



## LONG TO RAIN OVER US

BY DAVID LOWE

Almost four months later I'm beginning to recover and am able to talk about it. How peculiar it is to take your summer holidays in England, but how vulgar to take them elsewhere. I know that just as the English language seems to be taking over the world, so does the English weather, and more and more English holidaymakers are coming to France for the summer confident that it's not going to be too hot and that the general level of humidity will be such that their skin doesn't dry up.

But French rain isn't quite the same as English rain, especially English summer rain. We love our rain; it's the finest rain in the world. Our attitude to rain is what defines us. It proves that we're descended from fish. Fish and chips in the rain – heaven on earth!

But what we have in England is not exactly rain. The Gulf Stream meets a wind coming from Siberia or thereabouts rolling over the North Sea, generating hygroscopic conditions such that drops of water form spontaneously in the air and then, through the action of gravity, drop to the ground, giving an impression of rain. It's rather like a steam bath, only cold.

We quickly learn in England not to put our emotions in the weather – which explains why we hide our emotions so well, since we spend much of our time talking about the weather:

"Whether the weather be hot, whether the weather be rot, We'll weather the weather, whether we like it or not!"

Man, aren't those clouds beautiful? Fifty shades of grey! Remember that passage in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*? Gardening in the rain is a euphemism!

An Englishman comes out in little red spots when he's too hot. A suntan is when all those little red spots join together to form what is essentially one big spot. It's like a sort of giant jigsaw puzzle being done before your eyes. Or walking gradually away from a painting by Seurat. In fact, rain is just pointillist water. Dots and dashes, a morse-code message from the gods.

To get back to my holidays. Blackpool was the seaside paradise of my youth. It's a kitsch, small-time Las Vegas-on-sea, popular with Benny Hill fans, stuck on the coast 50 miles northwest of Manchester. Blackpool means *flaque noire*.

My love of France was inspired by the Blackpool Tower, a small version of the Eiffel Tower, only slightly bigger than an electricity pylon, standing on the seafront. Climb to the top and you could see the surrounding countryside if it weren't for the abandoned factories in between.

Underneath the monument is a zoo, where the animals walk around sullenly, like heroes of a Chekhov play dreaming that elsewhere life would be better. Monkeys waiting in vain for their bananas to ripen. Giraffes with sore throats. Elephants with runny noses. Anorexic tigers. Only the penguins seem relatively at home.

It's traditional for children to take a donkey ride along the beach; there's little else to do as the tides make swimming dangerous. The donkeys walk along sadly, regretting *la belle époque*, when they worked down the mines. Anyway the water is so cold that when paddling you have the impression that your legs have been amputated at the knee. It's good for varicose veins they say. Thirty years later I can tell you that this is not true. The sea is not visible at low tide and sometimes it's so far out that you could walk to Manhattan.

Ecologically the holiday in Blackpool is not justified. Trying to heat a flat in Blackpool for a week in August leaves the same carbon footprint as a return flight to Ibiza. Anyway, I think I'm heading south next summer... to Brighton.

