

Dear Chess Club,

This is an open letter, of sorts, in response to our captain Emer's query as to whether I had a good time in the Philippines. It contains little mention of chess, and is therefore probably not something that the members of the club will care about in the slightest. Fortunately, I can counter this apathy by not caring in the slightest what the club cares about and proceed with my rambling unabated. I suppose that I am sharing this with you all to let you know that I've missed you, that I am extremely glad to be back in Ireland and am looking forward to seeing you all some Wednesday for a few games, to offer my excuse for the lack of a (decent) email in the past couple of weeks, and perhaps to gloat that our dear captain cares — or at least pretends to — whether I had a good time or not.

So did I have a good time? I had several. They served to punctuate one rather longer and slow not-so-good time. I confess that I may have been somewhat prejudiced against the Philippines after reading up on its hundreds of species of snakes (of which far too many are nastily fatal), its spiders (such as tarantulas and the red-back spider which hides under toilet seats and then kills you), scorpions, poisonous frogs — even the caterpillars and centipedes are poisonous (one third of all recorded human fatalities from centipedes have occurred within the Philippines). In fact, the only fauna which seem to not be venomous or poisonous are the sharks, crocodiles and leeches. And the Philippine bearcat, of course. And then if you like swimming, they also have sea snakes (which you needn't worry about, because if they bite you, you'll be dead within two seconds), moray eels, stingrays, pucks of deadly jellyfish, octopi with a poisonous bite, and cuttlefish, lionfish, sea-shells and coral, all of which can also be lethal if they sting you. And, of course, there's the f***ing mosquito (technical term).

Then there were the necessary injections and thirty-odd hours of flying, the potatoeless food, the heat, the reported rampant corruption and scamming, and the deep suspicion that this list could grow substantially when I actually arrived in the country. Why on earth did I go, you might ask? Ongoing temporary insanity. And my better half wanted to go. She said she planned to enjoy my company. Her unfailing optimism is a constant source of amazement to me.

Anyway, I went, and tried to put my misgivings aside as we were hailed by a taxi driver outside Cebu airport — in the Philippines you are hailed by passing taxis rather than the other way around; they slow down and beep and yell at you as you walk along the footpath — and he drove us to the hotel we had booked online. Traffic in the Philippines is crazy; drivers communicating in a Morse code-like language of horn soundings and curses, children driving motorcycles, jeepneys (a hotrod form of public transport not entirely unlike the hybrid offspring of a jeep and a minibus and an alligator) flying past crammed to capacity and beyond with people hanging out of the back door or flattened against the roof, and pedestrians everywhere taking their lives by the hands and dragging them at a sprint across four to six lanes of traffic. The streets were lined with half-hearted construction sites and degenerate-looking children who seemed to have no homes to go to. It reminded me of our dear alma mater. And then there were the reassuring ads on the radio about where we could buy the best ammunition and guns "...for business or pleasure, for hunting, to keep your family safe, to avail of generous tax breaks...". We arrived at our supposed destination in due course, paid the driver, and hopped out. There was no sign of any hotel. Fortunately, the driver, who had hung around presumably to wrangle some more cash from us, also hopped out and was very surprised that this was not what we were looking for. He banged on a wall of some description and a uniformed gentleman appeared from the other side, exchanged a few quick words with the driver, and then informed us that our hotel, ironically named "Kuku's Nest", was gone. Needless to say, we were a little surprised, as seemed our driver, so the security guard instructed our driver to take us a little further south. Reluctantly we got into the cab again, I full sure that we were to be taken off and robbed and beaten to death in this s***hole (my misgivings had somehow resurfaced). I should point out at this juncture, as you seem to be a little fearful for our safety and I wouldn't want to upset you, that we survived. In fact, after the driver had stopped to ask various pedestrians for directions and received responses varying from instructions to go back the way we had come to instructions to go to the far side of the island, we finally found out that the hotel had closed for renovations and relocated to the other side of the island in the interim. That they had failed to mention this on their website was probably done less out of malice or avarice than incompetence or inefficiency.

(Filipinos are, in my largely uninformed opinion, remarkably inefficient. Half an hour to get through a queue of three people at the airport check-in desk, a solid hour to get to the top of the queue at the kiosk to buy ferry tickets (we were fourth in line when we joined the queue), a full ten minutes waiting at the express

checkout in the supermarket behind a woman with one basket of groceries, and it took three of the seven people at the baked goods counter to sell me a baguette. Incidentally, the baguette cost the equivalent of 7 cent. Crazy and, also incidentally, one fiftieth of the price of the small piece of Gouda we purchased to make our cheese sandwiches with.)

In any case, we abandoned Lonely Planet's recommendation and asked our seemingly heretofore maligned taxi driver to take us to an alternative hotel, which he promptly did. This place was the "Golden Prince" and staying there is highly recommended if you ever travel to Cebu, which is not. There we were at 4 in the morning and the lovely receptionist informed us that they had no rooms available and that check-out wasn't until noon the following day, but that there was a couple leaving soon, and if we were prepared to wait an hour, we could then have that room for the succeeding thirty-one hours for the price of one night's stay, which we were of course delighted to accept. One would be hard-pressed to find such accommodating folk, pun intended, in Ireland.

It occurs to me that this is descending into a step-by-step account of our doings, and as this is not a Maeve Binchy, nor indeed D. H. Lawrence novel that I am trying to write, I shall synopsise our thirty-one hours in the hotel by saying the room was very lovely and we rested well.

After we checked out of the hotel we wandered around the enormous local shopping centre for a while and purchased a couple of long-sleeved shirts for protection against the mosquitoes, as I was wearing jeans, walking boots and a jacket and was, understandably, uncomfortably warm. Then we got a taxi to the port for our ferry to the island of Siquijor. Now, I know you'll think I just have some sort of phobia of taxis, but the driver of this one looked just like a leaner, meaner Danny Trejo, and I reckon that was at least partially responsible for us leaving the bag with our lovely new shirts behind as we legged it out of the taxi. We dealt with this tragic loss admirably though and proceeded to join the aforementioned queue for the ferry. After we had been queueing stationarily for about half an hour, I felt a heavy hand land on my shoulder and spin me around. It was the taxi driver, with the bag of shirts. After ascertaining that the warm feeling that had begun to spread was indeed in my tummy and I had not, in fact, micturated myself in fright, I thanked 'Danny' profusely and pressed a couple of notes into his hand despite his protests. I later worked out that they were worth a total of 8 cent, but I felt that 'Danny' had earned it. Plus I am now the proud owner of one of those stupid striped shirts peculiar to our local nightclub's male clientele and their ilk.

Anyway, we finally made it to the top of that queue and onto the ferry. Now, I like boats, but that was a long five hours. It didn't help that they showed "Twilight" to keep us entertained. (For the impatient reader, they also showed it on the return journey.)

But we made it to Siquijor in the end. It was the middle of the night at this stage, and the resort owner who had agreed to pick us up wasn't there. So instead we had to take a "tuk-tuk", which is a motorbike to which a sort of metal basket with one wheel for balance has been affixed. It was very much like being driven in a shopping trolley. It even veered to one side all the time, since the weight was very unevenly distributed. After a half-hour trip on this thing, through the middle of a veritable jungle, I was beginning to miss taxis. There is something oddly comforting about not having to hang on to one's mode of transport for fear of being jolted out onto the road. It was like a really, really long roller-coaster ride. Except the animals staring in at you from the side weren't creepy smiling Disney characters, they were bad-ass goats and tortoises just willing you to fall off so that they could pounce on you. Anyway, we finally made it to our accommodation, dehydrated, starving, and all we wanted was to collapse into bed. Even the fact that our hostess had to check the ground with a torch for snakes did not concern us unduly. Duly, perhaps, granted. But first we had to put up our mosquito net, as there were a couple of the little b*****s knocking around. The net we had was one of those that hangs from the ceiling, but there was nothing to hang it from, so we ended up building a sort of fort comprising one curtain rail, one chair, two rucksacks, two pillows, one table, two towels, three books, and a sandal. Under normal circumstances I'm sure it would have seemed rather kinky, but in reality it was just really, really trying. So anyway, we crawled in under the net, trying not to bring the structure crashing down on top of ourselves, only to then find that there was no gap between the net and our skin, which was, of course, useless. We didn't even want to use the bedsheets for some extra protection because there were little buggy things on them.

So there we were, wondering what to do to prop up the net a little further, when out of the corner of my eye I spotted a spider making its way down the wall toward us. Now, normally I don't have a problem with spiders unless they might be venomous, but this guy was big and hairy, with an eight-inch leg span. Needless to say, the better half and I were out from under the net in two shakes of a lamb's tail and 'twas

only by some miracle that the entire “fort” didn’t collapse. We deliberated for a bit as to whether we ought to ignore the spider or kill it or try to catch it and put it outside. The first option was quickly dispensed with for obvious reasons. Then we decided it would be inhumane to kill it, as it was clearly old and had lasted a long time. Then we had nothing to catch it in. The better half fashioned some sort of elaborate trap using an empty water bottle and made to catch the spider in it, but it fled like greased lightning just before the trap hit the wall where it had been standing a nanosecond before. So we dispensed with the humane option too, and decided to kill it. This led to a half hour of us alternately spraying it with bug-spray, failing to wallop it with a refill pad, it zooming under the bed or into some dark corner, and us running away to the far side of the room. To the animal rights brigade amongst you, I can assure you that the spider was completely unharmed during the making of this email, and also that you would have discarded your righteous indignation and done exactly the same thing in our situation, so shut the hell up. Throughout all of this the spider just got angrier and scarier. Finally during one of its charges across the wall I managed to whack it with the refill pad, whereupon it bounced (as a result of Newton’s Third Law of Motion as opposed to of its own volition, I would hope) straight over to another wall, where it kept running, as though nothing at all had happened, and ran up into a corner behind some curtainy thing. At this, we gave up and pretended that we were confident that it wouldn’t trouble us again and that we were being humane and not going to kill it after all, but we also agreed to find alternative accommodation the following day.

Anyway. We survived the night, more or less, and packed our bags the following morning. In the light of day the place seemed lovely — there were beaches, and according to a tourist brochure, an enormous cave that took ninety minutes to walk through, culminating in a refreshing drop into some clear sparkling pool, and one half regretted one’s decision to leave, but in all fairness; half the counties in Ireland have beaches, Antrim, Clare, Donegal, Kerry, Kilkenny, Fermanagh, and Sligo all have big explorable caves, and f*****d if I was going to dive into a pool in the middle of a jungle, lovely and all as the idea might sound in principle. Before we left, we ate lunch there, and I don’t know that I have ever enjoyed a meal more. Some Spanish dish with rice, beef, carrots, banana, even some spud. And half a litre of Sprite to wash it down with. *Is maith an t-anlann an t-ocras*, I suppose, but, with all due respect to the better half, eating that meal was probably my favourite part of the whole trip. Unless one counts making it back from the Philippines intact as part of the trip. Sated, we left and walked to the nearest village, which seemed simply to be a spot where the huts lining the road were less spaced out, so we could hitch a ride with another tuk-tuk. As we walked, little children would run out from behind trees and wave and shout “Hello!” at us as we passed, but we found that if we waved or said “Hello” first, we were greeted with merely scowls and indifference.

Anyway, we got a “special ride” on the tuk-tuk, which meant that the driver did not stop and pick up the other three guys with the flock of hens who wanted to hang out of the side of the vehicle. Well worth the 50pesos (1 euro) extra. The countryside, I suppose one could call it, didn’t look a whole lot less bleak during the daytime — just huts scattered along the road, each with a little window of items for sale, ranging from out of date soft drinks to dried meat to lots of other, completely unidentifiable stuff.

So we made it to the port, or more accurately the quay, I suppose, where the folk at the ferry ticket office informed us, after we had inevitably queued for a while — well, queued isn’t the right word, as we were the only ones there and were simply waiting for the clerk to emerge from the back of the office — that it would be no problem if we wanted to change the date of our return ticket to the following day. Would that have happened in Ireland? Not likely. So then we set off to find alternative accommodation for that night, bearing in mind it had to be close by as we had to be back at the port at 5:15 (AM!) to catch the boat out. In the end, not having much choice, granted, we opted for Lonely Planet’s recommendation, “Das Traum”, which was a bit of a misnomer. More like “Das Albtraum”. Actually — while I think of it — f*** you, Lonely Planet. Later, after we’d booked the room and left our stuff in, we spotted a sign advertising Das Traum as “the most affordable accommodation on Siquijor.” Hindsight, eh? For 14e we got an en suite room with a double bed and a television and airconditioning, so obviously it was shit, but it was only a fifteen minute walk to the port, and that was the most important thing. Given that we had to get up ridiculously early, we decided to have an early night, and then proceeded to spend the next couple of hours killing mosquitoes. Fortunately, the double bed in this room was actually two single beds pushed together, which meant that we could stand up one of the curtain poles to make a proper mosquito net tent, though we couldn’t use the bed linen there either, owing to more little buggy things and bloodstains on the sheets.

As an aside — if you’ve managed to read this far — this evening’s venue for our chess meeting has changed to Java’s cafe on Lower Abbeygate Street.

Eventually I got to sleep for a couple of hours before waking up shortly after midnight with the horrid realisation that if we had to be at the quay at 5:15, our 15 minute walk through the jungle would be in complete darkness, or as near to it as made no difference. I was then completely unable to go back to sleep. Siquijor has a zero percent crime rate, allegedly, but there were always the aforementioned gazillion creatures that can kill you to be concerned about, and coconuts that could drop onto your head out of the trees like little round ninjas. And do you know what is big and green and has eight legs and could kill you instantly if it dropped onto you from out of an overhanging coconut tree? A snooker table. The more I thought about it, the more likely it seemed that we wouldn't make it alive. I sent my dad a text sending my love to all the family. I also contemplated texting Emer to confess my secret infatuation with her, but decided against it in the end, for scared though I was of being eaten whole or in part by some zoological gathering, I did not want to risk anything that might somehow negatively impact upon our beloved chess club.

There was also the small matter of the Sigbin — a creature which is said to venture forth from its lair during Holy Week to kill children to make amulets from their hearts — but this was the week before we arrived, so all we had to worry about was it “coming out at night to suck the blood of victims from their shadows”. Now, personally, I see an error in judgment there — if I wanted to find shadows I would go out during the day. According to Wikipedia, the Sigbin “is said to walk backwards with its head lowered between its hind legs, and to have the ability to become invisible to other creatures, especially humans. It resembles a hornless goat, but has very large ears which it can clap like a pair of hands and a long, flexible tail that can be used as a whip. The Sigbin is said to emit a nauseating odor.” Sure, it may sound laughable now. Screw you. As the time drew nearer to 5 (and it was inexorably f***ing slow, let me tell you) I kept peeking out the window to see if there were any sign of the dawn, but no dice. Finally, the better half woke up and we decided that if we didn't go for it, then we would have to spend another night in Siquijor and that wasn't really an appealing option. So we went for it. And it was bright enough to see, and we made it to the boat unscathed which is a bit anti-climatic for you guys, but it meant I didn't need to change my pants, which was nice.

The final impression that Siquijor left on me was when, half an hour after the boat left the quay, we passed a dozen guys out in little one-man canoes, who were obviously fishing, and had evidently been there for some time. I felt that here was the point where I was supposed to experience my epiphany on travel, now safely unencumbered by fear, and having already donned my rose-tinted spectacles, but no epiphany was forthcoming.

So we got back to Cebu in the end and stayed in our lovely air-conditioned room, with our nice clean double bed, and a proper loo and shower and no mosquitoes or giant spiders, with a WiFi cafe beside the hotel, and an enormous and cheap supermarket two minutes' walk away, and a lovely bar and restaurant just across the road, and a couple of bookshops and a music shop all within five minutes of the hotel. We even went to the cinema one of the days and saw “Thor”, which was exactly as mediocre as one would expect. And yes, the hotel in Cebu might have been four or five times the price of the places in Siquijor, but we stayed there happily ever after, at least until the end of the trip. And then I was really glad to get back to Ireland, and the cold and the rain. That wore off after a couple of days, granted, but there was definitely a newly found appreciation there. Similarly, I am expecting that my joy at the prospect of seeing all you wonderful people will wear off soon, so if you want to catch me in a somewhat affable state, I would suggest that you come to a chess meeting fairly soon, before I am, once again, driven to the conclusion that you are a useless shower of so and so's.

Puno ng Pagmamahal,

Fintan