

Considerare Al Turista

Within a few minutes of getting to Paris, the main experience is humiliation. I realise that to the French people in this cafe, I am different in only a few irrelevant details to the fat Englishwoman in the tight pink t-shirt with "Très Chic" emblazoned across the bust." - David Wilson, 1996

It's 8am and I'm drunk. If it wasn't for the orgy of other drunken ethnicities crowded around a communal, plastic, 15 litre bucket, I would look like just another alcoholic Australian. Don Simon's finest Sangria disappears quickly with every non-biodegradable cup that is dunked in. I watch my travel companion take a long slurp of the deep red liquid; she gives me a smile and laughs. Sangria dribbles down her chin and splashes down the front of her fresh white t-shirt. She spits, wipes her mouth with the back of her hand and clears her throat.

"Babe. Hey, babe. I'm wasted. It's 8am babe. What would mum think?"

"Don't worry, we'll leave this part of the story out."

Her eyes are rolling toward the back of her head and she starts slurring at a group of Spanish men.

"*Hola! Como estas sexeh boys!*"¹

Tara turns to me.

"That was the right pronunciation, wasn't it babe?"

Her teeth are stained red.

¹ They could be Portuguese. In any regard, 'sexy boys/girls/people' is most likely a universal catchphrase for inebriated and aroused young people anywhere, no matter what nationality they are. That was the extent of Tara's Spanish vocabulary. Before we left our comfortable, middle-class homes in Melbourne, Tara claimed that she was going to learn the languages of the countries we visited. She never made an effort to learn Spanish during our time here. One time, in perfectly good English, she attempted to ask a local *vejita* direction to our hostel; she was spat on.

Tara and I are standing in the *Plaza del Pueblo* in the Spanish town of Buñol. It's around 40 kilometres out of Valencia and it takes an hour and a half to get here by bus. There is nothing between Valencia and Buñol². It's an excruciatingly boring journey, especially when it's taken at 6am. For, like most of the people who piled into the six buses that left Valencia this morning, I was hideously hungover. I was drinking the night before that, too. In fact, I've been drunk for the past week³. So has Tara. She's dancing with the Spaniard in the middle of the street. She's swinging her hips and nuzzling her face into his chest and all I can do is hope she doesn't vomit on his white shirt⁴. His friends are laughing at Tara's dancing. They know that she is a drunken, Australian tourist.

At a shallow level, a tourist is someone who is found in a country where they do not live currently. 'Tour', which derives from the Latin word, '*tornare*' and the Greek '*tornos*', means to circle around a central point of axis. In saying this, a tourist is someone who circles around the globe, inevitably returning to their initial starting point. With Spain being the fourth-most visited country on the planet, it would be fair to suggest that the most popular destinations of Spain are inhabited by a large proportion of tourists. Cities such as Barcelona are inundated with travellers wanting to experience the La Sagrada Familias and the La Ramblas that the city so proudly boasts⁵.

Spain's economic growth is reliant on tourism; spending a few hours in big cities makes this fact blatantly obvious. The towering skyscrapers in Valencia, the beach in Barcelona that resembles the St Kilda foreshore, and of course, the running of the bulls in Pamplona

² There is nothing to see at such an early hour of the morning when you are sandwiched between another drunken Australian who attempts to 'break his seal' into a 125ml water bottle and an overly-obnoxious American who spits when he speaks. I wished that there was *anything* to see.

³ Every traveller's rite of passage, if nothing else.

⁴ Although, vomiting at random intervals is every traveller's rite of passage, if nothing else.

⁵ This is not a bad thing though; the point is that many people from across the globe travel to Spain to appreciate a rich culture that they may not have ever experienced otherwise. These landmarks and experiences are vital for 'broadening horizons'.

epitomise the economical impact that tourists have on Spain⁶. The aesthetics of the town which hosts the world's biggest food fight however, is a stark contrast. Buñol, home to 9,000 locals, is situated within the Valencian province and is the 'old world' Mecca of Spanish culture. Gravel roads wind through narrow streets, which are lined by apartment buildings that are built to house more than what is aesthetically possible. On any other day, 'Carne Fresca!' would be shouted from the *Carniceria* while local Spanish men and women stand at the counters, cigarettes in mouth, hacking at the thick chunks of ham with their meat cleavers. I would be hungrily prowling the streets for food, because most restaurants close for their daily *Siesta* from lunchtime until late afternoon. Today, however, it's hard to see any of the town through the sea of overly-excited, bare-chested foreigners ready to battle. The only thing that I can take from this city is that it smells like cat piss and seafood Paella⁷.

There are varying opinions as to why *La Tomatina* is celebrated. One theory is that a group of kids decided to throw a bunch of tomatoes at the city council every year. Some people believe the festival is celebrated out of honouring the town's patron saints, St Louis Bertrand and the Virgin Mary⁸. These theories – how true or untrue they seem to be – have merit. If we consider the festival as a whole, it's a wonder why people haven't concocted far more outlandish rumours about its foundations. *La Tomatina* begins only when a chunk of ham is cut from the top of a greased-up pole⁹. Once the ham has been successfully

⁶ Hell, even Gaudi is 'cool' now. It took me half an hour to enter the gates of Park Guell.

⁷ Which is comparatively pleasant; every town has its own smell that distinguishes them from the rest. If smell is what constitutes a town, Barcelona is sex and garbage; Valencia is sweat and plastic. Sevilla, in the south of Spain, is dried carcass. I think I'd prefer to smell cat piss and seafood than the sweat of a man who is carrying the corpse of a stray animal.

⁸ My most preferable theory on *La Tomatina's* origins is because kids back in 1945 had a penchant for rotten tomatoes and simply wanted to spend as much time running the streets as naked as possible.

⁹ The image of a ham, on top of a pole, that has been greased with thick lard is not something to scoff at. The pole, the ham, the grease; it all promotes imagery that does not necessarily need to be explained. I'm not making this up. In fact, one of the highlights of the day is to watch hundreds of burly, aggressive men try and rub themselves against the phallic object in order to create enough friction to capture their meat prize. Considering that these men have been desperately trying to grope any female-related object all morning, it is

removed, the tomato fight can begin¹⁰. Metric tons of over-ripe tomatoes are dumped by four or five trucks that slowly venture down the street. The problem with this, however, is that trucks the size of elephants attempt to divide the 40,000 overly-enthusiastic tourists that have crammed themselves into the orifices of each other. The crowd is inevitably forced against the walls of the closed *Carniceria's*, making it almost impossible to move, let alone throw tomatoes. The festival ceases once an hour has passed and the roads are covered in a river of red slush.

Habla espanol? Quieres pelear conmigo? Hello?

There's a sharp pinch on the back of my arm. I spin on my heel toward a speckled, sunburnt chest. Ginger hair is sprouting in clumps over the pecs and peeking out from beneath the armpits; he smells like coconut oil. I lift my head to the sky and admire at how the skin is peeling in such long flakes across his nose.

"Have you seen Tara?"

"Who the fuck is Tara, babe? Do you want some Sangria? I'm not letting you out of my sight until you give me the answer. Pretty foreign things like you shouldn't be at a big festival by themselves. You need protection!"

His peeling skin flakes with every move of his mouth¹¹. The pinch is still settling into my skin.

interesting to think that *La Tomatina* can create such carnal, homo-erotic urges in young men. It's almost as if the greased-up pole is nothing more than a gateway for those to express their deep-seated, innate urges while maintaining their masculinity in a public arena. In any case, that is probably another discussion and is irrelevant to my experience as a female at the festival.

¹⁰ Although, when I say that the tomato fight can begin, I mean the tomatoes can technically be introduced to the masses. The fighting has already started well before the tomatoes are in play; a direct result from the burly men becoming agitated that they themselves were not successful at capturing their meat prize. Objects being thrown include: shoes, t-shirts, empty Sangria casks, wigs, goggles, full Sangria casks and underwear. I can assure you, being hit in the face with a dirty, curly, black wig (that most likely has some form of lice), is scarier than being hit with any other conceivable object.

¹¹ I almost want to tell him that yes, I do know a little Spanish and his pronunciation was terrible and that I'd rather be pelted with unripened tomatoes than be caught in his bodily snow storm.

“Have you seen Tara?”

Plaza del Pueblo is flooding rapidly as every new bus unloads dozens of travellers. Yet, the faces all look eerily similar as they stampede past me. Under the goggles and the face paint, they all have that same look of carnal aggression and excitement plastered on their face. It makes it extremely difficult in deciphering one person from the next and I quickly lose hope that I’m going to find Tara before the fight begins. My legs are cramping and the sun is making me dizzy. There’s no point in sitting down because there are too many people who will simply stand over me, so I lean against the cool doors of a closed dressmaker shop. I think I went too hard, too quickly.

“Drunk bitch! I’ve been looking for you everywhere!”

Tara takes my hand and whizzes me through the sea of faces. The sweat from the bodies of the crowd is forming a collective of my own sweat and makes a slippery lubricant for my squeezing¹². We stop beside a group of men who are beating their chests and pouring Sangria down their front. Tara grins at me with her red teeth.

“I’ve found the perfect spot for us. Don’t say I don’t do anything for you.”

There is a sudden eruption of chanting and screaming and I know it’s because the ham has been captured by its conqueror. The pressure of bodies that pushes against my back becomes tighter. The hot breath of those next to me pours into my face. Water from local hoses that are sprayed from the top of apartments is my only relief from the stench and the heat. There are cameramen hanging out of their windows to catch the action. *I hope Mum doesn’t see me like this on television.* Over the sea of heads comes a battered, red dump-

¹² My skin lubricant smells of spices and alcohol. When people stop using deodorant, their skin exudes what they eat. I once had a friend who went on a hippy-tirade, only eating organic foods and using bio-degradable products. He even went as far as telling his girlfriend that she should be using only cotton ‘womanly’ products. He decided that the perfumes he was using were blocking his sweat glands and would eventually give him cancer in his lymph nodes. He has smelt like curry ever since.

truck pushing its way through the crowd and I realise that this monstrous thing is going to crush us too¹³. I grab at Tara's arm and pull her closer to me.

The first tomato is thrown at my head and I realise all too quickly, that yes, the tomatoes do hurt when they are being pelted at you by a 120 kg, hairy ape standing 30 centimetres away. If it wasn't for the fact that my arm is being pulled by a phantom hand then I would be beating this guy with every ripe tomato that came my way. My hair is pulled back so that my face is staring at the Sun. My legs are tangled with someone else's and I'm finding it hard to keep my balance. The acid stings my eyes. I have a piece of tomato skin stuck on my tongue, and now all that I can taste is its bitter flesh. The prodding, the pulling, the grabbing, the chanting, the sweat, the stale breath, the orgy of bodies. The stench of rotting tomatoes smells like vomit.

"Is this really going to be happening for a whole hour?" I shout at Tara.

"I'm in a Spanish mosh pit of wonder!" she screams.

The blast of the horn wails over Buñol and marks the conclusion of the festival. The crowd erupts in to a fit of laughter and shouting and the pressure on my body releases. I attempt

¹³ The fact that these trucks are trying to push through a crowd so tight is what epitomises the whole festival. The crowd would literally have to climb the walls to enable the dump-truck to pass. It is the 'Bolinches' company have generously provided these trucks for the festival. On further research, the Bolinches Group are "dedicated to the construction and earthworks in Valencia" and have been so since 1960. For a company that has been around for 50 years, it is the question of safety that is most concerning. It would be reasonable to ask why a company would provide these enormous, metal objects for a festival so large. To drive these straight through 50,000 people is even more concerning. On the one hand, the company is most likely being paid an exorbitant amount of money to provide their services. However, what is money if you end up squashing a foreigner? Would this 'accident' be a concern for them, or is it a matter for the dead person's insurance company? How do they rectify this situation and do they feel at odds at putting people's safety at risk? Or is this matter one for the Bunol local council? I'm assuming that safety isn't a primary concern for the festival organisers. On further pondering, it seems highly improbable that every single tomato in this whole festival is over-ripe. How could they possibly check every tomato, on the basis of safety? Australia would never hold a festival of this size because it would be deemed too 'dangerous'. I am not one who likes to be pampered and wrapped in cotton-wool, so this all seems to boil down to one overriding question: How sensitive are we in today's society and how are our deliberate actions at putting ourselves in danger justified? Can we really blame getting pinned under a Bolinches truck on the company itself?

to wade through the foot-high river of alcoholic tomato juice to try and seek a place of refuge. A group of men are making star-fish of their bodies as they collapse into the river. We submit ourselves to the flow of the crowd as they scramble to find the nearest local with a hose.

Tara starts to pick the tomato skin from my hair. "Babe, have you ever considered dying your hair red?"

The organisers of *La Tomatina* claim that after the festival the acidity of the tomatoes have disinfected the streets. The festival is not only the largest food-fight in the world, but serves the purpose as an annual cleansing ritual. By holding this event, Buñol reaps the rewards of being pristinely cleansed while maintaining their economy. For decades *La Tomatina* has maintained its spectacle and attracts thousands of tourists every year. This also has a ripple effect in that the towns close to Buñol benefit by travellers looking for a place to rest their heads. It's a win-win situation for Buñol and the wider Valencian province. What then, do locals think of tourists themselves? Are they as delectable as the money they offer? As David Foster Wallace describes, a tourist is "economically significant but existentially loathsome, an insect on a dead thing". Are tourists really feeding off a dying authenticity? What then, do the tourists themselves gain from the biggest food-fight in the world?

Travelling in particular is one of the most exciting and tangible activities that individuals can pursue. It provides relief from the 'real-life' stressors of maintaining a career, a family and a household. The temporary act of throwing stress 'to the wind' and relaxing on a beach in *some other place* is a temptation most adhere to. However, I must acknowledge here that there is a stark difference between booking a two week beach holiday in Bali, to organising a six month escapade through more countries than you can conceivably count. I'm not concerned about the 'sipping cocktails next to the pool, looking out over the ocean' kind of holiday. The *real* travel is what is in real question here. Why do so many young Australians decide to venture across the globe to participate in the world's largest food fight?

The thousands of people who travel to Buñol – and any other town across the world – are travelling there because they feel the inherent need to tell their story. The experience of *La Tomatina* is so outlandish, that it becomes a great tale to tell their grandchildren at bedtime. The thought that we can weave this experience into daily conversation makes for stimulating discussion. The groping, the pushing, the prodding, the smell and the people accentuate our experience. It would be credible to assume that the majority of those who travelled to fight in *La Tomatina* did not reflect on their vital contribution to Spain's economy. The fact that most of the Valencian province would reap the benefits of such a widely publicised festival would not enter into the minds of travellers; I can say with certainty that this didn't cross my mind as I begrudgingly squeezed myself between two pissed travellers on the bus destined for the festival. *La Tomatina*, as an *experience*, is what motivates us to travel so far away from our homes. Our inevitable return to our families and friends, and stories of the experiences we've had, shape our very being. Certainly, the story of Tara dancing with a Spaniard at 8am in the middle of the *Plaza del Pueblo* is the motivator behind my travels.

After all, why travel if you cannot tell someone about it?

“Hey Mum, guess what I did today?¹⁴”

¹⁴ Tara was on the phone to her mother for an hour.