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# OPINION

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## IMPRESSIONS OF A LITTLE MIRACLE

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**G**EOPGRAPHICALLY and climatically the Canary Islands are an extension of Africa. Historically, however, because they are Spanish, they are an extension of Europe. Like Israel is a dose of the West in the Middle East, the Canary Islands are a dose of the West in sub-tropical Africa, and this makes an enormous amount of difference to all sorts of things. Indeed, so great is the difference that, after spending three weeks there, I thought I would have nothing to write about because nothing had struck me as special, picturesque or different until I realised with a shock that what was in fact worth writing about is that, in that holiday-makers' paradise which enjoys twelve sunny tourist months a year because of its perfect climate, one does not get a cultural shock.

The population of Gran Canaria, the island where we stayed, is half a million. Last year it had one and a half million tourists. Fifteen years ago Gran Canaria was a quiet peaceful, not very prosperous island. It had three assets: its refuelling port of Las Palmas, its banana crop which had a protected market in Spain, and its winter tomato crop mainly sold in Britain, which likes the extra sweetness the Canaries' brackish water produces.

The tourist explosion, which is the result of people's fairly recent passion for sun-sand-and-sea holidays and of the charter plane package, has hit Gran Canaria with a vengeance. Everywhere buildings have sprouted or are in the process of sprouting, not all of them, alas, pleasing to the eye. The concentration of tourist accommodation: be it hotels, apart-hotels (buildings which consist of service studio rooms with cooking facilities, reception and common rooms), blocks of apartments to let, colonies of bungalows and studios, is formidable. The island is small, tourists want to be along the seaside where there are beaches, and there are one and a half million of them to cater for, not only with accommodation but also with countless self-service stores operating under the pompous title of supermarkets, restaurants, gift shops, fashion boutiques, ethnic curio shops from everywhere, as well as the 'Konditoreis' which lash out cream cakes to German and Scandinavian palates, and the Sindhi shops selling all the silicon chip technology from Japan at duty free prices which have to be haggled down. By special privilege dating from the 1850s, the Canaries are duty free so that they offer an added attraction to tourists who return sunburnt and loaded with hi-fis,

cassettes, radios, cameras and watches which they hope will not attract the attention of Customs Officials back home.

In one sense Gran Canaria is not very different from, shall we say, the Costa Brava or Majorca. It boasts a fairly nondescript and at times pretentious architecture. It is plagued by poor quality of execution, poor maintenance and an indifferent cooking stamped by a notable lack of variety. However, it is in the sub-tropics not in Europe. Coconuts do not grow in the Canaries, but mangoes do, avocado pears, papayas and passion fruit do, and so do tropical flowers. The climate, which tends to be fairly homogeneous, is not very different from that of Bombay in March.

The curious thing is that, nevertheless, one does not get the feeling of being outside Europe. This is because the local inhabitants who man the shops are no different, in look, dress or behaviour from the tourists. The only difference is that their mother tongue is Spanish, a difference which is minimised by the fact that all those in contact with tourists speak German, English and sometimes French or Dutch, sometimes surprisingly fluently. This is true for waiters, shop assistants, bus conductors, and taxi drivers alike.

The Sindhis look different, but Indians are now a familiar sight in London, a part of the local scene; seeing them in Playa del Ingles does not make it feel exotic. Sindhis have been in the Canaries for a very long time, long before the tourist boom. They came in the wake of shipping and must originally have been traders in a variety of commodities. Now they have latched on to the tourist boom with the kind of initiative and determination the natives of the Canaries appear to be lacking. The sale of modern technology and much of the jewellery trade are firmly in Sindhi hands, as neon signs with names ending in 'ani' proclaim in all the shopping centres.

One interesting aspect of the tourist explosion in Gran Canaria, an aspect which helps to make the explosion positively palatable to the natives is that many of them have at least one tourist studio apartment or bungalow which they let for ten months of the year thus providing their owner with a summer holiday for the remaining two months when the Gran Canaria is somewhat less crowded as Westerners do not have to go quite that far in search of the sun. Investing in tourism has been so firmly established that it is not uncommon for locals to own a number of flats in an apart-hotel or a block of service flats and to reserve one of them for personal use while the others bring in an income. Moreover, tourism provides a great deal of employment for those not rich enough to own tourist accommodation.

Because the Canaries are islands, and because it is usual for metropolitan ex-colonial powers to nurse soft spots for islands, there are many tax advantages, besides being duty free, in the Canaries. This is reflected, for instance, by the low cost of petrol which accounts for the vast number of cars. Even car hire is cheap and there are many car hire firms.

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The beaches are long, sandy, profusely equipped with beach chairs and sunshades, cafés and restaurants. Considering the fact that this, after all, is part of Spain it is extraordinary that toplessness has become an accepted feature of beach and swimming-pool life. All the hotels, blocks of flats and colonies of bungalows have swimming-pools and toplessness is as prevalent there, even in the middle of town, as on the beach. Indeed, at the end of the island's main beach, between it and the next, there is a stretch reserved for naturists. But since toplessness is already an accepted fact and since there even are a few G-strings to be seen, people who pace the beach back and forth stride along the naturists in varying degrees of swimdress apparently unaware of, certainly unconcerned by, the nudity of other sunbathers. Nor is the demarcation rigid. Indeed the boundary is so blurred that it is impossible to tell, by looking at patrons, where naturism begins or ends. People do what they like and nobody minds. This, for a country which is ardently Roman Catholic and which, until not so long ago, believed in a purdah-like seclusion for its daughters, is an extraordinary change.

The tourist boom has of course brought problems, the greatest of all being water. The islands are volcanic and, with the exception of Tenerife, have hardly any sub-soil water. Most of the water they have comes from rain in the high mountains of the centre of the islands. It was enough for agriculture and the population in the past. It is no longer enough. Indeed, water is now the key concern for everybody in the islands. In the Gran Canaria there are two desalination plants extracting fresh water from the sea and many tube wells. Water, as in certain parts of India, is owned by people who sell it for the purpose of cultivation. In the Gran Canaria water is sold by the cubic metre not, as in India, by the 'clock'. There are three rates for water. One rate is for very brackish water, which is extracted from the sub-soil by tube wells; it has anything up to 10 grams of salts per litre and is fit only for the cultivation of tomatoes and the bathrooms of tourists. There is another rate double the first for the filtered water which is used for the production of cucumbers, bananas, fruits and flowers, and a third rate, half that of beer, for water sold in plastic containers fit to drink and cook with. Obviously, the expansion of tourism has to go hand in hand with that of the water supply, and the government is wasting no time in making sure that there are no time lags. There is even a concerted attempt by the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture to divert land from bananas to other sub-tropical fruits because bananas are frightfully thirsty. To grow one kilo of bananas one needs 450 kilos of water, whereas pineapples only require a three minute spraying every third day.

Agriculture in the Canaries is extremely impressive because it is done in a wonderfully cost efficient way, a way which has been evolved over a long time with the same sort of rigour as in Israel. Nothing is left to chance, everything is costed and recosted and the producers are organised to keep a hawk's eye on prices in recipient markets. If

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demand sags they reduce exports to keep prices up. For example, around Christmas the firm which supplies Marks & Spencer in the UK with its winter tomatoes was, like all the other tomato exporters, destroying a quarter of the crop because the demand for tomatoes in Europe had become sluggish as a result of the freezing winter. The industry is efficient. It was most impressive to watch tomatoes being packaged, weighed, labelled and priced, ready for the Marks and Spencer shelves before being despatched to England by air.

Crops are grown most scientifically, there is even a sizable experiment in hydroponics for, amongst other things, bananas. The justification for the hydroponic experimental centre which is financed by a large Savings Bank is that the top-soil in Gran Canaria, and indeed more so in the island of Lanzarote, is porous, made of volcanic foam, it is like a rigid sponge without any nutrients, very similar in fact to the cotton wool used by children playing at germinating pulses. Soil with its nutrients exist below that porous volcanic crust, but at varying depths. Therefore, hydroponics have a lot to offer to farmers, especially in a country where it hardly ever rains and where water is almost worth its weight in gold. By optimising the balance of proteins and minerals, agriculturalists can save a great deal of expense and control the quality of their products. Because agriculture is an industry with such advanced techniques as drip irrigation, spray irrigation and rigorous pollination control, the landscape where it has not been marred by tourism looks almost like a large factory and its yard. This does not disturb tourists who come for the beaches and are content with a quick drive up into high mountains which look sprung from the brush of Le Douanier Rousseau. However, such intensive agriculture does disfigure. The countryside is covered in plastic sheeting to protect cucumbers and early tomatoes or parcelled out into little squares to shelter the dwarf banana trees.

Developing countries with tourist potential and possible markets for the produce of sub-tropical agriculture might learn a great deal from studying what has been achieved in the Canary Islands.

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