

The Tourists are Back!

Boris Johnson's announcement that travel could start as early as May for UK tourists triggered Spain's highest surge of bookings in "THE HISTORY OF TOURISM", as dramatically put by the newspapers. Brace yourselves! The socks in sandals wearing 50+ year old Brits are going to Alicante, and that means their kids are booking up party pads here to enjoy that which Barcelona is most famous for: Barceloneta beach and Pacha club. When I saw the headline I immediately thought of my escape route. I'm a seasoned periphery Barcelonian now and I won't be making the same mistakes. My first summer I stayed in the city for most of August and saw much of the life beyond the centre shutter and my friends leave for the coasts north or south of the city, depending on their socio-economic position, for months-long stretches. It was hot and sticky, I was bored, and I witnessed the carnival nightmare of the city centre with millions more tourists than it can hold. The language that was disrupting the peace, singing, hollering and misbehaving may have had various accents, but it was certainly British.

I won't defend the indefensible, I have no idea why they must come and treat their holiday like they're doing a stint on a Jersey Shore reality TV show. I see the way they disrespect their surroundings, with the main focus on alcohol and no clear awareness that they are visitors in a city with residents trying to live their normal lives. The only thing I can say is that, contrary to popular belief, these tourists don't bottle up their energy at their job, behaving well all year, and respecting the place they live in to then fly abroad to shit all over another city for a week, they do the same every weekend in their own city centre. UK small towns, regional cities, suburban centres of larger towns, and even the village pub are all plastered with vomit and broken glass by Sunday morning, and by Monday those responsible for the damage are on the 8 am morning commute to the office. The tourist situation in Barcelona is untenable, and I have solidarity with the city struggling to survive for its residents.

When I think about the *guiri* label I am reminded how complicated it is due to the very real tourist problem. 'Turismophobia' intersects with the *guiri* identity regularly and gives cover and justification to greater hostility. The tourists are a problem, and the *guiris* who live here and look like them are viewed likewise so much so, there is no distinction. I have been told multiple times that a '*guiri*' is a type of annoying tourist predominantly from Northern Europe, but the problem with that is I had never been on holiday to Spain before living here and I have only been thus christened a '*guiri*' since living here.

A reaction to one of my columns summed up the disconnection perfectly. They said that the term in question was just a joke not taken seriously by Spaniards and Catalans and that *guiris* themselves were reading too much into it. They elucidated on this point further by saying that they feel the same when *they* are on holiday so what's the problem? Now, let's put the gaslighting aside for one second and focus on the fact that despite my entire column talking about living and working here and my experience the past 5 years, the picture banner of a smiling Northern European combined with compartmentalised ideas of local resident, poor immigrant, and tourist meant this dude still couldn't grasp that these foreigners in his city don't like being reduced to his funny outsider experience of his latest trip to Japan.

What I'm saying, and he's proving, is the problem with *guiri* is that you can never transfer to a residency status in the eyes of the local population because you are always associated with the temporary state of a tourist. That *guiri* itself is the permanent manifestation of

resentment to tourists taking over the city and turismophobia. Saying that I shouldn't worry about it because it only refers to tourists doesn't grasp that *guiri* is a final destination identity.

When the pandemic hit in March my parents, panicking back home watching the TV, urged me to get a flight and get out of Barcelona before it was too late, to return home. Something in my stomach felt wrong though, *this* is my home, this is where I've built my life, this is where my responsibilities lie, this is where I have contributed to the state. When I had thought about it more I told them I didn't want to abandon the home I had made, that if this really will be a disaster I had made my choice to stay in Barcelona, its my home and my city, it is the society I want to rejoin after the quarantine, it will be there for me when this is over.

In the pandemic, I forgot my *guiri*-ness a bit. Being inside so much and not in contact with the public, my difference wasn't highlighted, I wasn't 'othered' at all. I guess too there's nothing like collective trauma away from home to root emotionally to a new place. This was my place now and it had become more so as I tuned into Fernando Simon's briefings watching the updates with the rest of the nation. I assumed too, well I didn't really need to think of it consciously, that as there were no tourists my residency should now be apparent when I finally got outside, maybe things would be different, the pandemic had changed so much.

I remember that first walk of freedom at 8pm on a Monday, a bit anxiety inducing at first as I hadn't seen so many people on Passeig Sant Joan in 2 months! When we were finally allowed to have a beer outside, I went to the local bar on the corner of my street with my friend, a curly haired English boy. This bar is our tradition and the family that owns it knows us, everybody wants something local, even *guiris*! Just as we were having our first sips and rejoicing at being able to see each other in person, a couple walked past, looked at us disapprovingly before muttering "Oh look, the tourists have come back". Something not even physically possible became the only explanation for our existence on their streets.

We stood balcony to balcony applauding, cheering, listening to each others' music and singing along, but back on the street I'm a pest. I love this city, it's my only home now, but it will never recognise our shared experience in me, it will never include me in the healing of our shared trauma. In moments like these that call for heightened community solidarity, who is the community? I won't deny that it hurt again, I won't deny anger rose through me as I shouted "somos residentes" and my English friend scolded me for being 'such a *guiri*' about it. But the truth is a *guiri* never graduates from being a tourist. Residency: 5 years, pandemic: 1, *guirigo*home: eternity.