

No Room Here

I came to Barcelona from the UK with the over-inflated and exotic view that I would be more politically stimulated here, that politics in my home country (this was pre-Brexit) was dull and business-like, that ordinary people there didn't discuss politics whereas across the shore in *Europe* they did. Yes, I know that technically we are European and that it's ridiculous to speak of the geographical continent, and at that time, Union that we are a part of, as something 'other'. But welcome to British exceptionalism, I've had to do a lot of deprogramming, and you can see where it's taken us..

First on the to-do list was finding some form of accommodation. I realised that I had never lived in an apartment before. I'm from London but outside of Oxford Circus most of the city is sprawling with houses each with a little bit of space at the front and back. That pretty much sums up the UK. In my mind all the flats were going to feature high ceilings, wooden floors, strange doors and grand windows, basic yet bohemian style kitchens. I remember my heart skipping with excitement as I approached the aged facade of the first building I visited. The stairwell was a little on the shabby side but my patronising romanticism of 'the continent' meant I was converting all this into quaintness. The apartment, however, couldn't be forced into my dreamland. It was damp with no living room to speak of, more like a sofa placed in a random entrance, cigarette butts brimming over the edges of a precariously placed ashtray, and when I was shown to the room there was a window...to the lift shaft of the building. Welcome to my first encounter with an 'interior'. I was shaken and upset; all that for the pretty price of 340e (January 2016 for ref).

After a few heart-sinking visits and an accumulation of horror stories from acquaintances, I got to the 'interview' section of viewing a flat I actually liked. Up until the COVID era it's well known that people with contracts at good flats are in a privileged exclusive club. They wield power of choice and some enjoy it a lot more than others. *Fabio, who holds the contract, is explaining that it's he (Italian) and a French girl living there. I'm not concentrating as he talks about their respective careers and timetables, I'm focusing instead on my seeming pleasant enough, but not too boring so that I can pass the test and end this hellish search. He moves on to talking about the ambience of the flat and highlights that because he is Italian and she is French they *loove* to cook each other their traditional cuisine. He doesn't even manage to finish the sentence before his face changes as he realises I am British and their set-up would be spoiled by Stone Age practices. I see this and rush forward to interrupt reassuringly before he is able to reach his mental conclusion offering "Oh fantastic! Because aaactually I'm half Greek and love to cook". Colour flooded back into his face, his shoulders dropped and he sat back with a relieved smile. Next day I got the text, I had been selected. I did message back and asked cheekily if my Greek credentials had pushed me over the finish line. "Of course" he replied.

In previous editions of this column I have talked about Brits being a privileged force in emigration, unrivalled in their access and confident in their marketability to new locations. However, my encounter with Fabio betrays a reverse system: The Hierarchy of Guiris. Now, what is a guiri? Some people say it is usually Northern European tourists, for some people it's all foreigners on holiday; really it is just extended to most non-local residents. Whatever it is, the Italians, Greeks, and Portuguese are at the top of the acceptable end of the undesirables list.

I have often wondered if this is the core part of my extreme irritation to Guiri. Most of my friends from the guiri side are either apathetic or desensitised to it, or full blown rejecting local culture as a defense mechanism. I am stuck in turmoil, trying to demonstrate how this label doesn't represent me, trying to be accepted, and feeling hurt every time I am relegated to the 'other' identity in this city; why do I care so much? Maybe it's because I'm half Greek. The fluent in speaking and writing it kind, the kind that forgets please and thank you and uses the imperative too much for polite British speaking patterns. I guess I thought I moved here to be closer to the Mediterranean region and greater culture that I'm from and a part of me has always wished to find its missing home again.

Of course most of my own personal reaction to 'guiri' comes from feeling erased. It is a strange feeling to move to a city, wanting so much to embrace it, only to be told you're a one-dimensional and undesirable version of Northern Europe, one that you don't even recognise. I often protest that I've never been to Magaluf... that I didn't eat butter until I was 18, but it's no use. I have a feeling of erasure in Barcelona I've never felt so acutely before. I may repeatedly tell people my father is Greek, that I attended a Greek school and church and am part of the Greek diaspora in London, that I spent the months during the holidays in my family's village in Greece. It doesn't matter, I will continue to be called a guiri and contrasts drawn between the Mediterranean and 'where I'm from'. If you look like a guiri you are one I guess. But it hurts more when using a group cultural term like Mediterranean of which you are part of in order to other you, even if it is around banal topics like the quality of the beaches and how healthy the food is.

Now I say the majority of this sentiment is a purely human desire to be seen for what you believe your identity to be but I will admit a hefty chunk is also wanting access to some of that Mediterranean advantage. I want some of the fun of slinging mud at Brits. So yes, there is a heavy dose of wanting to be seen as 'different' to those other guiris. A form self-loathing from the adoption of the local value system that probably means I have assimilated better than I thought.

Fast forward to 2019 and I inherit the contract from *Fabio. Of course I was looking forward to the power that must certainly come my way for the status of having a contract in Barcelona. I was no longer a lowly tenant subletting a room from the protection of an accepted guiri. Now is my time to shed that guiri identity and be seen as something in between a local resident and foreign intruder. I wasn't hoping for much but at least maybe a half-step up the locally-defined acceptance ladder.

At this time an Italian girl and I are living in the flat. We are advertising for the third room in the flat and messages are coming thick and fast. We browsed through them together and invited a few along for a viewing. One chap seemed perfectly pleasant, a local lad, and after showing him around we sat for one of those brief awkward chats to see how we would all fit together. What do you do? He asked me directly. I was a bit shocked as I thought I would be the one asking the questions. He's a young lad, I thought to myself, he's probably been brought up to be a bit 'alpha' in new situations. I started to reply that I pay the bills by being an English teacher but that my main interests were... but before I could get to that part I was stunned into silence by a loud laugh, an exaggerated tut and eye roll as he said "oh yeah, aren't you all?". And with that I was dismissed as a 10-a-penny English teacher as he moved

on to my Italian housemate to see if she at least had some substance to her. There I was, the contract holder, relegated to 3rd place again. How had this happened? I've accepted that I don't really know how the local population takes me, but it certainly isn't seriously.