



Searching for the super in Weston

Writer Phil Woodford survives a trip to an old-style British Rail buffet and an attack from a marauding gang of teenage girls to provide a snapshot of one of Britain's much-loved seaside resorts.

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After the Second World War, apocryphal bands of Japanese soldiers were supposedly hidden so far in the jungle that they'd never heard the conflict had come to an end. For all we know, some of the Emperor's aged legions may still be kicking around in a makeshift camp they constructed before the mushroom cloud went up.

A similar phenomenon can be observed at the railway station in Weston-Super-Mare, where the proprietors of the platform refreshment stop seem unaware that old-style British Rail buffets surrendered in the 1980s. As a result, they continue to serve unappetising, unbranded sandwiches from an unknown supplier and have kitted the place out with fruit machines that flash so fast that there should be a warning to epileptics on the door. Toddlers with earrings, left unsupervised by their tattooed and pierced parents, mess about with grubby machines selling 'toy capsules' and bouncing rubber balls.

It could easily get depressing, but the clientele is having none of it. Patrons sing along loudly to a jukebox hidden at the far end of the buffet – an area which has been converted into a bar. One lady knows ALL the words to Kim Wilde's "Kids in America", which dates from the era that the wipedown table mats were first issued. If any buffet-bar has regulars, I suspect this may be the one.. Shortage of staff unfortunately means that the guy who serves the sandwiches also pulls the pints. He moves from one end of the counter to the other in a seamless operation which would do Basil Fawlty proud.

Most of the time, I suspect the antics are good-natured. A cheese and pickle sandwich is washed down with Merrydown and another Johnny Cash number gets the punters' feet tapping. Before long, there's a harmless

stretching of the vocal cords, as the Taunton service rolls by 10 metres away. There is just a suggestion, however, that things may – on occasion – get slightly out of hand. The clue is the security man who paces the platform and occasionally pokes his head around the buffet door. Dressed in black paramilitary fatigues, with his trousers tucked inside his boots, he wouldn't have looked out of place with the police in Rothbury during the recent hunt for crazed letter-writer Raoul Moat. Unarmed, probably due to over-officious health and safety regulations, he is forever vigilant.

To say that the rest of Weston is an extension of the buffet is probably unfair to the buffet. Within three minutes of leaving my hotel, I was jumped on – literally – by a gaggle of female teenagers. One grabbed me around my waist and a short while later, when I thought I'd successfully made my escape, another ran up and leapt on top of me for a piggyback. There aren't many things about the UK that throw me (I once encountered two young women in Cardiff simulating an indecent act with a sex toy in the street), but I admit to being slightly disconcerted by my popularity among the drunken young women of a rundown seaside resort.

I beat a very hasty retreat to the seafront and inspected the new pier which is 'Opening Summer 2010'. Given that we were already well into July and the place is still a building site, it has to be assumed that the local council made the mistake of employing British contractors. In compensation, 40 multicoloured donkey statues have been erected around the town, although what proportion of the population will recognise them as works of art remains to be seen. I suspect the real donkeys, which still traipse the beach and roll in the sand between rides, will be more popular.

Close to the pier is Weston's answer to the London Eye. A nice piece of kit that must have taken a fair bit of corporate or government money to set up, but the queues aren't on a par with the South Bank. The smart lorry hauling a racing simulator is also out of place. It sits uneasily alongside the huts which promise tea, coffee, hot dogs, refreshments, beach goods, chips and jacket potatoes. In that order.

The seafront meanders past a parade of hotels which are low-level in every conceivable sense of the term. Residents can look out over the sea, provided they're prepared to crane their necks over skips piled high with rubbish, parked cars, a slip road and a newly created arch which seems to borrow its architectural influence rather inappropriately from a Middle Eastern souk.

There is in Weston a strong sense of a town unsure of where it is going. As the old seaside resort decays physically, new sea defences are planned. As the town's wider raison d'être disappears, the solution is to plough money into fancy piers and fairground wheels in an attempt at reinvention. The pounding beat of music from the local bars, however, where hens in full fancy-dress regalia strut their stuff, suggests that the investment will be in vain. Those who visit Weston today actually like what it has become. They arrive for beer and spirits, fish and chips and pitch and putt. The new attractions will be neither here nor there to many of the young revellers whose obvious intention is to have no clear memories of their visit. The new-look rides and amusements may also prove prohibitively expensive and rather alien to the working-class families and pensioners who appear to be the lifeblood of the town in high season.

A good parallel perhaps would be the pubs in the UK that are closing at the rate of approximately one a day. Is there anything they can do to change their image and attract new trade? Almost certainly not. In many gentrified parts of the country, people just don't want to go to pubs any more – they don't socialise in the same way, spend time at home, talk to people online and choose to visit restaurants and other more upmarket establishments instead. And in those areas where boozers are still a staple part of an evening's entertainment, people like them just the way they are.

Twenty or thirty years from now, there will still be a Weston. But no amount of 'super' in the form of cash injections is going to make any fundamental difference to the unfolding mare.