

TV

'WHAT HOUELLEBECQ HAS IN ABUNDANCE IS AN ABILITY TO TURN COMMONPLACE EVENTS INTO HIGH COMEDY...I ENJOYED LANZAROTE ENORMOUSLY'

SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

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LANZAROTE

BY THE AUTHOR OF *ATOMISED*

Lanzarote

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'The world is medium-sized.'

1

Mid-way through the afternoon on 14 December 1999, I realised that my New Year was probably going to be a disaster—as usual. I turned right on to the Avenue Felix-Fauré and walked into the first travel agency I found. The assistant was busy with a customer. She was a brunette wearing some sort of ethnic top; she had had her left nostril pierced; her hair had been hennaed. Feigning a casual air, I began picking up brochures from the displays.

'Can I help you?' I heard after a moment.

No, she couldn't help me; no one could help me. All I wanted was to go home, scratch my balls and leaf through the holiday club brochures; but she had initiated a conversation, I didn't see how I could get out of it.

'I'd like to go away in January . . .' I said with a smile which I imagined to be disarming.

'Do you want to head for the sun?' she shot back at a hundred miles an hour.

'My means are limited,' I continued, modestly.

The transaction between tourist and tour operator—at least from the impression I've formed from reading a number of the trade magazines—tends to transcend the framework of everyday commercial relations—unless such a transaction, dealing as it does with travel, that most dreamlike of commodities, can be said to reveal the true nature—mysterious, profoundly human, almost mystical—of all commercial transactions. Imagine yourself for a moment, dear reader, in the role of the *tourist*. What does it entail? You must listen attentively to the proposals made to you by the professional opposite you. She (usually it is *she*) has at her disposal—such is her job—a broad knowledge of the leisure and cultural opportunities on offer at each of the destinations listed in the brochure; she has a general idea of the clientele, the sports facilities, the opportunities for meeting new people; your happiness - at least your prospect of happiness - during those weeks depends to a degree on her. Her role—far from the stereotypical notion of proposing a 'standard' holiday package, and regardless of the brevity of the encounter—is to discover your expectations, your desires, perhaps even your secret hopes.

'We've got Tunisia. A classic destination and very affordable in January . . .' she began, to get into gear. 'We have southern Morocco, too. It's very beautiful off-season.' *Off-season?* Southern Morocco is beautiful all year round. I knew southern Morocco well, probably a lot better than this stupid bitch. It might very well be beautiful, but it isn't really my thing, that was what I needed to get through her thick skull.

'I don't like Arab countries,' I interrupted. 'At least . . .' Thinking about it, I remembered a Lebanese woman I'd met at a swingers club: really hot, nice pussy, big tits too. What's more, a colleague at work had told me about a Nouvelles Frontières hotel in Hammamet, where groups of Algerian women go to enjoy themselves with no

men about to spy on them; he had fond memories of the place. Arab countries might well be worth the effort after all, if we could just liberate them from their absurd religion.

'It's not Arab countries I don't like, it's *Muslim* countries,' I went on. 'I don't suppose you have any non-Muslim Arab countries, do you?' It would be a tough question on *Questions pour un champion*: A non-Muslim Arab country . . . you have forty seconds. Her mouth gaped slightly.

'How about Senegal?' she went on, breaking the silence. Senegal. Why not? I'd heard that white men still had great prestige in West Africa. All you had to do to take a girl back to your chalet was show up at a disco; not even a whore, either, she'd do it for the pleasure. Obviously, they welcomed gifts, maybe little gold jewellery; but what woman doesn't appreciate gifts? I couldn't work out why I was thinking about such things; in any case, I didn't feel up to fucking.

'I don't feel up to fucking,' I said. The girl looked up, surprised; it was true that I'd skipped a couple of steps in my train of thought. She went back to shuffling through her brochures. 'Prices for Senegal start at six thousand francs, though . . .' she said. I shook my head sadly. She went to consult another file; they're not brutes, these girls, they're sensitive to financial concerns. Outside on the pavement, passers-by trudged through snow turning slowly into slush.

She came back and sat opposite me and in a frank - and markedly different - tone asked me: 'Have you thought about the Canaries?' Faced with my silence, she explained, with a professional smile: 'People rarely think of the Canaries . . . It's an archipelago off the African coast, warmed by the Gulf Stream; the weather is mild all year round. I've seen people bathing there in January . . .' She gave me some time to digest this information before continuing: 'We have a special offer for Bougainville Playa. One week, all-inclusive, 3,290 francs; departures from Paris on the 9th, 16th and 23rd of January. Superior four-star hotel. All rooms with en-suite bathroom, hairdryer, air conditioning, telephone, TV, mini-bar, room safe, balcony with pool view (or sea view for a supplement), 1000m² swimming pool, Jacuzzi, sauna, hammam, fitness centre, three tennis courts, two squash courts, miniature golf, table tennis. Traditional dance shows, excursions from the hotel (details available on site). Travel/cancellation insurance—all-inclusive.

'Where is it?' I couldn't help but ask.

'Lanzarote.'

2

New Year's Eve was a disaster; I tried to hook up to the Internet but I screwed up. I had just moved house; I think I should have reinstalled the card modem or something like that. My fruitless tinkering quickly bored me, I fell asleep at about eleven. A postmodern New Year's Eve.

I had opted for the 9 January departure. At the Relais H in Orly—recently named the *Relay*—I bought a number of magazines. *Passion Glisse* offered its usual selection of content. *Paris-Match* dedicated several pages to an article about Bernard Henri-Lévy's book on Jean-Paul Sartre. *Le Nouvel Observateur* had features on teenage sexuality and Prévert's centenary. As for *Libération*, it revisited the Shoah, the duty of memory, the painful exhumation of Sweden's Nazi past. It had hardly been worth changing centuries, I thought. In fact we hadn't changed centuries; not, at least, according to a linguist in an issue of *Ça se discute* that I'd read the night before; the new century (and incidentally millennium) would not begin until 1 January 2001. From a pedantic point of view he was probably right; but he was obviously just saying it to piss off Delarue. Whether or not the usage was correct, the year 2000 started with a 2, as anyone could see.

The flight over France and Spain went well; I slept almost the whole way. When I woke, the plane was over Portugal, exposing an arid topography. Then it veered towards the ocean. I made another attempt to interest myself in the contents of my magazines. The sun was setting over the Atlantic; I thought about a TV programme I'd seen the night before. In the studio, a porn star contemplated the change of millennium with serenity; to her, men would always be men, what more was there to say? A historian, on the other hand, argued that the concept of the century had a certain relevance, albeit in a metaphorical sense; thus, according to him, the nineteenth century had not actually ended until 1914. A left-wing geneticist hit the roof: it was incredible, indecent, that in the year 2000 so many human beings on the planet were dying of starvation. A right-wing academic commented that ironically that while he deplored war and famine as much as the next man, it seemed to him futile to try to change the destiny of mankind unless one could alter the intrinsic nature of man himself; he was, therefore, implicitly in agreement with the porn star, with whom he developed a certain rapport during the programme. But, ill-formed of recent progress in the field of molecular biology, he had no idea that such modification (which he hoped for only inasmuch as he was certain that it was impossible) would very shortly be feasible. For his part, the left-wing geneticist was aware of these developments; but

being a fervent supporter of political protest and democracy, he dismissed such ideas in horror. The debate, in short, simply brought together another bunch of idiots. I slept until the plane landed. From the look of things, I thought to myself, we weren't likely to see the end of the twentieth century for some time.

I have to admit the hotel transfer was organized. This, then, is what would endure of the twentieth century: science and technology. After all, a Toyota minibus is a far cry from a stagecoach.

3

If it is no match for Corfu or Ibiza in the *crazy techno afternoons* holiday sector, then neither is Lanzarote in a position to offer ecotourism—for obvious reasons. There is, however, a third possibility open to the island: cultural tourism—the sort of tourism of which retired teachers and other mid-market OAPs are so fond. In a Spanish island—in the absence of nightclubs—one might expect to find some vestiges of civilization (baroque convents, medieval fortresses. Unfortunately, on Lanzarote, all of these beautiful buildings were destroyed between 1730 and 1732 by a succession of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions of unparalleled violence. So, *cultural tourism*, nada.

Considering the limited range of its attractions, it's hardly surprising to find that Lanzarote is patronised by a nebulous variety of tourists—Anglo-Saxon OAPs rub shoulders with ghostly Norwegian tourists (whose sole *raison d'être* seems to be to give credence to the myth that *you can even see people swimming in January*). Is there anything, in fact, of which Norwegians are not capable? Norwegians are translucent; exposed to the sun, they die almost immediately. Having established the tourism industry in Lanzarote in the early fifties, they deserted the island, located to the far south of their desires—as André Breton might have said on a good day. The islanders have fond memories of them, as is apparent from the menus—the Norwegian wording almost faded with the years—posted at the entrances of long-deserted restaurants. For the remainder of this piece, it will not be necessary to mention Norwegians again.

The same cannot be said of the English, nor of the more general mystery of the English holidaymaker. There's no such mystery to the Germans (who will go anywhere there's sun), still less to the Italians (who will go anywhere there's a cute ass); as for the French,² let's not even go there. Alone among Europeans in the middle- and higher-income brackets, the English are notable by their absence from mainstream holiday destinations. Nevertheless, meticulous and systematic research, supported by considerable data makes it possible to map their movements during summer pasturing. They gather in small groups and head for unlikely islands absent from Continental holiday brochures—Malta, Madeira or, indeed Lanzarote. Once there, they duplicate the principal elements of their home environment right there. When asked to explain their choice of destination, they give answers which are evasive and tautological: 'I came because I came here last year.' It is apparent that the Englishman is not motivated by a keen appetite for discovery. Indeed, one may observe that he is not interested in architecture, landscapes, in anything whatsoever. In the early evening, after a short trip to the beach, he is to be found drinking bizarre cocktails. The presence of the English at a resort, therefore, is no guide to the intrinsic interest of the destination, its splendour or its possible tourist potential. The Englishman goes to a particular tourist destination purely because he is certain that he will meet other Englishmen there. In this, he is diametrically opposed to the Frenchman, a vain creature, so enamored of himself that the mere sight of a compatriot abroad is anathema to him. For this reason, Lanzarote is a destination to be recommended to the French. It might particularly be

recommended to the *hermetic French poets*, who will have plenty of time to produce pieces like:

Shadow,
Shadow of a shadow,
Traces on a rock.

Or, more in the style of Guillevic:

Pebble,
Little pebble,
You breathe.

Having dispensed with the case of the *hermetic French poet*, I can now concern myself with the *ordinary French tourist*. Admittedly, in Lanzarote deprived of his habitual *Guide du Routard*, the ordinary French tourist runs the risk of quickly developing all the signs of abject boredom. This would not, one might suppose, pose a problem for the Englishman; but the Frenchman, a vain creature, is also impatient and frivolous. Creator of the sadly renowned *Guide du Routard*, he also, in happier times, perfected the famous *Guide Michelin*, whose ingenious system of star ratings for the first time made it possible for the world to be systematically categorized according to its potential pleasures.

And yet the pleasures of Lanzarote are few: in fact, they are twofold. The first, a little to the north of Guatiza, is the 'Cactus Garden'. Various specimens, selected for their repulsive morphology, are arranged along paths of volcanic rock. Fat and prickly, the cactus symbolises perfectly—not to put too fine a point on it—the abjectness of plant life. Be that as it may, the Cactus Garden is not very large and, as far as I was concerned, our visit could have been over and done with in somewhat less than half an hour; but I had taken a group excursion and we were obliged to wait for a little mustachioed Belgian. I had passed him as he stood, stock-still, staring at a huge purplish cactus in the shape of a prick, artistically planted next to two smaller, outlying cacti intended to represent its balls. I was struck by his rapt attention: this was certainly a curious phenomenon, but it was hardly unique. Other specimens brought to mind a snowflake, a man sleeping, a ewer. Perfectly adapted to their desert environment, cacti lead, if I may put it thus, a completely unfettered morphological existence. They grow alone for the most part and are therefore not compelled to adapt to the pressures of this or that plant formation. Animal predators, scarce in any case, are immediately deterred by their abundant spines. Such an absence of selective pressures makes it possible for them to develop unhindered into a complex variety of farcical shapes likely to amuse tourists. Their mimicry of the male sexual organ, in particular, always has a certain effect on Italian tourists; but in this moustachioed man, who appeared to be Belgian, things had gone too far; in this man I could discern all the signs of an out-and-out *fascination*.