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From The Times

April 3, 2009

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Hugo Rifkind

Miss Universe - Dayana Mendoza of Venezuela to her friends - has just had a marvellous holiday. "It was a looooot of fun!" she wrote, on her Miss Universe blog. "I didn't want to leave. It was such a relaxing place, so calm and beautiful."

What paradise was this? Hawaii, perhaps? Koh Samui? The Bahamas? "The water in Guantánamo Bay," she continued, "is soooo beautiful!" Oh.

"We had a wonderful time," she adds. "This truly was a memorable trip! We also met the military dogs, and they did a very nice demonstration of their skills. We visited the detainees camps and we saw the jails, where they shower, how they recreate themselves with movies, classes of art, books. It was very interesting." Later, they went to the beach, where Miss Universe bought a necklace made out of little bits of glass. It will remind her of Guantánamo, she sighs, for ever.

Look, I won't lie. There's a temptation to sneer at Miss Mendoza. Genuinely. I feel it too. But, probably because she is so pretty, I have decided not to. Instead, I have decided to begin a campaign, on her behalf. Let us send Miss Universe to more awful places. And, let us be heartened by the way that she only sees the good.

BACKGROUND

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She could go to Afghanistan and enthuse about not needing sunblock, thanks to the cute local outfits. She could have gone to Australia during the bush fires ("so warm!") or Banda Aceh, just after the tsunami ("you can see for miles!"). "It's so easy to lose weight in Zimbabwe!" she might tell us. Or, up in the Congo: "The diamonds are really cheap!" In northern Canada, she might just

want to rub her face up against the gorgeously soft pelt of a recently clubbed-to-death seal.

Miss Mendoza's blog reminded me of the British Ambassador to North Korea, Peter Hughes, who blogged a few weeks ago about the re-election of Kim Jong Il (with 100 per cent of the vote) in terms that made Pyongyang sound like Shangri-La. "The booths selling drinks and snacks were very popular with the crowds and everyone seemed to be having a good time," he wrote, before adding that "the city has returned to normal... The children sing songs and chant slogans as they either walk gaily hand in hand, or march solemnly by."

Strangely, I didn't feel nearly so inclined to forgive Mr Hughes for his rose-tinted view of terrible things. But that's his fault, for not looking remotely fetching in a ballgown, a sash and a tiara. I assume.

Traumatic equations

My favourite headline of the week is the one that read: "Most undergraduates show fear when asked to do maths." According to a study by the University of Granada, most students display symptoms "such as tension, nervousness, concern, worry, edginess, impatience, confusion, fear and mental block" when asked to perform mathematical tasks. This affects slightly under half of men and slightly over half of women. Is this "most undergraduates"? I'd work it out for myself, but I'm scared.

Frock of ages

I'm not supposed to be writing about the G20 today, because everybody else is, and my function is to provide light relief (hurrah for beauty queens). Still, if I start it off down here, maybe nobody will notice.

The whole "spouses" thing. The way they're all women. The way the two men who could have come along (Mr Germany, Mr Argentina) very understandably stayed away. The rest of them, all posing together, as the world's press analysed their frocks. The strong suggestion of pearls. You sort of kid yourself, sometimes, that the world has changed a little. But blimey. It's all a bit Mad Men, isn't it?

Point taken

In to the City on Wednesday, anyway, to gawp at the fuss. I went on my bike. Just around the corner from the office, the first protesters were being arrested - the ones who had bought themselves a huge blue armoured car. Rule One of peaceful

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Hugo Rifkind

Hugo Rifkind writes a Notebook on Fridays, the spoof diary My Week on Saturdays, and features for Times2 and elsewhere. Formerly the People columnist, he is the author of the satirical novel Overexposure and also writes a column for The Spectator. He has been writing for The Times since 2001.

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protest, guys: don't turn up in a tank.

I ended up at the Climate Camp on Bishopsgate, which felt like a sort of makeshift urban Glastonbury. Mark Thomas was there, along with all sorts of people you'd recognise from the news. A.A.Gill congratulated me on my disguise, and seemed a little confused when I told him I wasn't wearing one. The highlight, though, was watching a man dressed as a cat trying to climb a tree. He kept falling out of it on to the head of another man sitting below, who was ostentatiously meditating and had to pretend not to notice. This lasted for ages.

The reek of skunk probably didn't help with the carbon footprint side of things, but I rather approved of Climate Camp. It was good-natured and friendly and, unlike with the fraught and frightened mob down the road, you actually got the point. Yesterday morning, I watched YouTube videos of the police breaking it up with batons. It made me feel rather sick.

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