

Sun, sea and sour grapes

Are you and the kids looking forward to your summer holiday? **Simon Hattenstone** is – kind of. Here, he explains why this annual ritual brings him out in a cold sweat

Get away from it all, have a break, recharge the batteries. Dream on, suckers. Holidays are about misery, despair, being scared witless, falling out with friends, falling out of love, separation, counselling, crisis. Holidays are about taking away the kids for a fetid fortnight of the soul. We're talking deep underbellies and psychic displacement.

I admit I've always had my negative side, but holidays give me the existential wobbles. I look at a holiday brochure and, without wishing to come over all Proustian, I think of loss.

The family holiday airlifts us out of reality and splat-drops us in on the unknown. And do we like the unknown? Do we rise to the challenge, strap on our adventure boots and stride purposely on to the great plains of experience? Do we buggery. We hate it. And so do the kids.

In normal life, we just about cope by swaddling ourselves in everyday securities – Countdown, Jaffa Cakes, the gym, our bed. Some of us even manage to keep relationships going by allowing ourselves sufficient physical and emotional space. On holiday we do away with all that. We strip ourselves of our protective layers, expose ourselves to the elements and burn in a claustrophobic hell.

I've associated holidays with horror ever since I was five and got lost on an Italian beach. More of a desert than a beach actually. Mile after mile

of it. I had gone off for an ice cream, and couldn't find my way back. I walked forever in a straight line until I was soaked in exhaustion and sick with panic. The beach began to empty, and I was left, tiny and terrified and too proud to tell the few remaining stragglers that I was lost. After the panic came resignation, which was even worse because I'd given up. Eventually a policeman scooped me up off the sand, put me on the back of his bike and carried me off to my weeping mother.

Then a few years ago at the seaside I took little Maya for a wee in a forbidding, heavily tattooed pub. Alix, who was five and all grown up, decided to wander when we were in the loo. No one in the pub looked me in the face when I asked whether they'd seen her. It was probably only a couple of minutes later that we found her wandering along the pier, but it felt like decades.

You never get lost in your own street back home. This is something my children know too. They hate the unfamiliar. The other week we got a new car. Alix and Maya still say it's horrible, and ask why we can't go in the lovely old car, despite the fact that it doesn't work. They had never shown any affection for the car until it was taken away from them. Maya suggested a compromise – perhaps we could keep the car so she can look at it every day and wave hello.

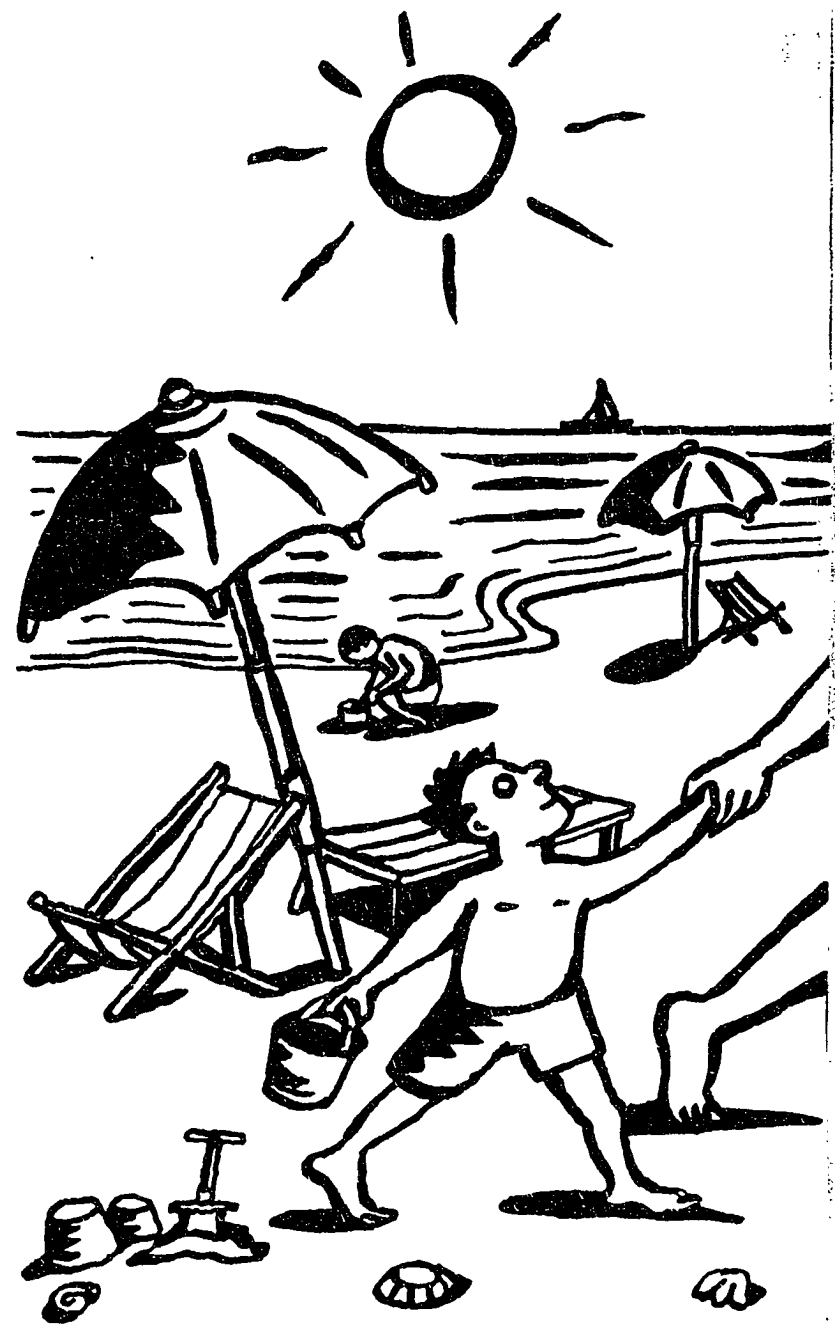
Don't they call it the shock of the new? Same with holidays. When we go away the kids suddenly see home

in a new light. Yes, the beach and the pool and the sea are nice enough, but where's our lovely bedroom and our lovely kitchen and our lovely garden which is too small to play games in, and our lovely hose with which we can drench ourselves and pretend we're on holiday swimming in the pool? From the moment we set off they are mourning the loss of the home that they take for granted for the other 51 weeks of the year.

Fair enough, kids are contrary sods. But even so they are right to be confused about hols. There is something truly bizarre about the notion that you give the children the treat of their lives by removing them from all they love: no TV, no games, no home, no friends... Have a nice trip!

Still, at least the kids make new friends, hey? Yes, for about half an hour. And then they're gone. Every year they manage to fall in love with some sweet little tot as they're packing away the swimming costume for the last time. Half an hour for a week's worth of mourning the loss of a soulmate: the pictures that weren't taken, the disco nights they could have shared, the Agadoo dance routines that oh so nearly were.

Well, there's always the beach for light relief. Sure, it's a little uncomfy with the sand down the pants and the mozzies and the ice cream-stick splinters buried in the sand. But there is the glorious moment when the sandcastle is complete. The grin of pure pleasure, concentrated achievement. Until some vindictive little git kicks it over



or the waves soak it into history. If a holiday teaches children anything, it's that nothing lasts forever, that the world is as cruel as it's transient. "Won't you take me back home...", as Slade sang all those years ago.

Still, the summer is here and Majorca beckons. A compromise: a holiday, but nothing new. Home from home. So safe and familiar that the kids forget they're on holiday and

start to enjoy themselves. Hotel Tucan, Cala D'or, if you're interested. Nice place, familiar feel to it. Pool table by the swimming pool, table tennis by the pool table, Smarties at the bar, straw donkeys at the mini-store next door.

Now let's get one thing straight. This is not an advert for the Hotel Tucan or for Cala D'or. There is nothing exceptional about either hotel or



resort. The hotel looks like every other hotel on the block. The food is great on the first day, quite good the second, and gross for the rest of the week. The pool's wet.

We went to the same hotel last year. The year before that we had a break from our normal break. But the kids were disorientated by Portugal - strange fish, alien sand, no disco. The year before that we had a

week at the Hotel Tucan, Cala D'or. Interesting old life.

Only one difference. We've always taken people away with us. My parents, my partner's parents, my mate Les, who's old enough to be my dad at a pinch. They know they're basically there to look after us, but they don't mind so much because they can pretend they're looking after the grandchildren. Anyway, this year

we're going by ourselves, braving it. Which will be exciting and liberating. Except for the fact that we won't be able to go out at night unless we fancy lugging the kids around with us or going out by ourselves on a rota basis. Sitting alone in a Majorcan pub, not a friend in the land, can't be bad. Still, not to worry. Only two grand for the four of us, and it'll be over soon.