



FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT Helen Davies

Our plane touched down a few minutes early, and for once I reclaimed my baggage and got through the formalities without delay. I stood to one side of the exit, waiting for the other journalists to catch up. We'd introduced ourselves back in London, not getting much further than names and publications before our flight was called and we drifted apart, cocooning ourselves with laptops, MP3 players and movies. First came the girl – Amy? Emily? I'd already asked and forgotten twice – from *C'est Chic*. She was barely in her twenties, and I wondered if she was a favoured intern being rewarded for her unpaid work with this freebie. Next came Nick and Toby, two freelancers in their late thirties, chatting together, and bringing up the rear was a blowsy middle-aged woman, travel editor for one of the glossies.

I led the way to the arrivals hall. It's a scene I've written about so many times – that moment when you step out into a foreign country, besieged by the jabbering anarchy of an incomprehensible language. Over the years, I've found a dozen ways to describe the piquant exoticism of it all, without ever mentioning the fear: that awful conviction they're all talking about you; the vast relief when you make out a couple of words of heavily-accented English; the way your ears and mind strain for

just a little more.

I was the first to notice the young blonde smiling at us as she made her way through the crowd. I knew from our phonecall the previous week that she'd upped sticks from London for the summer.

'Are you my press trip?' she asked.

'I think so,' I replied, stretching out my hand. 'Peter Channing. News on Sunday.'

'Stephanie Cross. Good to meet you, Peter. I've been a fan of your writing for years. It's nice to finally put a face to the name.' She smiled so intensely that I had to look away.

She shook hands with the others, then led us past a lurid yellow pop-art sculpture to our minibus. I clambered in, aware of two cabdrivers staring as they leaned on their vehicles, waiting for a fare. One of them shouted something and they both laughed. 'What did he say?' Toby asked Stephanie.

She smiled as she translated, 'He was just saying how smart you all look.'

I shuffled across the chilly vinyl seat to the window and looked back at the men. I'd been led to believe the natives would be kitted out in typical Eastern European style – vivid tracksuits, with clashing knitwear to keep out the cold – but these men weren't badly dressed. The younger of the two was wearing the same brand of designer jeans as I was myself. I presumed they were fake.

I turned away to smile a welcome at the girl from *C'est Chic*, who had slid into the seat beside me. She asked how I'd become established as a travel journalist, and I gave her the usual spiel: always interested in travel, right place at the right time, all about the contacts. She nodded sagely.

'Right, if I could have your attention for a minute,' Stephanie began, twisting in her seat to face us. 'We'll pop to the hotel to freshen up, then it's back to the bus for a tour of the shopping district. It's going to be an action-packed weekend. I want you to see how much the city's changed over the past few years.'

At the hotel, I plugged in my about-to-expire mobile, then took a quick look around the standard-issue suite. LCD widescreen television? Check. High thread-

count Egyptian cotton sheets? Check. Rain shower? Check.

Immunity to luxury is both a perk and a peril of my job, one of the reasons I'd never dream of booking a trip I had to pay for. It would be like living in a mansion but going on a camping holiday.

Back in the bus, I began making notes on my surroundings, seeking out poignant contrasts between the city's old poverty and new wealth. I smiled as I noticed a beautiful teenaged girl, head-to-toe in designer rip-offs, standing in front of a derelict shop. We'd no sooner got out of the bus than I spotted another: an old woman in a bruise-coloured anorak, pushing her tartan shopping trolley with one hand while she held her mobile to her ear with the other. You couldn't make this stuff up. Well, actually you could, but it was a little unethical.

Stephanie took us to a department store first, where we nodded our confirmation that it could indeed, as the press release had put it, 'rival the big London stores'. Then we were off to a traditional bazaar, Stephanie explaining that the bazaar itself and the curiosity shops surrounding it were soon to be razed to the ground by the local council, to make way for another magnificent department store. I scribbled in my notebook: 'Make your visit soon, before the city is ruined by tourism.'

Then, Stephanie clearly having decided that was enough local colour, we were off to another modern development. The area along the riverfront had been converted into pointless boutiques and gift shops for the tourists the city hoped to attract. As I watched the girl from *C'est Chic* battle the wind for control of her hair, I wanted to tell Stephanie that we tourists weren't worth the trouble. We'd only ever come here for a cheap weekend or stag night, then we'd piss off back home, whingeing about the weather and leaving her compatriots to clear up our sophisticated, metropolitan messes.

We scurried from shop to shop, our faces screwed up as if that would protect us from the icy wind, and all I could think of was the reception waiting for us back at the hotel – how much I was going to enjoy that first glass of wine, and how the second and third would allow my mind to wander nicely while the local grandees wittered on about redevelopment. I noticed the girl from *C'est Chic* blinking at me

with her cow eyes again, and I wondered what might happen once she'd had a couple of drinks, too.

As Stephanie herded us out of a shop selling inexplicably expensive furniture, I tried to stifle my yawn, but to no avail. I muttered something about a late night and she pursed her lips. 'If you'd prefer to explore on your own, just let me know,' she said, a note of threat in her voice, and in that moment I knew she'd seen right through me, through my international-traveller shtick, to the man inside. The man who'd never been abroad until after university, never outside Europe until that press trip to the Gambia. The man who could speak precisely 12 words of French, and none of any other language except English. The man who'd been to 23 countries on six continents, but never alone and never paid for himself. I was a child, and she was the adult.

I was still staring at my brogues in shame when a pair of white trainers came into view, and I realised I was about to walk into someone.

'Oh, I'm so sorry,' I said.

The man's reply was incomprehensible.

'Terribly sorry,' I said, and went to walk around him. He took a step sideways to block my path and I glanced up at his face for the first time. He was my age, or a little younger, and about my height. He looked me up and down as he spoke again, and this time I didn't need to understand the words: the harsh vowel sounds of his native tongue spiked out from the universal language of machismo.

'Sorry,' I said again, as slowly and clearly as I could, trying not to let my voice tremble.

He said something else, and I managed to discern the word 'tourist'. His glare now seemed more curious than actively threatening, and I wondered if I had misjudged him. 'Yes, yes,' I said. 'I'm a tourist. From London.' He said something else and I sensed he might have asked me a question. I nodded furiously and vaguely for a moment and, finally, he let me pass.

My group was gone.

I told myself to keep calm. I reached for my mobile, before remembering I'd left

it back at the hotel. Keep calm. I still had the press release and itinerary in my inside pocket. Stephanie's mobile number would be in there, and there was bound to be a payphone round here somewhere. I took the itinerary out and unfolded the loose pages. At that moment, there was a scream as a seagull swooped past my head. In my shock, I lost my grip on the papers, which skittered along the ground, towards the river. The seagull was just in front of me now, using its beak to excavate an abandoned fast-food carton. I edged around it, but the gull squawked a warning and I took a step back again. A gust of wind lifted my pages, then cast them down into the water.

I leaned over the freezing railing but, even if I could have reached the papers, they were already soaked through.

Keep calm, I told myself again. I had plenty of cash. All I had to do was hail a taxi, tell them the name of the hotel and—

What the hell was the name of the hotel? I started walking back towards the main road as I went through the options. Four Seasons? No. Not a Hilton. Marriott? Didn't think so. I closed my eyes for a second. Think. I could picture myself looking around the room. What was the name on the headed stationary? I tried to form a mental image of the logo on the shampoo bottle. It was useless.

I was at the road now and, when I saw a cab, I hailed it, hoping the hotel name would come to me.

'Where to?' the driver asked.

Thank God! His accent was strong, but I could just about make out the words.

'The hotel district, please.'

'Which hotel?'

I explained that the name temporarily escaped me, and asked if he might know which hotel was holding a reception for visiting journalists that evening.

'You're a journalist? I'll take you on a little tour. Maybe you'll remember the name on the way.'

I'm not bloody stupid. 'I have very little cash,' I replied. 'Just take me to the hotel district, please.'

‘Don’t worry about the money. Call it a gift.’

And then I knew: this was it. All those years of cosseted travelling, shepherded around by PRs, amply protected from the dangers that I assured my readers were nothing for the sensible traveller to fear, and now this was it: my first authentic mugging experience. My heart beat faster. I told myself that, when it came down to it, I’d just hand over my wallet. There was nothing that couldn’t be replaced. I just hoped there wouldn’t be any violence.

I stared out of the taxi window, trying and rapidly failing to memorise our route. The driver asked me questions as we went, about my work, which newspaper I wrote for, where I was from. I didn’t know whether to boast – as if I was too important for him to risk hurting me – or if my trivial fame might give him more of a thrill. Then I thought maybe I’d try to strike up a conversation: make him realise I was a human being, just like him.

‘What’s your name?’ I asked.

‘Everyone calls me Dino.’

‘Dino,’ I repeated, showing him I’d remember it.

We drove on, past another parade of shuttered shops, the swirling litter no longer seeming ironic or poetic. The sun was beginning to drop. If all he wanted to do was rob me, Dino could have done it by now.

It was almost dark when he pulled over. ‘Get out,’ he said.

‘I’ll stay here, thanks,’ I told him. ‘I’d just like to go back to the hotel quarter. Please.’

‘Get out!’ he almost shouted.

I clenched my teeth together hard as I climbed from the taxi, making a show of looking around for the approaching attack, all the while longing to close my eyes to the inevitable pain.

There was no one there.

‘Look,’ Dino said.

I followed his outstretched arm with my eyes, down the green hill – I’d never expected this part of the world to be green – to the city below, laid out like an

architect's model, dotted with fairy lights. I could see the tower of the Gothic cathedral, the twin domes of a riverside building, all the way to the magenta glow that was the river, reflecting the setting sun.

'It's beautiful,' I said, finally.

The pride was beaming out of him. 'Most beautiful city in the world.'

We stood there in silence as my thoughts took me far away from this hillside. I felt as if I could soar down to the river with the seagulls and off, out to sea. Anything seemed possible.

And then I remembered it was cold, I was only wearing a light jacket, and I was enjoying the scene not with the woman of my dreams but with a burly middle-aged taxi driver named Dino. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye. From his abashed look, I guessed his thoughts were not dissimilar to mine.

'Hotel district?' he asked.

I nodded.

As we drove back, I knew I should get out my notebook, but instead I closed my eyes and tried to hold onto the image of the city of lights. I didn't need notes. This was something I would remember. I had my story.

We drove towards the centre of town, and my mind rattled through the hotel names again. Not Hilton, not Marriott. And then—

'Got it!'

As Dino pulled up outside the hotel, I felt a strange sadness. It reminded me of my last trip to the Bahamas, when I'd hooked up with the woman from *Gold* magazine. Saying goodbye to her at Heathrow, watching her get into a cab, back to the flat she shared with her fiancé, I'd felt this same sorrow. Tomorrow I'd be back in London. My story was over.

My legs felt so heavy that I wasn't sure I'd be able to get out of the taxi, but then I remembered my glass of wine and the girl from *C'est Chic*, and I was leaning forward, waving a handful of notes at Dino.

'No, no,' he was saying, shaking his head almost violently. 'Just make sure you write about what I showed you.'

I wanted to shake his hand – hug him even – but the glass partition prevented any physical contact. I'd only have embarrassed us both, anyway. I settled for thanking him profusely, to which Dino merely nodded, before I trotted up the stairs to the hotel.

Our reception was already underway. The first person I saw was Stephanie, a large glass of white wine in her hand and a questioning smile on her face. Behind her was the huge welcome banner: 'Welcome to Liverpool: European Capital of Culture 2008'.

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