

DESTINATION

DARKSIDE

In the first of a regular series, *Locum Destination Review* casts a sideways glance at the destination industry. In this issue **Al Brockley** deconstructs some of the glamorous myths of the tourism business and warns of the potentially devastating effect of watching too many travel shows on TV.

Travel, Television and the Perils of Sloth

Travel, for all the billions spent annually promoting and consuming its myth of adventure, is monumentally overrated. For most of us, most of the time, the act of travelling is about as appealing as, say, getting dog hairs out of the sofa. We are not enjoying the luxury of travel, we are enduring the necessity of mere transport. Never mind cruisers off the Corniche, an everyday voyage in real life is far more likely to be to glamorous Glossop or exotic Enfield.

Forget breathtaking ascents of Alpine passes or fish-kissing dives into laser-clear lagoons, you'll be straining along some constipated motorway, trying to ignore the under-evolved *Homo erectus* in the rep-mobile jammed in the next lane. A 15-mile tailback alongside a hatchback hero with a brain jammed at zero and the charisma of a retarded plankton is enough to put you off 'travel' for life.

To escape, you flee down the next turnoff. But the slip road inevitably sluices you onto one of those deranged dual-carriageways-from-hell which always terminate in two hours' rain-blasted gridlock on the charmless streets of Stevenage or Swindon. This is not travel, this is psychosis.

The only practical therapy is, of course, to stay at home and to metamorphose as rapidly as possible into an utterly stationary, unadventurous sloth-*mensh*. The only known cure for twenty-first century travel sickness – (*dementia Watfordgapis terribilis*) is a six-pack, a microwave lasagne and an indiscriminate taste in 24-hour TV. Lie back, relax and let the world come to you, rather than chasing after it yourself. Nothing counteracts the urge to venture forth better than a mid-morning quiz, followed up by a lather of lunchtime soap. Severe cases must slouch on regardless, right through to Emmerdale, which can, *in extremis*, render a grown man comatose at 20 paces.

Exposure to day-time TV, that encapsulated essence of utter futility, will obliterate even the most die-hard compulsion to adventure. Final immobilization, both physical and mental, will come during a game show featuring Keith and Lorraine from Chingford, agonising over 'sticking' for the toaster or 'twisting' for the Toyota.

Congratulations! You have now achieved spiritual perfection: the body recumbent, the mind redundant. Now that you have been admitted to the inner sanctum of sloth, it is once again safe to re-experience even travel itself. On TV.

TV-travel is done for you. Every week, pastel-clad professionals jet off on your behalf, lovingly editing time and distance to fill those deadly mid-evening slots which would otherwise attract crown green bowls, sheep dog trials or David Attenborough.

Once you have seen a travel show, you need never travel again yourself. TV's video voyagers, with their professional vocation to vacation, do it for you, putting amateur excursionists to shame. The tiresome necessity of actually being there in person is removed. No more passports, pesetas and paella; ferries, francs and foreign food are banished forever. The TV crew travelling in your place liberates you to stay at home.

Selflessly exposing themselves to deckchair - *blitzkrieg on la plage des cent-mille Allemands*, TV professionals bravely assault the world's holiday frontlines, in order to save you the bother. Thanks to their efforts you can now relax, senseless and supine before the screen, experiencing at last the true bliss of proxy-travel in the age of intercontinental consumer culture. Enlightenment is yours!

Until, that is, your exhausted partner walks in – after another day's grotesque and demeaning toil – and asks: 'What sort of day have you had, then?'

One answer – 'Well, I've spent the last hour flat on my back, belching lasagne and watching some prat on telly go on holiday

on my behalf' – is unlikely to meet with sympathy and understanding. More probably, a domestic catastrophe in the medium-yield megaton range will leave you surveying the wreckage of your relationship and taking a somewhat more critical view of the slick screen-safari that just cost you so dear.

Suddenly the spell is broken. The glossy production which so enchantingly caressed you towards complete inertia is now unmasked. The TV travel show is almost pure nothingness: a glib-gobbed guidebook to one vapid dystopia after another; never-ending tours of mundane vacationlands for the terminally inane.

Exploded out of listless ennui by the collapse of your love-life and catapulted from the sofa by an unfortunate gastric interaction of lasagne and lager, the audacious breadth of the conspiracy becomes clear: this is not broadcast travel, this is the terrorism of the banal! The televisual packaging of the package tour is nothing less than the global extension of the antiseptic American infinity of the mall. Safe, smooth and seductive: ersatz experience at the shallow end of the gene pool.

Fighting back, you search for explanations. You clutch at the few shards of reality still embedded in your brain. Who am I? What is this rubbish? Why am I watching it? What is that idiot blethering on about? Why should I give a toss?

Yet, almost immediately, the still-running programme subverts your defiance. Although vowing to resist, you find yourself acknowledging that the unctuous presenters do at least fulfil one vital function. Tanned, superficial and torrentially multi-syllabic, they fight themselves onto the beaches every week in the name of light entertainment, filling the pre-watershed schedules and thereby warding off the codgers, collie dogs and copulating gorillas you'd otherwise have to suffer.

Realizing this, your resistance wanes. For having spared you these dreadful alternatives, you can forgive the show's gibbering frontpeople almost anything. You even start to sympathise. After all, you nod, it must be a nightmare, roving the globe on dodgy charterlines with the maintenance record of a ropey Lada and in-flight catering that'd make a straw donkey sick, let alone a passenger.

So you cave in, the softening focus of the screen lures you back to pixels dissolving into a Paintbox payoff to the commissioning resort. Credits roll over the payola-pictogram of the final shot, the obligatory steadicam pan over a palm-lined promenade, those eternal ergonomics of vacationland: the sun, the sand, the sea.

Now you finally crumble. You're facing life, lager and lasagne in desolate isolation. The therapeutic softness of the sofa is irresistible. And your last conscious act, as you slump back into broadcast braindeath? Zapping. To the 24-hour Vacation Station on Channel 39.