

Carlos – a Spanish Emigrant

Destination Malaga. The main entry point to most of the Spanish golden coastline, Malaga airport is full of British, German and Scandinavians en route to their respective holiday destination in Torremolinos or Nerja. Ready for calamares and cerveza, they arrive with their golfbag in hand, spend a day or two in the regional capital before they hit the beaches.

In Malaga I met Carlos. Originally from Seville, Carlos lived in Madrid until a few months ago but decided to go to London in search of work when he was dismissed from the public enterprise he worked in.

- There simply is no work here. The chances of finding something to do are so much greater in London that I decided to pack up and leave. – Besides, he confessed, the atmosphere around here is so depressive that I just couldn't handle it. People are depressed. The crisis is all there is, it is all that exists. Those who don't have work, and they are many, don't talk about anything else, understandably. But also those that have a job are having a rough time. Their salaries have been reduced and the pressure is high. Hours are long and there are five hundred people lining up to take over should you not to a good enough job, a fact you are constantly reminded of.

Carlos speaks English and is volunteering in an NGO that helps children of Latin American immigrants adapting to life in the UK. Yet most new Spanish-speaking immigrants to the UK are Spanish, not Latin-American. Carlos told me how the number of Spaniards in London is increasing by the day.

- There are opportunities in the UK and it's your qualifications that determine if you get a job or not. In Spain it was never like that. And depending on what kind of job you are looking for, you don't necessarily have to speak English.

One night he introduced me to some of his friends who invited me to for an evening barbecue on the beach. While we watched the smoke stretch to the sky in the warm light of the bonfires, trying to keep the mosquitos away from our ankles, the conversation inevitably turned to the economic crisis. Though most of these young friends had a job, they all told me they could feel the crisis. They spoke of increased stress and less money for those that have a job to go to, hopelessness for those that don't. One of them, I learned after, had been severely depressed because he feared for his ability to feed his two children.

We stayed on the beach until early morning. The children went to sleep on the beach under a blanket while the rest of us remained in silence watching the bonfires light up the sky until the first rays of sunlight appeared on the horizon. Before splitting up, I asked if I could contribute with anything for the drinks and food. They looked at me

and shook their head. – Thank you but no, it's ok. You're a guest.

The following morning I met up with Carlos again. We chatted about the party and about Spanish culture in general.

- The sad thing, he pointed out, is that all the tourists see only the party, without realising what's behind and what it means to life here. Any tourist at that beach yesterday would say 'where's the crisis? There's no crisis here! Everybody's out partying!'

- Look, he suddenly interrupted himself, pointing at the front page of a newspaper, half of which is covered by photos of the Spanish soccer team, while the other talked about Prime Minister Rajoy's negotiations for a Spanish rescue package in Brussels.

– Football and crisis, he sighed. It's all there is. But people have to go out, the day we stop going out, the day we can no longer find a way to have a beer with friends, that day it's really over.

I have to admit that Carlos is right. I've lived in Spain and travelled there for years. The Spain that greets the tourists today is not very different from last year, or the year before. It is a country as warm and welcoming, as quietly exotic, as it always has been. People have their beers as if nothing had happened. An overwhelming majority of the tourists will never have to worry about the crisis or even acknowledge its existence.

For Spaniards, in spite of their desperate economic situation, have no plans to renounce on life. However depressive it may be – there is an amazing capacity among the Spanish people to put their worries aside and enjoy what life has to offer – no small quantity on the sun-blessed southern shores of the Spanish peninsula. Some may call it ignorance, this ability, I call it resilience.

Resilience because what they've endured in the past century is no little burden. It is easy to forget that those countries that today form the core of the European Union, less than half a century ago were little else than 1000 years of history and war-torn rubble. And Spain was hit particularly hard and long – it was devastated by a civil war which resulted in thirty years of right-wing dictatorship. Atrocities were committed on both sides and the wounds run deep, far deeper than democracy, and were never healed by the economic progress of the eighties and nineties. That's why resilience is what the Spanish party is all about. It is a survival mechanism. But unless you realise that, you won't see the Spanish disaster. You may see the party, but you simply won't see that there is circus but no bread, that it is a feast on an empty stomach.

Should you take the trouble, though, to look past the initial images of your holiday

destination, what you will find is quite frightening. It's an image of a country in free falling, a country from which the young and talented are escaping while those that stay have to carry the burden of decades of economic folly. Carlos is among the first lot.

- You have to remember, Carlos concluded, that when you're talking to me you're talking to someone from the higher middle class. Lots of people are a lot worse off than I. There are people that don't have enough to eat at the end of the month. Then what do they do? They line up in front of Caritas or the Red Cross. That's the reality in Spain today.

Before we separate, Carlos asks me who will read my article. – Will they understand? he wonders. – Will they understand what is happening here?