

TRAVEL

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The unpackaged costa of Spain

Avoid the tourist trails and you can still find the untouched Spain, says Mike Cartlidge.

There was a time when much of Spain was undiscovered and prices were famously low. Times have changed.

Once it was invading Moor armies that threatened to submerge Spanish culture. Now it's the package tourist industry, which has seen whole chunks of the Mediterranean coast given over to high-rise holiday resorts like Benidorm.

For many package tourists, all they see of Spain are crowded beaches surrounded by giant hotels and streets full of restaurants serving hamburgers and all-day English breakfasts.

If they venture out to the smaller towns between the resorts, they find that many of them are run-down and seedy, and they hurry back to their air-conditioned rooms and swimming pools.

But if you travel independently along the coast, avoiding the toll roads and tourist trails, passing dramatic hills topped with tiny villages and whitewashed churches, you can still find seaside towns that have not been submerged by the flood of package tourists.

Benicassim, halfway between Barcelona and Valencia, is a good example, a traditional resort that had its heyday in the early 1900s.

Despite its expansive sandy beaches, the vacation invasion has passed it by and nowadays it crouches on the coastal plain like an aging dowager, dressed in her fading finery.

The villas along its seafront have fantastic designs, all sweeping roofs and shaded balconies, but many have peeling paint on their shutters and gardens full of weeds.

Sadly, some are being pulled down and replaced with apartment blocks.

Still, Benicassim attracts mainly Spanish visitors and an evening promenade along its seafront takes you back to the days when whole families took their daily exercise together.

Voluble elderly people walk in groups, dodging marauding grandchildren, and teenage couples escape their chaperones to hold hands.

The town's unsung highlight is the Voramar hotel, which during the Spanish Civil War was occupied, at different times, by General Franco and Ernest Hemingway.

The Voramar's bedrooms are more basic than luxurious, but they're reasonably priced and they all have views, either of the hills or the sea.

Best of all, the hotel is on the beach, not in the sense that it's beside the beach, but actually on it. You walk out of the hotel on to a broad patio that's surrounded by sand. It's a rare glimpse of what coastal Spain was like before the package tours started.

Further down the coast, past the bustling city



OLD CHARM: The little town of Calpe retains its individuality, hiding away like a shy child in a playground of giants.

PICTURES: Supplied

of Valencia, dowdy seaside towns are interspersed with antiseptic developments of apartments and town houses, typically clustered around golf courses.

They're built by German and Russian companies, the latter, according to the locals, likely to be money-laundering fronts for the Moscow mafia.

Some British ex-pats told us of a mansion built near their finca (land) which has stood empty since it was built a decade back: the unused Mercedes in its driveway, they said, had weeds growing through it.

The big developments could be anywhere in the world.

The little town of Calpe, though, retains its individuality, hiding away like a shy child in a playground of giants.

Located on a peninsula on the Costa Blanca, about 100 km south of Valencia, it has a few high-rise buildings but they're on a single strip – between the sea and a salt lake – and the old town survives. Apartments line its two beaches, in the lee of a Gibraltar-like rock called Penon de Ifach.

Like Benicassim, its residents appear in the evenings and promenade along the tiled beachside walkways.

Spain's autumn weather is generally fine and warm.

We are in Calpe for a few days, though, when things take a turn for the worse. On the streets, the locals mutter about an approaching huracán. When the rains come, the peninsula turns into an island as the salt lake overflows its shores. Cars are submerged, basements flooded and the beautiful walkways swept away or covered by mud slides.

It is like a war zone, a scene of devastation. The locals agree that it is still better than Benidorm, though.

Apart from the benefits of avoiding the high-rise resorts, sticking to small-town Spain enables you to avoid the worst of Spanish



LOW PROFILE: Alcossebre's council has had the rare good sense to prohibit high-rises.

driving. The country has the second-highest road toll in Europe and it is not hard to see why. At one point our car GPS, which was becoming increasingly psychotic in the Spanish heat, disobeyed orders and took us straight through the city of Valencia. Here, the highway runs through massive, four-lane roundabouts.

The Spanish driving on these roundabouts resembles one of those cartoons that illustrate the way heated molecules whiz about in random directions.

The Spaniards are not brilliant on straight roads but put them on curving ones and their tentative sense of road positioning goes right out of the window.

An old friend who is building a house north of Valencia recommended neighbouring seaside

villages called Peniscola and Alcossebre.

Alcossebre, like Benicassim, caters mainly to Spanish holidaymakers. The city council has had the rare good sense to prohibit the building of high-rises. Its promenade is lined with modest bars and restaurants and its sandy-beached bays include a nudist beach.

Peniscola did not have the best of luck when names were handed out and it is not doing quite as well as its neighbour when it comes to surviving the onslaught of the 21st century.

Here, in the absence of benevolent by-laws, high-rise hotels block out the evening sun along the northern beach. The place does, however, have the great bonus of a classic Spanish old town, strewn over another of the Gibraltar-like rocks that line the Mediterranean coast. All

narrow lanes, cobblestones and ancient stone houses, it is full of charm until you reach the tourist shops, which flog cheap t-shirts, garish mugs and (I'm not making this up) colourful examples of that uniquely Spanish artefact, the boomerang.

The rock is topped by a crusader castle that famously featured in the 1960s Charlton Heston film *El Cid*.

We climbed to the top of the castle, which boasts classically formed battlements and expansive coastal views.

It also had a crusader display dedicated to the Knights Templar. The knights, tenants of the castle when it was still young, were pious souls who went around the world preaching the Christian gospel of peace and harmony, and slaughtering anyone who did not buy into it.

The torture chamber was stocked with all the usual means of persuading your friends and neighbours to see your point of view, from thumbscrews to that old stand-by, the rack. In this case, though, the rack was a sort of super-deluxe model. It was covered with wicked-looking iron spikes, presumably intended to stop its customers getting too comfy while their torso and limbs were parting company. Old Spain was not all bucolic bliss.

We had to drive back northwards to catch a ferry from Barcelona.

Just south of that city, Sitges is surviving with soul somehow intact, its buildings still low-rise, its hotels scattered throughout its narrow streets or located in newer areas along its endless beach.

Late at night, a lone Spanish trumpeter somewhere in the distance blew a plaintive dirge.

As we prepared to sail away from Spain, its bustling cities, tourist sprawls and gem-like small towns, the trumpeter's lament was a fitting farewell.

□ Mike Cartlidge is a Wellington writer.

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Thomas the travel writer's lonely trip to hell

THOMAS KOHNSTAMM is literature's enfant terrible of the moment and the kick up the backside the travel writing industry had to have.

If you haven't heard, the 32-year-old Seattle author of *Do Travel Writers Go To Hell* recently made international headlines and set internet forums and blogs on fire with his no-holds-barred expose of travel writing.

In it he writes: "The two most important attributes for a travel writer are a strong liver and a good ability to bullshit."

His book weaves tales of sex, drugs, more sex and more drugs into the story of his first writing assignment – a book on Brazil – for *Lonely Planet*.

Kohnstamm, who appears at this week's Auckland Writers and Readers Festival, tells in the book of how he sold ecstasy to fund his travel, accepted freebies from hotels and restaurants and admits "what I can't plagiarise I can always make up".

He also described table service at one restaurant as "friendly" after having sex on a table with a waitress.

But as Kohnstamm said recently, "the shit hit the fan" after a flippant comment about how he wrote a book on Colombia from a desk in San Francisco, based on what "a chick I was dating who was in the Colombian consulate" told him. He's since done a bit of explaining.

The Colombia stuff was a "desk update" (he was never required to travel to South America) and his comments were "taken out of context".

"There was a perception I had defrauded my employer and brazenly . . . trying to pull a fast one on readers and that was not the case," he says.

The waitress thing was "a private joke", and for anyone who thinks he treated her shabbily, they exchanged emails and are still in contact.

He admits he accepted freebies but never in direct exchange for a favourable review.

"My point in my book is that there's a gap between what many writers are paid and what is expected of the writers," he says. "The reality of being a guide book writer and of covering such a massive amount of territory, and covering such comprehensive details, is that corners need to be cut to make the budget function."

But what Kohnstamm really takes issue with are the accusations of plagiarism, which he denies. "No writer in their right mind would want words like plagiarism or fabrication associated with their name," he says.

Kohnstamm's book, like the author himself, is contradictory. It glamorises the life of a travel writer while trying to depict them as overworked, underpaid and unsupported.



THOMAS KOHNSTAMM: Burned bridges.

Kohnstamm does tend to come across in parts of his book as "an obnoxious prick" (his words).

But he seems genuinely perplexed that his ethics or personal conduct have been held up to criticism.

"I never expected things to get as big as they did, I don't think *Lonely Planet* did, I don't think my publisher did," he says. "I think it's unfortunate there couldn't have been a conversation about the content of the book or some of the issues raised by it."

Kohnstamm says he never intended to write a journalistic expose or a "takedown" of travel guide publishers. Instead, he wanted to fill what he saw as a hole in the travel writing genre.

"I wanted to write something that I would walk into a bookstore and think, that's something exciting, that's something different," he says. "I also want to discuss in the story about going from being a young person in their 20s and deciding between the pressures of financial stability and career expectations versus our natural human sense of adventure and spontaneity."

Not surprisingly, while Kohnstamm has garnered a fair share of publicity through the whole thing (he's been invited to speak and hold

a writing workshop at the Sydney Writers Festival next week), he acknowledges he has burned his bridges as far as his future as a guide book writer is concerned.

Kohnstamm says he's now working on a new book about his "experience coming up the other end after a number of years on the road in perpetual motion and working as a travel writer and trying to return to civilian life".

That period also included a few months where he thought he had an "illegitimate Patagonian love child".

Despite Kohnstamm describing himself as a lifelong traveller, he has never visited Australia and his trip to Sydney and New Zealand will mark his first foray Down Under.

(This fact probably explains his somewhat uninformed comment in *Do Travel Writers Go to Hell* that "finding cocaine in Australia must be like spotting a wallaby on the loose in Fresno".) So do travel writers go to hell?

Not all of them, says Kohnstamm, who adds he doesn't believe ethical travel writing is an oxymoron.

"I'm sure there are plenty (of travel writers) in heaven," Kohnstamm says.

At least those who are headed for hell will find themselves in good company. – AAP
□ The Auckland Writers and Readers Festival runs from Wednesday until Sunday. Kohnstamm appears twice on Sunday. www.writersfestival.co.nz