



MALICE IN WONDERLAND

BY DAVID LOWE

The festive season in England is largely modelled on images promulgated by various popular songs sung by the likes of Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra and Johnny Mathis... songs such as, "White Christmas", "Jingle Bells", "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus", "Let It Snow!" and "Winter Wonderland". The songs were often written by the side of swimming pools in sunny California, where snow seemed just white, fluffy and fun.

As a result, the English insist each year on having an "authentic" Christmas and New Year experience, without leaving their temperate and rather snowless climate. Intrepid entrepreneurs rent bits of old wasteland and open a "lapland-style theme park". They sell tickets in advance, advertising the place with photographs of the "Far North" pilfered from *National Geographic* magazine. Families start to arrive just after Halloween under the illusion that some fairy-tale winter landscape can be created on the Dorset/Hampshire border in south-west England, 1,500 km south of the North Pole, where it hasn't snowed much since the Palaeolithic era.

You are welcomed at the entrance to these makeshift Winter Wonderlands by giant elves (and I mean giant in the sense that a normal-sized tree is just a giant bonsai). You cross a rather tatty Tunnel of Light, which consists of a few coloured light bulbs and a row of Christmas trees sprayed perfunctorily with a bit of whitewash. It's prettier at night the elves tell you, but the place closes at 6pm, so you have to take their word for it.

The skating rink is one enormous puddle. Global warming or a problem with the generator? *The crèche vivante* is an advertising board on which a bogus Bethlehem nativity scene has been painted by somebody lacking in talent. The scene is enlivened by the rain dripping down the painting, making the colours run and giving it a rather contemporary feel. On Christmas greeting cards, you'll either get a biblical scene or a snowscape. In Winter Wonderlands, the two are combined and you get the traditional Middle-Eastern nativity with what looks like the Himalayas behind. Mistletoe and cactus, polar bears and camels. I suppose you could say it emphasizes the universality of the message, continuing a tradition that is encountered in paintings by Brueghel, for example, where mythical scenes are

enacted by characters clad in contemporary dress in the then modern-day Flanders countryside.

In one corner of the Winter Wonderland, you'll find a group of Siberian huskies but, in fact, they are just the security guards' dogs whitened for effect. "PLEASE FEED THE ANIMALS" a notice says, or else they could possibly eat your children, the expressions on the dogs faces seem to say.

The "Christmas Market", according to the ads, is modelled on the famous "Christkindlesmarkt" in Nuremberg, and it does resemble it a bit, but as it was in 1945, just after the fall of Berlin.

A clown is making festive shapes out of balloons. "A Christmas tree!" he says, handing something that looks like pink haemorrhoidal intestines to a child. The clown does his best; he's still unaware that he most probably won't get paid.

Something resembling a television aerial has been stuck to the head of a donkey, while his nose has been daubed with red lipstick – Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer it says on the notice board, except there's a spelling mistake: "Raindeer" it says, which is something of a Freudian slip given the weather.

Santa's Grotto is a garden shed made out of chipboard. After a wait in the queue of two hours, the children at last get to enter the grotto and what a surprise – there are two Santas inside, and yet another is having a fag round the back. It costs 15 euros a photo, so the more Santas there are, the better the turnover. It is left up to parents to explain the anomaly.

But, everything's alright; we don't complain, because we hear Christmas music blaring through the speakers and "It's strange how potent cheap music is."

Sleigh bells ring, are you listening,

In the lane, snow is glistening

A beautiful sight, We're happy tonight.

Walking in a winter wonderland.

Happy Christmas and a very Merry New Year.