

## THE EMPTY QUARTER

by Miks Koljers

“He eats like a camel, doesn't he?” said the man across the table.

I had no idea who he was. He had sat down at the circular table a few minutes earlier and I had barely noticed him as I stared at the departures screen, willing the minutes away. The cafe felt like it was trying, unsuccessfully, to edge away from the rest of the airport.

All the other tables were occupied by the usual random collection of humanity one expects in a cheap airport: fractious families, excited groups of young friends, businessmen buying each other drinks and hoping the trip would result in more than unnecessary expense, and a reasonable number of people like myself, single travellers of indeterminate status whose lives extended no further than the boarding gate.

When the man sat down my attention was already occupied by what I considered the most interesting group in the cafeteria, sitting in a booth just to my right. Shameless eavesdropping had already determined they were four young computer programmers on their way to a conference somewhere hot – as their brand new sun hats showed. All were in their early twenties. They may have been recent university graduates, presumably after securing outstanding degrees in applied logic, computer science and such other subjects that seem to most of us like a sort of guaranteed alchemy.

Despite their youthful looks, such that one would call them boys and girls rather than men and women, they were dressed in a very middle-aged manner with loose-fitting, short-sleeved shirts, trousers that sacrificed shape for pockets and shoes always described as “sensible” by travellers of a certain maturity. There was something rather charming and innocent about them. They provided an obvious contrast with the straining hedonism one could sense in the holidaying youth around us and it made me smile to think these four young people might quite conceivably sit together in forty years' time and one would barely be able to tell the difference.

Though understanding little of what they said to each other – their enthusiasm for information technology was such that even here they talked of nothing else – I enjoyed listening to their conversation. Their voices were stereotypically nasal and monotone but they pronounced words with care and precision as they sipped cups of tea while at the tables all around them the vowels and consonants of the English language plopped superfluously into glasses of gassy yellow lager.

Concentrating on my observation of the computer group, I had barely noticed the new companion take his place at my table. Only his own curious observation about camels directed my attention towards him. He was well dressed in a dark blazer and pale slacks. This should have made him more elegant than the general display of shorts and T-shirts in the departure area, but somehow he gave the impression of being less smart than one

might imagine. The buttons of the blazer needed a polish as did his brogues.

He looked as if he had been travelling for a very long time, getting more and more rumpled as he passed through endless stations, taxi ranks and airports. A battered cabin bag on scuffed wheels was under his chair. His presence in the departure area suggested his journey was far from over.

I asked him to repeat what he had said.

“Eats like a camel,” he said with a grin, indicating with a nod of the head a man dining alone on a full English breakfast on the table to our right.

It was a rude thing with which to begin a conversation and I was a little worried the eating man might hear what had been said, as my uninvited companion made no attempt to lower his voice. But he had not – and involuntarily glancing across at the table I had to admit there was something of the desert ruminant about the way he was shovelling scrambled egg into his greasy mouth and chewing with a clumsy circular chomp of his jaws.

“Reminds me of the Empty Quarter,” my table companion continued. “It's not so empty now. Well, it is, but not compared to Thesiger's time. Though he wasn't quite the great white explorer he made out, by all accounts.”

I made no reply, regarding this whole outburst as of minimal interest. I looked up at the departures screen that cycled relentlessly through the morning's flights. My flight was still delayed and I had more than an hour to wait in this limbo of expensive coffee and limp sandwiches.

“Ghastly places these, aren't they? Still, better than the business class lounges. They are even worse,” continued the man opposite without any further explanation of why he held such an opinion.

“Hard to believe air travel used to be thought of as romantic and glamorous, isn't it?” he said, waving a hand vaguely at the terminal's franchised outlets and the people walking in circles around them.

“Fur coats and champagne? Look at it now. Gah!”

Despite this observation, a broad smile sat complacently across his features which had the ruddy finish of a naturally pale skin exposed to lengthy periods of sunshine.

“Flying anywhere nice?” he asked.

I told him I was going to Riga.

“Nice place, been there a couple of times. Good architecture, pretty women, food not so great. Wine terrible. But then it's not a grape culture.”

I told him things were changing and it was perfectly possible to get a decent bottle of wine there now.

“Probably. That's positive. Maybe it's worth a visit after all. Must be eight or nine years since I was there. But I was leaning towards somewhere south. Been in Bergen for a couple of weeks, Helsinki before that. Was thinking Bari or Tenerife. Open to suggestions.”

I didn't understand what he was talking about in his strangely abbreviated sentences. I asked where he was going.

“Who knows?” he replied. “Could be Riga too. Think I should?”

I felt I must have missed some vital piece of information in his earlier speech. Perhaps he had said something while I was still studying the computer programmers, but rather than repeat my question, I just came out with vague chatter about how the Baltic states weren't quite as cold as everyone else assumed and that the summers could be very pleasant.

“Perhaps you're right,” he said, then added after a short pause: “Do you know anything about Orvieto?”

I admitted I did not.

“Poznan?” he asked.

I'd heard it was nicer than it used to be.

“Hmm.”

He thought for a moment, pulling at the cuff of his shirt so that it emerged from inside his blazer sleeve. He looked at the departures screen.

“Quite a wait you've got. Don't think I'll bother with Riga this time. But tell me, if you could swap your flight for any one of them leaving this morning, which one would you choose?”

I suppose we have all played a similar game while waiting for a flight. I scanned the names of the outgoing destinations, a shopping list of cities across Europe and North Africa with one or two from the Middle East and Central Asia. I knew well the orange-lined avenues of Seville, the cobblestones of Tallinn and the scrubby hills that hemmed Nice in on the shore of the Mediterranean. I had walked past the white Plecnik-designed

columns of Ljubljana. Other places I had never visited but seemed familiar from film and books: Istanbul, Naples, Warsaw.

Dublin. Though I had been there briefly on a couple of occasions I had never got to grip with the place. Dublin felt like someone you meet at parties once or twice and who you feel sure should be a good friend if only you could spend more time with them. But then I noticed another destination on the departures board.

"Malta," I said.

"Malta?" the man at my table repeated. I waited for him to ask me why I had chosen Malta. In truth I had no idea why I had done so. "Malta, Malta, Malta," he carried on and started rummaging in the cabin bag which he pulled from beneath his seat.

"It's in here somewhere," he continued with enthusiasm," pulling a sheaf of printed papers from the bag and leafing through them quickly one at a time.

"Malta, Malta, Malta... here we are!" he said with satisfaction, waving one of the papers above the table top. It was one of the boarding passes you print yourself to fly on a budget airline.

My curious companion looked up again at the departures screen and a sudden expression of comic panic seized his features.

"Whoops! Boarding already! Better get a move on!" he laughed, grabbing his bag, extending its handle and standing up.

"Just like a camel, nam, nam, nam!" he said by way of farewell with a nod of the head towards the man on the next table who was swallowing his final piece of sausage. Without another word, he scurried off, the wheels of his cabin bag squeaking until long after he had disappeared into the endless procession of travellers.

On the table remained his sheaf of papers. I picked them up. As I had half suspected, they too were self-printed travel tickets. There was one for Orvieto, another for Ljubljana, others for Seville, Warsaw, Dublin, Istanbul and yes, even one for my delayed flight to Riga, plus a dozen more besides. In fact, I realised, the pile of papers contained a ticket for every single flight displayed on that morning's departure screen which winked through its routine of Gate Opening, Boarding, Gate Closed and Delayed. He had a ticket for every departure.

"Final call for the flight to Valletta," the loudspeakers said. I imagined him hurrying along the featureless corridors to the departure gate, leaping aboard the plane, waving his ticket and his passport at anyone who thought they were important and collapsing into a seat next to some other unsuspecting traveller. At some point in the next couple of hours, over

the south of France or central Italy or the Mediterranean itself he might turn to them with a copy of the in-flight magazine in hand and ask: "If you could fly to any of these places, which one would you choose?"

Of course the unused tickets left on the table bore his name, which also gave a fair clue as to his nationality. It would be indiscreet to reveal either, but despite the enormous waste of money his printed boarding passes represented, I found it curiously satisfying that this strange individual had single-handedly saved the world of aviation from becoming too predictable, too restrictive and too devoid of adventure. His was not the glamour of fur coats and champagne but there was something immensely likeable about such meticulous insanity.

The camel to my left grunted and trudged off towards his flight. The computer programmers rose as one on my right, checked three times that they had not left anything behind and walked in a line in the opposite direction. They looked a bit like a camel train crossing the desert sands.

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