryl admires his watch then sucks greedily on his straw. "Mary, Ah've finished ma coke, so Ah huv."

We drink up too, and I enter the Pink Parrot to use the loo.

The interior looks tired, untidy, grubby. In the gloom I spy six small tables, four of these occupied by elderly couples furtively enjoying their two for one all day breakfast deal. The loo is a small cramped cupboard which opens directly off the disorganized open plan kitchen. Behind a large multi-burner stove and a muddle of frying pans and pots with various contents bubbling, I see a chubby harassed woman with a hot face under a sweaty brow. Clean and dirty dishes spill around an overflowing sink. I judge this cook to be the wife of mine host. She too looks tired, untidy, grubby, worn out. I imagine her working every day from 8.00am to late evening, concocting mainly all day breakfasts. My practised eye reveals that The Pink Parrot is not air conditioned. I wonder what it is like in the kitchen in summer, especially on days when it soars to 42 Celsius, as we heard had happened several times last summer.

Relieved, I wait outside for Margaret.

We saunter off to lunch at the pristine La Panorama. I say to Margaret, "Those ladies were nice. They did not condescend to that African lad. They were kind to him. And did you notice, none of them were smokers and they were drinking tea and soft drinks, not alcohol. Rough diamonds. Scottish rough diamonds."

### *Costa di Silencio*

After lunch at we are on our way to Costa di Silencio, a mere 10 minutes stroll (!).

Forty minutes later I am very needy for another pee and very grumpy! (It's all because of my blood pressure pills! And having drunk 80% of a litre of fizzy water during lunch.) I find relief in the dark shade behind a convenient palm tree - the bonus hydration was good for it! I have wet wipes, don't worry, my hands are clean! We bicker and eventually agree that what we are seeing *is* Costa Silencio. Trip Advisor tells us that a few years ago it was hot bare rock. Now it is thousands of low-rise apartment blocks and small strips of restaurants and cafe pubs. No local housing here. Indeed, it is hard to spot a local. This is almost like a gated community. Indeed, every separate zone is hemmed in by security fences. Entry and exit are controlled. It is a gated community. The inmates escape only to use the scattering of smallish supermarkets and the gaudy restaurants and bars. John Smith ales are available on tap. "Get yer Full English Breakfast here, mate."

We think we there must be more to Costa de Silencio. We debate this. Perhaps if we walked through the blazing heat to that roundabout in the distance we would find the original village? NO! I refuse. We wait at the next bus stop for the next 467 to La Caleta, back to our refuge, tae oor ane wee holiday But and Ben.

On a later expedition to El Medano (below) we discover that in fact where we are now sitting is in fact the terminus and that the recent development that is Costa de Silencio ends at that roundabout. There is no original village, or, if it did exist, it has been 'disappeared' by the new 'tourist village'. So, we can tick the 'apartment resort' of Costa de Silencio off our list. It is a soulless place with not a handbag shop to be found anywhere. It is a ghastly ghetto for tourists. Trip Adviser, here she comes.

### *Shopping.*

The hotel courtesy shuttle bus takes us to Las Americas, the hub of the south Tenerife 'strip'. We are determined to find a rucksack that satisfies Margaret's particular specification. But first we have coffee. This is a must. I fear that I am addicted to good coffee. Margaret will have one 'shot' a day, no more, preferably sipped before noon. You may recall that our hotel dispenses tasteless, gunge. Here in Tenerife good coffee is hard to find.

As part of this endless trek we find a nice place for tapas. We order a tuna plate for me, Serrano ham plate to share, and prawns in garlic for Margaret. Perfect. We return several times. Each time is perfect. It is called El Mirador; but take heed, I judge there could be a hundred El Mirador restaurants on Tenerife.

The bag hunt recommences. Margaret is relentless when she is focused. Later I estimate we will eventually visit 200 or more shops. (During her read-trough, Margaret denies this, vehemently - stick to my estimate. I have the laptop!)

We often come close, but still the exact bag eludes us. I suggest the Internet is the place to look. But of course a bag, like shoes and most items of ladies' clothing must be seen, touched, forensically examined for quality and seldom purchased on first discovery. Later, much later, during the last few days of our stay, this Internet idea takes root and later Margaret advises that several suitable candidates have revealed themselves on the M&S and Debenhams websites. For the present we must continue. At least, I muse, our meanderings under a hot sun are not without a higher purpose.

And, to be fair, it is not all bad news for me. I buy a pair of pale green shorts. Later I find a matching/complementary light green polo shirt. Later still I find two further polo shirts in navy and light blue. I have added to my meagre holiday wardrobe. Margaret has flirted with several blouses and dresses but has not yet made a purchase beyond a €3.90 bottle of nail varnish. She has half-heartedly looked at shoes and sandals but she is not in that 'mode' and is worried about overloading our red trolley case for the return flight.

As mentioned, the other serious strand to our shopping during these first days in Tenerife is for perfume. The GBH is now combined with perfume testing. "Perfume changes over time, after it is in contact with skin", I learn, again. My forearms and backs of hands arms become additional testing surfaces. Soon we are in a complete muddle, walking in a fume of spiced fruit. We draw stares. Margaret wants a scent that lingers. She decides the answer must lie in *Eau de Parfum* rather than *Eau de Toilette*. On day five, in the 40<sup>th</sup> (?) perfume shop we sniff the sample of *La Petite Robe Noir* by *Guerlain* and "splash it all over". A small friendly lady who may be the owner of the shop bustles over. She is a fine featured wide-hipped Asian and sounds Indian.

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

She asks if Margaret would like to try it, unaware that we already have. I ask myself: "If you work in a perfume shop all day, every day, can you actually smell anything or are your nose buds on permanent overload?"

"This is a very nice perfume for you, madam, and this is a very good price. You are English, not German?"

"No, we're Scottish, from Glasgow," I say.

"Ah, yes I have been to England once, to Edinburgh. This perfume suits you madam, it is very nice."

"Yes," says Margaret, "but they change after a little while, on the skin. Does this one linger?"

"Yes, madam, this one is lingering for very long time if you take the *Eau de Parfum*, which is nearly the same price for nearly the same size bottle. This is the very good price and it smells to you very well. Is this the one you want?"

"John, do you like this one?"

"Yes, it is very nice, Margaret. Very, very nice. I think this is what you have been looking for. Am I right?"

"Yes, it *is* nice. Yes."

"A good choice for you, madam. You will take the *Eau de Parfum*, yes?"

"Yes," we chime in unison.

"And for you, sir, how do you like a very nice aftershave?"

"No, thanks, I never use it, but thanks"

The deal is done and we are back in the sun in less than ten minutes.

Thank you, nice Indian lady. And yes, I do like Margaret's new perfume. With part one of her forthcoming birthday present in the bag, so to speak, now all we need is the perfect rucksack. Does that nice Indian lady have a nice sister who sells nice handbags?

Flushed with success, boiling from walking in under the merciless sun, and fully ready for an afternoon siesta in our air conditioned room, I insist we take a taxi back to the Adeje Palace H10. From his rear view mirror our driver gives me a close inspection and pointedly opens both front windows and sets the fan to high, drowning out any possibility of a stream of consciousness type soliloquy about Tenerife or Pakistan or Dunfermline.

### *Out of the blue.*

We have now been on Tenerife for a week. It is Sunday.

We are beginning to repeat our visits to favourite haunts. We are heading back to La Caleta. It is our hottest day so far. We saunter onto the dark gravel beach where the paragliders land and take a seat at the upgraded bar. The previous incarnation of this very bar features in my forthcoming Maisie Kaywood romp called "Spanish Sparrows". We enjoy our best coffee of the holiday.

We restart our walk and thirty minutes later settle again for a second coffee (me) and a fizzy water (shared). We plan our next moves. We plan to eat at a snack lunch at a nearby bar-restaurant called *James's Place*. Margaret has checked it on Trip Advisor and it is highly rated. Tonight we will snack at the dinner-time buffet.

Before *James's Place* we will revisit a small clutch of shops near one of my favourite restaurants, *Il Rosso Mare*, also in "Spanish Sparrows". Then we will visit the small outcrop nearby, watch the snorkelers diving for shellfish and then, when it is time, head back to *James's Place*. It is all settled.

We visit each of the three shops in turn. The last one has only a few glitzy beach bags but a good display of costume jewellery. After a bit of gentle arm twisting, I persuade Margaret to let me buy her two necklaces. I fish into my man-bag for my purse to retrieve sufficient cash.

(Backstory: Last year on our first day we took the bus to Los Cristianos. That bus was older, smaller, very crowded. After boarding I placed my purse-wallet into my man-bag, but did so carelessly. At least that is what we believed at the time. We concluded that I missed the pouch in the man-bag and that my purse had slipped to the floor. Did I mention that that bus was very crowded?)

That lost purse contained our Caxton FX currency/debit card and around €200 in cash, both lost in a stupid, careless act. Our day was spoiled. We raced back to our hotel and phoned, cancelled the card, accepted the loss and used our RBS Visa card to obtain cash and to pay our various bills, accepting the overheads of various bank charges as punishment for my daftness.

In the wake of this, under Margaret's close guidance, I bought a new purse in bright orange and a bright blue plastic expanding cord to fix the purse to the zip fob of the inner pocket where the purse must always be zipped in tightly for security. I would be disingenuous to claim I am 100% fully trained. But I am reasonably sure I remember to follow this protocol most of the time.)

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

(Further back-backstories:

Years ago in **Barcelona**, on a dark night, in a dimly lit street, I was subjected to a violent bag snatch. Fortunately I lost only a mobile phone on that occasion.

In **Prague** one time while boarding a tram we became aware that we were being "set up for a similar bag snatch" and managed to avoid this trap.

In **Sitges**, a few miles down the coast from Barcelona, a restaurant we saw a bag being taken from a family. The two men boldly came in, stood near the family. One chatted to the waiter, the other tied his shoelace and then they made off with the bag.

In **Milan** on a rickety tram we were, we believed at the time, being trailed by two young African men.

We have heard similar tales from friends. We try to be careful, especially when we are sitting in cafes and restaurants or walking in crowded places.)

**Now back to La Caleta**, a sleepy little place we have always felt safe and secure.

The time is around 12.30 pm. We are dallying, intending to eat soon, but not before 1.00 pm.

After the jewellery purchases we saunter again along a quiet street in full sun heading to the snorkelers. Normally I walk with my baggie pushed back, to rest on my left bumlet. This means that it travels behind me, out of sight. Clearly this was a mistake.

Ahead, is an elderly couple ambling even more slowly than us.

To our right is a high wall.

To our left is a line of tightly parked cars.

I was slightly aware of a 'presence' behind us.

I heard a sharp "click", from ahead of us, which at the time I took to be a stone hitting off a car wheel.

I think this is where I was "dipped."

Later Margaret told me that she was aware of a younger couple walking behind us.

She wondered why they were so close to us but did not ask to pass.

She has no memory of the "click".

After the distraction of the click sound we carried on as before, unaware. From the corner of my eye I saw a dark-haired youngish man in a white shirt veering away from us, as

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

if crossing over to the opposite pavement before he disappeared. At the time this meant nothing.

Five minutes later we arrived at the 'point' and stood apart from everyone for a few minutes watching the snorkelers. Two men of my age were bait fishing. All seemed completely normal. We were adjacent to two café-bar-restaurants and both were half-full, many local people enjoying Sunday lunch in the warm sunshine. A perfect day, a perfect scene.

Only then, as we turned away to head for *James's Place* did I feel my baggie rubbing at the inside of my left arm. I was shocked to find the top zip of the baggie gaping open and my orange purse dangling from the plastic expanding cord. The purse itself was open, empty. Our pre-loaded Caxton FX Euro card and around €50 in cash had been taken. To reach the purse the thief had also opened the top zip, which is stiff, and the inner pocket zip, also stiff, often awkward, requiring both hands to operate it, prevent it sticking.

I was immediately reminded of the "click" and the "presence" which preceded it.

I was outraged and then, soon afterwards a little frightened.

I think now that the technique was to lift my baggie and support it clear of my backside, dip it, and then lower it carefully back into place. Why the "click"?

A second small black purse containing only coins was buried in the bottom of my baggie was still there. It had been missed. Nor did they take my iPad, held tightly in the same pouch but secured by a Velcro strip.

Our day was spoiled. We headed directly back to the safety of our hotel room and phoned the card company, to cancel the Caxton card while at the same time checking online for possible illegal transactions.

(Future story: When we arrived back in Bearsden a voice message from Caxton on our home phone advised that a kind and thoughtful lady had found our card in the gutter. By that stage we had already cancelled the card.)

As we calmed down we realised how lucky we had been, perhaps. Apart from the feeling of violation, we had lost only €50. However, if we had detected the robbery in progress, perhaps we might have been assaulted? We have heard of such thieves using craft knives to cut open bags. Would they have turned on us if we had discovered them?

Later, Margaret visited Trip Adviser. Only then did we discover that pick-pocketing is widespread throughout this part of Tenerife and that a couple just like us had recently lost €800 in cash. They had been carrying this large amount because they did not have a room safe in their accommodation.

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

The 'attack at La Caleta' dominated our thinking and our actions during the remainder of our stay in Tenerife. It turned us into 'paranoid cynics'. Even the most benign of people became suspect. We veered sharply away from groups of young men, especially Africans or those who reach out to invite us to eat and drink at their cafe bars. It has tainted La Caleta, one of our favourite places. Our perception of our vulnerability has changed. We watch other seemingly unsuspecting people like us and wonder how they can act in such a careless care-free manner.

Our new regime involves:

- We will carry only cash, never cards.
- 
- We will calculate what we expect to spend and take only a little extra.
- We will split this cash between us.
- We will leave all other cash, cards, passports, travel and insurance documents locked in our room safe, except when we take a debit card on forays to a 'safe' Autoteller.
- I will carry my baggie across my front at all times, not behind me. To ensure this I now have a leash, looped to the eyelet of the zip and tethered to my belt. Re-tying this after opening my baggie will require re-training and monitoring by Margaret.
- In future, if either of us even suspects a problem of being 'trailed' or 'targeted', we are agreed we **must** make a point of advising ourselves.
- We have become jittery, extra vigilant when passing or overtaking other people, no matter how benign they may seem.
- I am now particularly extra wary of passing motorized bikes and scooters.
- If possible we will avoid crowded places.
- Did I mention that the bus last year was crowded?

## *Sakura*

### *(a teppanyaki restaurant).*

#### **Pre-story:**

In a spirit of adventure, and to avoid the chaotic crush and tasteless boredom of the Great Dining Hall we try to book for the Sakura the other in-house restaurant.

Sakura is located adjacent to the Great Dining Hall. We keek in on our way back from breakfast, when the internal screens are drawn back. It is a modernistic place with high chairs around the perimeter for 30 diners. The room is dominated by a square doughnut-shaped bar/counter set around the hollow centre which is the chef's domain. We cannot get a booking for our preferred day, Saturday. It is fully booked. It is popular, we are told. The only booking slot for the following night, Sunday, at 6.30. No, sadly, it seems, the 8.00 pm performance is already fully booked. The Sakura remains closed on Monday and Tuesday. We accept our karma and take the 6.30 booking for Sunday.

A card confirming this is posted under our door and soon disappears. One of us tears up the envelope and puts the pieces in the tiny dustbin. ("Sorry, Guv. Just being tidy, Guv.")

Our Privileges' girl is happy to issue a new booking card. I ask if we get a 20% discount as at La Tosca. She tenses, smiles her brightest smile, and advises that although we would normally pay €60 each for the six-course set menu, as hotel guests on half-board, we get a special price of €30 per person. Her parting shot is we will have a 'romantic evening' as we are the only ones so far booked on the 6.30 pm slot.

It is now Sunday, late afternoon.

Emotionally we are descending, coming down slowly after our high noon trauma at La Caleta.

The calm and silence of Sakura will be ideal for us, I predict.

We arrive 10 minutes early to be met by three Spanish waitresses and a young man. We are hungry. I am very hungry. He is dressed as a chef, but wearing a black headscarf and smiling through a bad set of brownish teeth, several missing. "Too much Karate, Grasshopper."

Two of the waitresses smile, offer a sham Japanese bow, giggle like geishas and disappear through a side door, never to be seen again.

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

Places are set for a total of ten diners. No others materialize.

It seems that, romantically, we will in fact dine alone. We are anxious, hungry and arrive early.

One waitress.            One chef.            Just us.

We get top dog positions directly in front of the single shiny stainless steel plate which is about 1.2 m wide and 1.0 m from back to front. (Later, via Wikipedia, I learn that "teppan" is Japanese for "iron plate".)

The tall and very thin young chef, who may or may not be Japanese, enters the donut and takes up his position in front of us at the teppan. It transpires that this is used both the cooking and food preparation.

At 6.30pm precisely our waitress closes the tall doors and moves the sliding screens to block out the inquisitive common people swishing in and out of the Great Dining Hall.

With the screens deployed the room is acoustically dead. I find it hard to hear Margaret even though she is seated at my left elbow, accessing my better ear. Japanese plinky-plonky music plays in the background at exactly the right level to block out all other sound, including the unfortunate rattle of the air conditioning system.

Our chef is a budding mime artist. At first he has no real words, just unexpected ejaculations of high pitched squeals. I deduce that these are intended to draw attention to his culinary achievements. We respond accordingly with coos of amazement. We are easily led.

At our right hand, a set of chopsticks rests on ornate stands of (I hope) fake black ivory.

(If you are left handed, must you still eat with your right hand? Is it forbidden to eat left-handed? Sorry, this is a question unasked!)

Thankfully we each have also a knife, fork and spoon. We will not starve in frustration or resort to using our fingers.

We have the full attention of the remaining waitress. It transpires she is from Uruguay. We learn that strong family links persist between Spain, Italy and Uruguay. She has relatives in Galatia, on the north coast of Spain, but has yet to visit them. She wants to do 'long travelling' before she has a child, she informs us, enigmatically.

Yoshi, (my name for our chef), certainly sounds Japanese. Everything he squeaks means nothing to me except when he utters 'smoked salmon'. Yoshi is brandishing his very sharp knives. I am nervous. He seems less interested in us than he is on the food being swiftly,

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

energetically and deftly moved around the teppan, directly under our noses. I could easily reach forward and have my fingers added to the mix.

Parts of the teppan seem to be very hot. A sequence of oils (?) are splashed plumes of fragrant fumes soar up into the canopy. With the tired old eye of a long ago professional, I inspect this stainless steel arrangement. It is spotless. I put a tick in that box.

Yoshi uses two stainless steel knives that look like 3" wide paint scrapers. He twirls and whirls them like a paid up Dervish, wheeching them unexpectedly into the air then in the air, in direction canopy. I wonder if he has ever marched with the Tokyo Chapter of the Loyal Orange Order or perhaps more realistically, if he has appeared with the massed bands at the Edinburgh International Tattoo as a culinary timpanist?

The scrapers glint menacingly as they whirl back down from the canopy. I pray to Buddha that Yoshi does not miss them. They could bounce at me and I am no grasshopper. They look sharp, very sharp. I am mesmerized by their sharpness and begin to obsess.

Only now do we see there is 6" by 1" opening in at the corner of the cooking plate, in the corner, to our left. This is where Yoshi ushers unwanted crumbs of food. It is above this sacrificial slot that he clashes his scrapers to clean them. Having vigorously scraped the teppan, he dribbles fresh oil (?) on it then scrubs it clean with a fresh clean cloth. I tick that box.

Our waitress serves the cava we have just ordered. I have picked the more expensive vintage. The cava is very, very dry. This was a bad choice. "Sorry, Guv. Doing my best, Guve" We should have defied convention and drunk our usual red, we confide, sotto voce.

(On occasion, Margaret suffers from tummy reflux which is an added disruption to sleep. Please remember, this is only 6 hours after the 'La Caleta attack'. Her tummy is 'uncertain' about the cava. I am designated to drink almost 95% of the bottle. Later, upstairs in the Lobby Bar I am allowed a brandy. Ah, remember that drink of the sixties - Brandy and Babycham? That night I sleep through 6 hours straight, a record for recent years when sleep comes normally in bursts of 2 hours or less.)

Back to Yoshi and his performance.

As we have been sipping, distracted, muttering about the unsatisfactory cava, Yoshi has prepared a large pile of what might on the teppan be crinkled and browned vegetables; (onions? root ginger? spices? We did not see, we cannot tell.).

Inscrutably, Yoshi smiles, continues his mime, shuffles these crinkly bits first left, then right, then left, then diagonally, then down, the up and so on. My eyes tire and I ready to nod off. Yoshi judges the bits to be cooked and moves the pile to what I believe is the 'keep warm' area of the plate. I am thinking of them as 'bits in waiting', to added to a dish later. Later I re-classified them as 'sacred bits'. Even later I wonder if rigmarole has been done to

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

infuse the surface of the plate with 'taste', to take away the metallic taste after the scraping ritual?

I am hungry. These bits look ever more appealing. I re-designate them as 'appetizing bits'.

Yoshi is on the move.

Without explanation he retires from inside the square to take up sentry duty directly behind us. Yoshi is invisible. The back of my neck becomes itchy and I want to turn, to check if he is there, desperate to find out what he is doing. Remember after our recent drama I am now a full blown psychotic cynic!

Is he laughing at us?

Has he detected by ESP that I was thinking I would eat his special bits on the side?

If so, is Yoshi getting ready to castrate me with his very sharp paint-scraper knives, as Teppanyaki honour demands?

From the door at the far left corner of the room our waitress breezes in, enters the donut and serves us each a small bowl of soup, called "Miso and Tofu". She moves to stand behind us, and whispers to Yoshi. I imagine I hear giggles.

Mercifully we are permitted to use our spoons. These are full size silver service soup spoons. I recall eating soup in Malaysia using much daintier ceramic spoons. We sup, suspiciously at first. This 'consume' is salty; the tofu is rubbery and tasteless. The portion is small. Those appetizing bits, if sprinkled like croutons, would have been yummy. As usual I finish first. Margaret smiles and says her soup was "fine", which means "quite good".

The soup bowls are removed and we each receive a tiny narrow tray. Each tray homes three tiny white bowls. Our waitress explains, Margaret relays as I do not hear. The bowls contain soy sauce, each with a different blend. No 1 is for sushi, No. 2 for (hot) fish and No. 3 for meat.

Yoshi appears before us. His eyes are wild. "Oh God or Buddha, keep us safe from the paint scrapers."

Amid great drama and flashing and crashing, squeals and high-pitched verbal ejaculations, a now demented Yoshi prepares our wee sushi dishy. What happened to calm, controlled, inscrutable?

This baleful white fleshed fish of unknown species is lacerated on what I assume is chilled part of the cooking plate. The clashing of paint scrapers continues unabated for many minutes. Intermittently Yoshi becomes eerily still and peers at the long dead fish bits. The portion slowly identified as edible grows smaller and is isolated near the appetizing bits. The

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

offending bits scraped close to the sacrificial slot. Clearly I am immune to the mysteries of sushi. I keep my eye on the pile of bits on the side and lick my lips. I suspect Margaret might not trust them and that I will get her share too. Yippee!

Our platters are adorned and presented. Smoked salmon is recognised, and perhaps tuna. Something is explained (?) but my Jappinglish fails me.

Then, at this most sacred point in the highly sacred ritual of sushi, when chef and waitress watch to see if we will eat and survive, the sacred moment of tension is ruined.

An obstreperous man, a whirlwind brandishing an iPhone, enters unannounced and hops around the room. He points his iPhone at us like a pistol, takes shots of us, the room, the teppan, our glasses of cava, Yoshi at arm's length, Yoshi in close-up, and fends off the waitress with a rapid series of shots as she does her best to usher him from the room.

Throughout his invasion he talks loudly in what might be Italian. Here is my translation:

"I justa wanta see whata goes on ina heerea. You can'ta stoppa me. I justa wanta see. . ."

Perhaps he was actually Danish? Or maybe from Dunfermline?

Eventually, after several minutes, he storms out, slamming the door behind him.

One minute longer and Yoshi would have reduced him to carpaccio.

The Japanese music plinks and plonks. Tranquillity is re-asserted.

Yoshi and Miss Uruguay resume sentry duty behind us.

We both add No.1 soy sauce and all too soon our plates are empty.

Margaret declares that the sushi was delicious and means it. She eats every morsel.

The portions were tiny. My innards cry out: "This place is a mistake. This place is a mistake. I need real food! I am hungry!"

The pile brown crinkly pile leers at me. I could easily swipe them with my big fork and claim that the obstreperous man must have done it!

(An aside: The sushi we have just eaten here in Sakura, in my humble and unbiased opinion, is NOT as tasty as our own version of sushi comprising North Uist peat smoked salmon and a large dollop of homemade (home caught!) smoked trout pate accompanied by a drizzle of freshly sliced lemon and olive oil with as many slices of home-made bread and Nairns' rough oatcakes and butter as you wish.)

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

Yoshi is back at work. His knives flash and whirl up into the canopy. Once more he oils the teppan, then scrapes, repeatedly, vigorously, obsessively, removing invisible contaminants from the hot plate section. His paint scrapers clash. The drama is intense. He re-oils, re-wipes. All is clean. All is bright.

Yoshi is about to prepare our hot fish dish. He reveals two slim fillets of salmon. He then douses these with many oils and other liquids, sprinkles salt and other condiments. At a quick count he is armed with an array of around 50 bottles and dishes with condiments far eastern.

In parallel, on a different section of the hot plate, he is frying snow white pre-boiled rice. Bits are added to the rice, which are probably finely chopped onion. They brown crinkly bits continue to be ignored. Through the plinking and plonking I hear them cry out to ME be eaten. I respond from inside my head. "Come to me, little ones. I am hungry. Most verily am I hungry."

The dishes are served and we eat.

Our humble servants guard our backs, about their *Game Boy/Girl* scores? OR? Surely not! Yet, stranger things have happened. I think of the aircrew 5 mile high club and the plane hurtling through the dark night at 550 mph, flying on autopilot, unattended, while, in the broom cupboard. . .

I nibble a morsel and rate the salmon 'nice', (dammed by faint praise?). My taste buddies suggest perhaps even a little bland? We both add No.2 soy sauce to the fish. The salmon tastes saltier. I like saltier, Margaret does not. I drain my No. 2 soy sauce into my fried rice. In Japan of old perhaps they would have dropped me from a high place onto my head for such an offence to the art of rice cooking. Perhaps Yoshi, 'he's behind you' might be seething, preparing to leap forward and slice of my offending digits?

The teppan is again cleaned and this time the brown crinkly bits are punished for crying out: without mercy Yoshi shoves them viciously towards then into the sacrificial slot. I almost shout out in protest- "Aw, gonnae no dae that!"

Yoshi, triumphant, moves to stand behind us. Is he playing with his *Game Boy*?

We are at the sorbet course. I could go through the remainder of my years without sorbet. Margaret judges it to be 'fine'.

Yoshi re-appears. Suddenly he is happy, suppressing giggles, soaring up, up, up. Later I realise that this is because the culinary orgasmic climax of his evening is to hand, so to speak. With great drama punctuated by squeaking from Yoshi and cooing from us, he creates a tiny replica of Mount Fuji using a pre-prepared onion rings in reducing diameters. He fills a small pannikin with alcohol, (perhaps Japanese brandy?) which he heats on the hot part of the teppan. When the liquor is bubbling, he pours it into Mount Fuji and uses a blow torch to set it alight. This makes him ecstatically happy. I fear for his underpants. The flame burns a

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

bright blue then falters. With a flourish he scatters the onion rings and the remains the liquor whooshes and dies. We clap, politely. Yoshi bows deeply. The remains of Mount Fuji are banished to the sacrificial slot.

Yoshi recovers from his near hysteria and dives to one side, returning at once to reveals a single thin sliver of beef, less than 1/4" thick, 12" long by 4" wide. We admire it and I think, where is the one for Margaret? The slice of beef is set to one side while he fries pre-prepared diced vegetables separately. I think Blue Peter. He then sprays oil (?) onto the hottest part of the teppan and as fumes plume, he flashes the beef for about 60 seconds. The fried veggies are shovelled onto the sliver of meat. The meat is rolled into a 12" wide beef olive, slices it into four sections, two for each of us.

He presents them to us individually with deep bowing of head and shoulders. This is clearly a religious experience. I tense, expecting the return of obstreperous man to spoil it. The sacred moment passes in sublime tranquillity.

Yoshi bows in turn to each of us and again retires behind us, slips out his Game Boy. Is Uruguay Girl also playing with her game Boy, or does she play on Game Girl. Stop, John, that way leads to fuller madness?

The beef olives are tasty; small, but tasty. I am hungry. I eat quickly, adding No 3 soy sauce. I wonder, why no French fries or creamy mashed potato.

I devour my beef in two minutes and focus on the cava. Hell's bells, another clanger - I forgot to use up the No 3 soy sauce.

Time passes.

Margaret, who has been nibbling tiny morsels of her olives and chewing forty times per moothfae, is at last finished. She declares it delicious which is high, high praise indeed. Trip Adviser, here she comes! She's a coming 'round Mount Fuji, here she comes.

Yoshi re-appears and cleans the hot plate, cue the clash of his knives, then oils (?) it, wipes it clean again with a fresh clean cloth. This box, already ticked, but I insist on giving it a second tick.

Yoshi ducks down out of view again and I fear another Blue Peter experience in my runes. I am but half right. A stainless steel beaker is tipped forward to reveal a gloop of pancake mix.

The process continues and we are served a tasteless pancake filled with 'very ordinary' vanilla ice cream. Margaret, disappointed, slips most of her ice cream onto my plate.

Yoshi smiles, showing a line of small brownish teeth.

Our plates are removed and our ordeal/delightful experience is almost at an end.

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

I am hungry. I am still hungry.

With a high flourish Yoshi dispenses two thimbles of Saki. Margaret sips, baulks, and slips hers across to me. I am experienced. I have been to Japan. I have endured ritual Saki drinking and survived. I know one (me) must gulp it over the precipice into the gut without allowing it to interfere with ones (my) taste buds. Did you now that in Japan Scotch Whisky is 100,000 more popular than Saki?

Alas, ritual Saki drinking is a sign of enduring friendship.

I note Yoshi does not partake. But at least from his missing brown tooth smile it seems I am not to be castrated. In acknowledge this escape by signing our T2 Credit tab for €84.43 tab and leave a €10 note as a tip.

I would rather have had fish and chips or even a Pink Parrot all day Full English.

We exude our thanks and escape to the Reception bar clutching one flute and about half a bottle of Cava which Margaret has assigned to me.

The entertainment tonight is a diminutive dark haired girl with a 44 DD bra and 9" killer heels. She mangles a few old favourites. I gradually give in and hum along with her, hoping to drown her Spamangalees. I am hard to please when it comes to singers.

Free of Yoshi and the Uruguayan Girl we mutter our disgruntlement. We have not had value for money from the Sakura experience. Imagine we had not had a 50% discount on the food? It would have cost us around €150 including wine for this experience, we ask?

### *Epic Trek*

We are tiring of the shuttle bus ride to Las Americas and seek adventure. Last year we drove to El Medano, another small village/town a bit like La Galletas but further on, less easy to reach, requiring the daring manoeuvre of changing buses mid-flight.

What we remember is that El Medano is a Mecca for windsurfers, kite-boarders and those who like to bake near naked on gritty brown sand. Note! Brownish sand, not grey-black.

By car it took us around 30 minutes of slow-ish driving. (Nowadays I find that 30 mph feels fast, and if forced onto a motorway I baulk above 50mph.

We take our 467 bus to Las Americas bus station. €3 for two. This leg takes around 60 minutes, start/stopping between pick up points. Every bus stop has a bevy of the old and slow waiting to teeter aboard, cling to the poles and straps.

At the bus station I purchase a return ticket to El Medano, €15.40. Excuse me? Why so much? Before I can engage in 'discovery', I am shooed urgently to the stand where our luxury single decker waits. This is the Number 111 bus which will terminate at Santa Cruz, the island capital. We **must** alight at San Isidro interchange, it is emphasised, making me nervous. I should have used the facilities but this would risk missing the bus. From this interchange we shall have a choice of several buses which might take us to El Medano. This information is explained (?) by means of a small scale route map annotated with squiggles and accompanying instructions (?) in Spanglish.

We jog (?) to board the 111 which has its engine ticking over. We are alone on this bus. I leave the safety of my seat and buttonhole the driver and emphasize that we must de-board at the interchange where we can catch a bus to El Medano. He nods, but did he understand? Ten minutes later, just before our bus leaves, a clutch of youngsters clamber aboard re-breathing second-hand tobacco smoke.

Our journey begins slowly. We follow the same start/stop pattern as before, picking up only a few more passengers, middle-aged local ladies with large shopping bags. At the open-air bus station in Los Cristianos we pick up a young couple with rucksacks who reveal their life stories to a local girl using a new version of Spanglish. This is cheery banter with lots of laughing. This rucksacks boy and girl are camping, living rough. They both have Afro-ringlets. I image millions of head lice baking as they wander around unable to shower and shampoo properly. There is another young man, with an enormously heavy rucksack. He is English, it transpires. I can understand what he says. Because of his command of English I will soon, foolishly, trust his judgment.

We find the motorway and pick up speed. Then we force our way into the edge and halt briefly at a little motorway 'in-go refuge', with only inches to spare, just out of the path of

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

nearby speeding motorway traffic. At this first motorway bus stop two shopper women alight disappear at once into the wilderness of rough ground and cactus plants.

This pattern repeats. People leave, no one boards. Our cohort is diminishing. We speed on. Ringlet boy and girl chortle and tell that they are earning enough to live from ???. The local girl laughs and claps her hands, clearly impressed.

We arrive at a stop. Almost everyone leaves the bus. The driver shouts back to us in Spanglish, "Hola! Getta yous offa heera furra El Medano". We get off and find we are alone with the boy who speaks perfect English. The ringlets couple and the local girl and several other who also de-boarded have disappeared. Our lonely bus driver heads off to Santa Cruz.

Our Sherpa Boy loads up his huge rucksack and staggers ahead of us downhill. We see and recognise El Medano in the far distance. I conclude that since Sherpa Boy is moving with purpose, he knows where the bus stop is. At least we are on the correct side of the road for the bus to El Medano but there is no pavement and the traffic is whizzing at high speed. Sherpa Boy is on an informal dirt path. We follow him, bleating like Mary's Little Lost Lambs, asking where the others went; and why, oh why, the connecting bus stop is not RIGHT HERE!

El Medano seems now to be in the far, far distance, glittering on the edge of the vast Atlantic Ocean.

We plod on in the heat and hope for a bus stop soon. The road is steep, but downhill, which is encouraging. Slowly Sherpa Boy creeps further and further ahead. We plod on in the heat. We plod on in the heat, stumbling on the rough path. One of us is very much more unhappy than the de facto leader and she makes this very plain. We turn and discover we have come only a few hundred yards. We are alone. We grit our teeth and continue to plod in the heat.

Time passes. We trek on.

Margaret says several (hundred) times: "I knew we should have given up and gone back to Adeje. I knew from the minute we got on the Number 111 that it would all go wrong. I knew it. I knew it".

Cars, lorries and vans hurtle at us from behind. Because we have to concentrate on how we place our feet to avoid stumbling out into the roadway, I know we might not see a bus heading for El Medano if it comes

A bus approaches coming from El Medano, heading up the hill towards us. This gives us hope. Ahead we see a blue sign. So far every stop sign we have seen has been lime green, and always with a shelter and a green plastic seats. We stumble to a halt and look at this blue sign of hope. It depicts two buses, one above the other, pointing in opposite directions. I say that this is a legacy bus stop from days of yore. It is a lonely bus stop without a proper in-go for the bus to pull in but nonetheless we hope that it might still be operational.

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

We wait, time passes.

Fra, far, away, near the Island of Dreams, about half-way to El Medano the diminutive figure of Sherpa Boy marches onwards.

We discuss walking on but resolve to wait. A green bus appears, fleeing downhill round the bend towards us. I wave enthusiastically and it slithers to a stop. I lead, flash our tickets, the driver smiles and we are rescued from purgatory.

Aboard we find the cheery local girl and the ringlet couple. We are travelling fast when we overtake Sherpa Boy. We never see him again. It has taken us two hours to reach El Medano.

Time for a coffee and a pee.

NOW, please.

### *El Medano*

In El Medano we do almost exactly what we did the year before.

We find the same cafe bar and order tapas and fries on the side. Naughty but nice. These fries are frittatas bravas but acceptable to me if not to Margaret. We wander along the kite-surfers beach, as last year. We sit in the sun and admire them, as last year. We have had enough of sun and sea and brown sand and the long journey back to H10 base camp looms.

We plot our return. We examine the timetable we have and check it against the timetable at the modern green bus stop. Eventually we decide we must avoid a re-run of what happened coming. We must therefore take the slow bus which wends along the coastal route via Costa Silencio to Los Cristianos bus station. There we will catch the 467 to Adeje Palace. We decide to try for the 15.30 departure.

El Medano is old hat, unattractive, with few good shops and most are closed for siesta. How sensible. The mythical rucksack fades as a priority. At every turn we are at high alert for pickpockets and we traverse wildly away from anyone suspicious approaching close behind us. At 2.45 we are near the bus terminus, ready to leave. Last year's cheery coffee shop is full. The one we try is empty. The crap coffee explains why.

We have 30 minutes to squander and make ourselves walk in the blinding heat, arriving back at the bus stop at 15.20. We sit beside a German couple in their fifties. Wife Frau is interrogating an elderly couple from somewhere around Birmingham. The Brummies explain that the best way to get to Los Cristianos is to take the coastal bus due soon. When Wife Frau hears it will take "an hour and a half" she explodes in disbelief.

"But this is not so far! No, we should get ein bus to San Isidro, no? There we will change to ein quicker bus. Look you! This mappen here, on zee wall, it shows this to be possible. This way is shorter, no? You agree?"

Their Brummie advisers explain there will be waiting time at the changeover point in San Isidro, and confess that they have never tried this method and that the coastal bus is now arriving.

"No, we are only to go to Los Cristianos for a quicker visit. We are now be staying here in El Medano where we have just comen to. I am thinking that we find ein other quicker way this to do. Come Hans, this horrible slow coastal bussen is not for you and me. Danke schon, my nice English people and Auf Wedersien."

Secretly we believe that the advisers are wrong, that the coastal route to Los Cristianos cannot possibly take a full 90 bub-numbing minutes. Silly us. The Brummies dismounted at

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

Costa Silencio, at the terminus bus stop we sat and a week earlier wait for the 467. Indeed there is a 467 bendy-bus sitting there, the driver having a fag break. We consider translocating to this bendy-bus but are not brave enough. It is empty with its lights off and might be broken down? We stay on our ane wee bus and soon the mannish lady we know from the restaurant we nearly went into in near our hotel hauls her bulk aboard. Here she is among friends and her stern mask slips. She seems like a very nice lady, full of fun. We do not arrive at Los Cristianos until 17.33. We have endured 120 bum-numbing minutes, not just 90. The Brummies gave out bum information.

Maybe, just maybe the brave Wife Frau and Hans are right after all? Indeed in my experience Germans, especially Swiss Germans, are seldom wrong.

At 17.48 the 467 bendy-bus from Costa Silencio terminus snakes into Los Cristianos bus station. It cannot find a place to park and keeps moving. Oh NO! Will it by-bus us? We follow it along the pavement behind a local girl who is regaling it for trying to avoid us. It stops, we clamber aboard and find the last two seats, singles, face to face. Yippee for me, I am travelling backwards, which I prefer. Did you know that all military planes have rear facing seats because it is safer on impact?

This driver is Mr. Angry. Possibly his nicotine levels are dropping? He beeps and loudly curses his way to Adeje. There, at our ane wee bus stop right next to the Adeje Palace H10 we are among the last five persons aboard. We arrive at the hotel at 18.37. Today we have travelled in buses for more than four hours. Did I mention that the hard seats are designed for narrow Spanish bottoms? Margaret promises: "John, no more long bus trips this holiday, all right?" I say, "Hallelujah!" Many times over.

### *Winding up*

We are down to our last two full days.

On Wednesday Margaret suggests we take the hotel shuttle bus to Las Americas and amble back to Adeje, finding a snack along the way. "No more bag shopping, John, promise. In fact you've done well. I thought you would moan, as you usually do, but no, you have been quite good about it."

I have a confession.

My son sent me a link about relationships which I attach it below. I urge you to scan it, whether old or young, married or single.

*Since reading it I am trying to be a better husband.*

<http://www.businessinsider.com/lasting-relationships-rely-on-traits-2015-11?IR=T>

Anyway, it turns out that bag hunting is still on the agenda. I remember to be 'quite good' and do not complain. However, now we are up off the coastal strip amongst the shopping malls. This is probably a good thing because most of these shops are air conditioned and the sky is cloudless, the breeze is light, the sun blazing hot. Later we learn we are experiencing 26 Celsius. We enter a shop filled with smart young ladies. I am first to spy a candidate bag!

"Margaret, look-ee, dear one, over there!"

"No, John, this is a designer shop, it will be too expensive."

This rucksack is a brighter pink than we hope for but seems to me to be the right size. It does not have a back zip, a serious failing. I remove the packing and as I do so a young lady materialises. As we search inside and find an interior zip (good). The hunt ends when the assistant reveals the price tag.

€250! Margaret would never, ever, spend that amount on any bag.

"But this is before discount", our sales girl confides in a whisper.

Margaret is already near the exit when the girl catches my arm, "Only €180, sir, what a lovely bag for your lovely wife."

"Sorry, much too expensive," I shrug her off and canter to catch up with my darling wife.

Margaret asks, "what price did she say?"

"€180, a lovely bag for my lovely wife."

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

"John, I know it was a designer label but it was not even leather. We can buy a nylon bag for €10 from any beach shop."

And that, dear readers, put paid to our GBH, at least for this holiday.

There was another wee twist to this daunder up behind the beach strip. During the aftermath of The Attack at La Caleta, Margaret scoured the internet to discover that Veronica's Night Club has a reputation for drug taking and the like. I look across from the bag shop and see the infamous dive. It is surrounded by a clutch of seedy massage parlours, all open for business, even at this hour before lunch. My eye tracks rightwards. There is the very line of taxis which we boarded when fully fragranced that day last week. I wonder what our cab driver thought we had been up to?

ooOoo

It is Thursday. We stroll along heading to La Caleta. There is a new boardwalk which connects the formal tiled paving outside our hotel across the half-mile stretch of grey-black sandy beach to the sloping ramp leading up to the pavement at La Caleta. We no longer have to trudge through soft sand to traverse the beach.

As we sit on the front of the deck at the Paragliders' beach bar, sipping excellent coffees, we witness a now familiar scene. The new wooden walkway is comfortably wide enough for two people side by side. A convoy of three couples astride annoying two-seater trikes hove into view, moving at high speed. The trikers are of a kind, in their early fifties, husbands driving, their wives sitting behind chatting on their phones or surfing Facebook. A couple in their mid-seventies is taking the boardwalk slowly, clinging to each other. This is wise: we saw a stout lady trip and crash off this boardwalk on that famous Sunday of the Dipping, now four days ago. She tumbled onto the soft sand, seemingly unhurt. Soon these elderly couple are being pressurised by the leading triker. He is right behind them, almost clipping the walkers' heels. Eventually the wife concedes and eases her husband to stand aside. The trikers zoom past without a thank you.

Later as we wander through La Caleta we see the six trikers gathered around a table at a beach bar. The table disports six pints of lager type beer. Ashtrays are overflowing and tattoos wobbling as they roll about, consumed by loud laughter. They are brash, speaking loudly, in estuary English. The females are taking camera shots on their iPhones. They are half cut at high noon. Their trikes are parked on the beach pavement directly opposite their table, partially blocking the footpath. No need to compete for a parking space or walk from the car park. Like many winter sun-seekers they are overweight but do not seem disabled. I refuse to give them the benefit of the doubt.

Two hours later we see this trike convoy speeding along the pavement, heading up, and up, and up out of La Caleta village towards the thousands of apartments which nestle around the two golf courses perched high above the village. It dawns on me that for three couples sharing an apartment the hire of one trike per couple is a good option. It must be about as

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

cheap as hiring a people carrier or two cars. I saw a price for a twin scooter at €110 for three days. Presumably a week hire would be cheaper. Since they are driven on pavements perhaps drink driving laws do not apply. And with a trike per couple they can do different trips in parallel.

(Another new feature is unmissable. Last year there was just rocky waste ground behind La Caleta. This year two large multi-storey construction projects are now well advanced. I estimate about 300 units. These further apartments are for sale, the giant hoarding advises. Near Las Americas there is what appears to be an enormous hotel under construction. It seems that after a decade of stagnation the Tenerife economy is moving forward. Is investment finance from Germany?)

Today we at last we make it to *James' Place*. This is being run by a London couple in their mid-forties. The eponymous James is alone in a huge, sparkling stainless steel kitchen. His wife/partner is tidy, smart and quick. The menu mirrors that of The Pink Parrot at Las Galletas but the décor and the Trip Advisor reports give us the confidence to eat here. Margaret's tuna mayo toasty was tasty, my tuna salad superb, and the shared chips hot and more-ish. Trip Adviser, here she comes!

"Enjoy these chips John, they will be the last for a while. Back to soup for lunch when we get home. And well done, John, no beer today! It just shows the last vestiges of your will-power are still lurking somewhere in that old noddle of yours."

We head back to H10 base camp. I want avoid the Calle El Cabezo, the narrow pavement street where we were dipped. But like a moth to a flame, Margaret insists we take a look at it from the Avienda di Las Gaviotas. We rub salt into our wounds and lick them again, for the umpteenth time. The incident has certainly left its scar on our psyche.

As we continue, we pass the small sewage works near the beach which serves the hamlet of La Caleta. As usual it is whiffy. I glance up at the tower cranes swinging over the new constructions and hope someone has factored in an upgrade.

### ***Repatriation***

Friday 15<sup>th</sup> January arrives with blues skies and an even hotter sun. We must head back to cold, dark, rainy Scotland.

At Reception we check our bill and cough up then find a comfy seat to await our promised Tenerife Taxi Transfer to the Airport. The time we have been advised approaches. This time was scribbled on an untidy note from Lisa our invisible TC Rep. Yes, Lisa has a desk tucked away near the snooker table where there is an equally untidy sign which advises if we have a problem we must phone her mobile number night or day. If she is unavailable, we must default to the TC emergency number (not given).

A huge coach arrives at the door. We are unsure. We are expecting Evil Kinevil or one of his buddies. A smartly dressed driver steps down and eases open the side flaps.

At Margaret's behest I step forward.

The driver asks "Nederman?"

"No, we're with Thomas Cook." I brandish the Lisa note. "Si, Nederman, Thomas Cook." He takes our red trolley case and chucks it into the storage area.

We climb aboard. There are four others already in place, talking in German or Danish. The driver wanders about Reception asking everyone in turn: "Nederman?" Two more couples board. They are not British but maybe French. They are not together. One chap is urgently draining the last three quarters of a bottle of white wine, by the neck.

I will draw a veil of the next excruciating 90 minutes when we weave along the strip making further pick-ups. Ever nearby is the motorway with traffic hurtling towards the airport. We gradually realise that we are about to miss our flight. I need to find a loo. There is none on board. Eventually the bus is as full as my bladder. Our driver at last finds a way to access the motorway and winds up to 80 mph.

At the airport our exit is blocked by the Nederman Rep who gives lengthy and detailed instructions in what I believe might be Dutch. She repeats her information in French, then broken English. Perversely she is warning her people that they are running late for check-in, advising the gates they must run to if they are not to miss their flight to Brussels.

We are released onto the concourse and I eventually see our red trolley case deep in the cargo hold of the bus. I elbow my way through and get it. Where is the TC Rep to help us? We do not panic. We are resigned to our fate. The screen displays a list of 10 desks all marked TC without destinations. As we approach a wonderful TC girl with a Glasgow accent steps towards us, checks our tickets and leads us to an empty desk. We are check-in in less than two shakes of a lamb's tail. She re-assures us we are in good time. At Security we join a

## Winter Sun Seekers

---

randomly organised conga. Ten minutes later we pass through and in the process see a Cobalt Lite laser test box being used. Put the item in, close the door. Wait five seconds. The result is displayed. Easy Peasy. Thankfully, the item was classified as "Safe".

We are in a rush so cannot shop. We find a loo and then head immediately for our gate. People are boarding. Ten minutes later we have our bums on our seats. Seated beside Margaret is a very nice red-haired lady who is a Radiologist (one of 400) who works at The Queen Elizabeth University Hospital (Southern General). The complaints are untrue, she asserts. All is wonderful in Radiology. It is all a media stitch up. Everyone is against us, she says. (Including the statistics, I refrain from saying.)

Now on the plane, Margaret fishes out the note from the TC Rep Lisa. Reading it again we see that it states that we will be *transferred by a taxi*. Only then do we realise that we have probably been on the Nederman bus by error. Perhaps Taxi Man is still at the Adeje Palace H10 trying to find us?

The journey back to rainy Glasgow is uneventful except that there is a very noisy group ahead and to the left of us, about 8 rows of them. Most are very tall and very wide: adults and teenage children both. This entire group has St Vitus Incontinence Syndrome and is perpetually on the move to and from the toilets, causing chaos for the trolley girls plying their wares at us endlessly. Regrettably, these annoying people are *oor very ane folk*, made plain by their West of Scotland patois. As we file off the plane we pass their now empty rows. This area is knee deep in litter: food wrappers, discarded packaging from duty free purchases, empty drinks bottles, newspapers and magazines etc. And this despite three aggressive rounds of refuse collection by our stewardesses. Welcome Home! People make Glasgow! Dearie, dearie me.

We exit into a sleety rainy night and a temperature of 3 Celsius. The Radiologist has told us that when she left her apartment in Tenerife it was 29 Celsius. We catch a white Renfrew taxi and are driven sedately to Bearsden in less than 20 minutes. We get an update on the weather we missed.

Rain, rain, rain.

Glory Be! Our heating system has not failed. Our house is toasty warm. I race across to our new Sainsbury Local and buy limited essentials. We snack and watch the 10.00 BBC News then Reporting Scotland.

We hear the same old news. It is as if we have never been away.

By 11.00 pm we are abed.

Next up? Paul and Judy and Celtic Connections.