

I love Benidorm

www.lademiddel.com

studio@lademiddel.com

The curtain rises and a city with an electrocardiogram profile appears imposingly in the background. A pink-clad retiree bursts onto the scene dragging a wheeled suitcase, followed by another, and another, and another, until the stage is filled and they have to dodge each other as they wander around on their wheels. A couple of widows wearing dark glasses sit on a bench in the background and begin to chat about this and that, while a whole family carries towels and beach buckets, straining their ears to reach the coast by following the sound of the waves. Then, a small plane flies across the cloudless sky dotted with skyscrapers, pulling an elongated flag that clearly reads "I Love Benidorm" (the "Love" implied by the shape of a red heart).

We are on Spain's eastern coast, in the cradle of tourism that no longer needs a helping hand, because it has grown up and can now walk on its own. In fact, it came of age some time ago: we are in Benidorm, a perfectly oiled leisure machine.

Like someone who designed an imaginary city from scratch or someone who commissioned their dream home from the most daring architect, Benidorm has made itself by responding to almost every demand of the entire range of climate tourists, regardless of age. It is a strategically located wetland that meets the needs of those who travel in search of eternal sunshine and cool sea breezes, and today it has become a product that is so eccentric that it is hard to believe itself but is sold and bought with blind confidence, which is saying a lot in these times.

An explosion of saturated colors guides tourists from one offer to another, serving them up the surefire recipe for a well-deserved vacation in which they can almost forget the plains of La Mancha, the traffic jams on the M30, or the leaden gray skies of Cardiff. The fact is that Benidorm's leisure and entertainment options are endless, and it has shown amazing inventiveness in continuing to offer its loyal clientele new destinations and new adventures season after season.

To the north, a medieval tournament where you eat chicken with your hands; to the mountains, a legendary theme park; on the beach, giant inflatable bananas that travel along the coast; and everywhere, 24 hours of live music if you walk from terrace to terrace. Patron saint festivals, Moors and Christians, bonfires, and maybe in a few years, bull runs with red scarves tied around your neck... who knows? A good Miura bull running through the West End would not look out of place in Benidorm because nothing ever has there, and that's fine. We would just have to find room in a calendar where every day should be marked in red.

Benidorm functions, breathes, and grows healthily even though it feeds almost exclusively on coconut oil and instant paella. Its beaches withstand the onslaught of tens of thousands of towels that cover them in waves under a proud blue flag, and its people, those descendants of fishermen who were tempted by the first tour operators, continue to invent successful formulas of picaresque alchemy that transform a choped sandwich with sea views into a retirement plan and a legacy for future generations of former fishermen now buried twice under the ground and foundations.

The coherence of a city that might seem decadent is based on the first rule of supply and demand: Benidorm offers what is asked of it, with no limits on noise, land, or time. It is a constantly evolving Panic Opera in which everything fits. Trained sea lions coexist with black leather bikers and retired legionnaires, young people dressed up in red-light district costumes with devout women seeking the shade of a palm tree to play julepe, Swedish sand sculptors with Harrod's cashiers ready to gamble everything on a number, and so on to infinity without anyone batting an eyelid.

There had to be a place like this, just to show what we are capable of when it comes to fun and to continue exploring the complex nature of human beings who, when they relax, are at their most conciliatory. In what other setting could such different species coexist without friction? With the problem that Babel faced in its day solved thanks to multilingual menus, there are few obstacles visible from the top floor of the Bali Hotel to prevent the city from continuing to boil and spewing surprising bursts for years to come as it moves toward consolidation as a classic. It is unlikely that a generation will come along whose refinement is willing to sacrifice such a complete and elaborate work that has found in popular tastes a circular runway that forces the ship to accelerate continuously.

This work without acts, this free-rhyme sequence shot, has no defined protagonists because the weight is on the changing and overwhelming scenery that reduces the actors to mere observers who react predictably in response to its thousand stimuli.

Seen from the outside, Benidorm forces you to frown, and seen from the inside, it almost disappears, in the same way that the audience reacts when the play jumps into the stalls, with the vertigo of being part of something that is slipping through your fingers. Because Benidorm is its towers that scrape the sky, breaking the necks of curious onlookers, and its sequins that flash like fists at night, but it is also the people who inhabit it for fortnights and show it off in low-cut tops in Poniente and Levante. In a world where Belén Esteban and Isabel Preysler share the glossy pages, why should we stop to judge a city as self-sufficient in its eccentricity as Benidorm? It is not questionable, just as Parcheesi is not, however colorful and simple it may seem. Those who want to play, play, and those who don't sit and frown from the box seats while waiting in vain for the curtain to close.

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