

Welcome to the Jungle

Calais: a humanitarian disaster unfolding in slow motion.

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Third World Stench

They call it the Jungle. The French encampment, 3 miles outside the port of Calais where thousands of migrants and refugees are bivouacking in appalling conditions. Waiting for a chance to cross the UK-border by boat, train, truck or even swimming. After a grueling trek of sometimes thousands of miles, they are stranded here, just before the finish line.

We have visited refugee camps in DR Congo, Bosnia, Lebanon, Pakistan, but the Jungle is something else. The term 'refugee camp' implies order, structure, an involvement of the government and professional aid-organizations. But they are absent. The jungle is a filthy, anarchic slum, expanding uncontrollably on the edge of an industrial zone, where chemical factories emit an acrid, pungent smoke. 'This is a Seveso-zone' says volunteer François Gvennoc, referring to the environmental disaster in the North Italian city, where giant quantities of dioxin were released.

The French government tries really hard to make the place as uncomfortable as possible. Yes, they installed some lampposts to curtail the free reign of rapist and robbers in the otherwise pitch dark nights. For the rest the government involvement consists of evacuating temporary shelters in town and breaking up tents that are encroaching on Calais. Despite this active policy of discouragement the population of the camp has grown exponentially in 2015, from 600 early in the year to currently an estimated 6000 people in November.

The Jungle starts under the highway to the port, exit 2, Oye Plage. Once a pristine natural reserve with rare birds and lush vegetation, it now is a slowly expanding sea of tents set up amidst accumulating piles of garbage, rain puddles and muddy paths. Here and there a sloppily constructed shack, with tarpaulin rattling in the wind. Sometimes a fire pit goes awry and a blaze destroys dozens of tents. Misery as far as the eye can see.

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