Return Journey

BY **ALEC APPELBAUM**

Harry Eyres is a contrarian among *Financial Times* columnists. Every weekend, he reminds his readers to stop checking RSS feeds and savor what used to be known as leisure time.

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Eyres's notions of how to spend leisure time are at odds with the jet-set column, "Fast Lane," with which he shares the page. He's more likely to suggest having a look at a Gauguin than flying off to Tahiti. Or skip the city break to Montserrat and head for the local swimming pool. It's not because they're cheap, but rather because things like these have nourished humanity for millennia. Leisure, in his view, is pretty simple. It's usually close at hand, it's often free or close to it, and—crucially—it can make us happy. We caught up with Harry Eyres in London, where he lives when he's not traveling.

If the allures of the fast life are off the table, what's left for us to do with our leisure time?

Harry Eyres: Remember that there are three traditions of leisure. The first considers holidays as holy days—the church gave people license, and that led to carnivals and festivals. Carnival in the Catholic countries is a licensed misrule. It makes fun of the established authorities, and it's the only time you're allowed to do that.

The second tradition is mass leisure, which arose in response to industrial reality. Workers, probably through trade unions, demanded paid holidays, and they really had to fight for them. The Bank Holiday Act passed in 1871 in the U.K. I see this more as a secular tradition of leisure. It is more individualistic: people have been working damn hard, they feel they deserve a bit of time off, they feel they can go fishing or go to the park or go swimming. And public swimming pools start being built in the late 19th century. Seaside holidays, which were the kinds of things that only the more leisurely classes used to do, now took on a democratic format.

And the third tradition, older than the others, is Aristotelian: that leisure is superior to work and available only to upper classes. So the idea of leisure as doing nothing at all has never been compelling for most people. They get bored. Leisure means being active, and you can extend that to being spiritually and intellectually active as well.

Some have wondered if the days of cheap flights and packaged tours are over. Are they?

HE: The "sun, sea, and sand" holidays that became popular in the 1960s may be coming to an end, but I'm not happy with the idea that we abandon mass leisure. It represented an important democratic advance, but we have to rethink it in a sustainable way. We may need to go back to earlier forms—encouraging a more local approach. The lidos, the big outdoor pools we built in the 1920s, went out of fashion because people in the U.K. started going to Spanish resorts with highrise blocks. I've been involved in saving the ones that are threatened—we are still closing them down in this country, which is crazy. We've neglected the local in many ways. We can rediscover a lot of enjoyment there, and this will improve our locality. There's still the idea of going to a Greek island or something for two weeks. I just think we can't do it as much as we've been doing. The nature of work plays into this. If people feel their work is meaningless, they have a desire for a complete escape. When work is meaningful, people tend to appreciate where they are. There's less pressure to go off somewhere they can't afford.

If we're serious about global warming, we need to shift to more sustainable ways of running our economy. That shift could lead to things that have been rather forgotten. When people see how they enjoy more civility in our cities, social changes will occur—even if oil prices come down.

Cost and eco-conscience aside, how does local leisure compete with a beach in Greece?

HE: Communities should claw back some of the public space that has become commercialized. It's a difficult area because we've had a long period where privatization has been in vogue and we need to restore some balance. Without communal outdoor settings, people retreat into private realms. That leads to loneliness and a lot of desperate reaching out on so-called social networks that can't substitute for seeing people. The amount of time and space that cities give to let children roam around has been greatly reduced, as people are more afraid of strangers.

This is really a question of city governance, and who drives that. I'd make a distinction between democratic leisure and mass leisure. I'm not an advocate of everyone converging on the same place to do the same sorts of things. In public spaces, people can go read a book on a bench or take part in other activities. This kind of leisure doesn't require a private income—there are lots of things you can do that don't cost anything. You can go to the swimming pool, the park, or the waterfront and meet people. It's definitely happening quite widely in Europe.

So there's a chance to go back to the great days of cities. Take museums. A place like the Tate Modern has been an enormous success in part because it's a welcoming space and people go there to be in an environment that is communal rather than commercial. More broadly, there's a movement to restore the sense of piazza in public space. When they are well planned, public spaces can be inspiring. They have a generosity that you don't find in private enclaves.

As communal leisure gains ground, do you foresee changes on the commercial end?

HE: I'm not saying that people shouldn't shop, but there should be something else. One idea I've had is to develop "thought malls" that are infused with learning and culture—places where you can drop in and watch something about Derrida. It could happen electronically. Airports show how this could happen. San Francisco's has a meditation room, which I think is wonderful.

Harry Eyres writes the "Slow Lane" column in the weekend edition of the *Financial Times*.

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