

LOST IN PARADISE

Perfect white beaches, rose petals on every surface and attentive staff. Why does that sound like the holiday from hell, asks **Helen Kirwan-Taylor**

I was lying in a deckchair, the sun on my face, the wind in my hair, the kids happily occupied in the pool, and what was I doing? Texting my friends in the Seychelles. And what were they doing? E-mailing their friends in Mauritius. My South Africa beach holiday friend complained that there were too many people she knew there. My Bahamas buddies were looking for 'action' on other islands. And there I was, wondering how I was going to pass the next ten days in paradise.

I might sound like a brat, but paradise is not all it's cracked up to be, at least not when you get there. If you're tired and ogling the palm trees on the website when you should be Christmas shopping, paradise looks pretty good. But when you get there, it fades almost as quickly as the fake tan. I think perfect makes us anxious because the real fun is the fantasy, not the reality; the striving rather than the getting.

Dave Stewart, formerly half of the Eurythmics, coined the term 'Paradise syndrome' before he checked into a clinic in Bangkok complaining of a mysterious illness. I imagine he was on his way home from an Aman Resort with rose petals still stuck to his trainers. He was rich and happily married. It was all so perfect that he became instantly miserable. 'Paradise syndrome is when your world is going fantastically well and you feel so inspired you think you might be ill,' he said. A Boston psychiatrist referred to Stewart as 'pleasure anorexic', without much sympathy.

The small Caribbean island I visited actually has a sign saying, 'Welcome to Paradise'. The problem is, to create beaches without bugs and lawns on which to play croquet they had to spray the insects to oblivion and railroad the water supply from the locals. But even if conscience or the environment isn't your thing, there's the 'What now?' factor. In our all-time-biggest, blow-the-bank holiday at the Four Seasons Resort in Nevis, I noticed that the masters of the universe were all superglued to their Black-Berrys. A few never bothered changing into their bathing suits. They perused the spa menu with an intensity usually reserved for the Federal Reserve inflation report. Being left to their own thoughts clearly terrified them. 'People resent the fact that the most moral decision in their lives is choosing what colour the next car will be,' JG Ballard once said. 'All we've got left is our own psychopathology. It's the only freedom we have.' For Stewart, things were perfect until he started thinking about them. By constantly moving, we don't feel guilty.

Luxury resorts seem to awaken 'Paradise syndrome' in those of us who never knew it existed. 'I can't help feeling something is rotten in the state of paradise,' wrote Dom Joly after his stay at a luxury resort in Mauritius. Fresh flowers on every surface made him retch rather than rejoice. 'There must be a hidden part of the island that's been stripped bare as petals are almost pathologically sprinkled over everything in sight,' he wrote.

For years, luxury resorts have tried to create

perfect settings – rose petals et al – for their demanding clientele, only to find them sitting in their rooms watching MTV instead of the sunset. Paradise syndrome is now so rampant that 59 per cent of Brits polled want an experiential holiday – that is, something that comes with adventure and, yes, discomfort. Luxury was once the apex of our aspirations, but now (because everyone is doing it) roughing it has become a sort of amenity virtually added to the bill at the end. Paul Stallings, owner of the super-trendy Rivington hotel in New York, is presently building a luxury resort in Panama that promises to make its guests suffer a bit. He says his guests were at their happiest when he first opened the downtown hotel. 'My most loyal guests love to trade stories about broken elevators, erratic heating and room service from across the street,' he says. 'They felt part of something. I think as things get slicker, a lot of people feel this compulsion to get their money's worth by being very demanding.'

By stripping some of the paradise out of his next 'eco' resort, he hopes to avoid the syndrome. "'Rougher" can be linked to making people feel a connection to a place,' he says. 'I like keeping a resort simple, imposing "hardships", either in the name of reality or being green, because that counters most people's quest for their money's worth. I've just returned from a 25-room hotel in Mexico with no electricity, mediocre food – even bad margaritas – but very native Italian owners. Everyone loved the place and instantly bonded with each other. I guess roughness avoids boredom.'

Lars Svendsen, a Norwegian philosopher, thinks it's boredom rather than curiosity that drives us these days. Most of us rush around to avoid boredom at home, only to pay vast amounts to get it on holiday. Then, when we do, we get on our iPhones and spend the holiday complaining about it. My husband compares this to the laws of diminishing returns in economics: the first spoonful of ice cream is the most satisfying and after that it's downhill. I have to agree. Paradise should be the big treat that follows a three-month-no-sleep labour, not the de facto half-term holiday. You know we're going to the dogs when ten-year-olds can recite most of the names in *The Leading Hotels of the World*.

Even my children agree we should give paradise a break. My smarter friends came to this conclusion a long time ago. 'I gave it up years ago,' my banker friend Juan says. 'Now I like rough holidays that involve trekking or rafting.' When he gets back, the first thing he does is turn on the screen, pour a drink and take in the paradise called home.



DO YOU HAVE PARADISE SYNDROME?

- When you arrive at a luxury resort, your first question is: 'Do you have internet access?'
- You notice the small stuff, like the mosquitoes, the humidity and the fact the sun is really hot when you want to lie in a deckchair.
- You complain about the room, even if you haven't looked at it properly.
- The 'How are you doing?' from the relentlessly cheerful staff starts to get on your nerves.
- You immediately set about finding out what your friends are up to.
- You lie on the beach and start thinking about all the things that are wrong with your life.