

Alice's Facebook post about her experience in the Calais Jungle 9 Feb 2016

Hello sweet friends. Here are my thoughts from Calais. Please read to the end if you can bear to, especially if you liked or commented on my last post about this issue. Much love xxx

As I write this I'm sitting in the bar of a P+O ferry from Calais to Dover and on the table in front of me are four boxes of tasty Afghan food. Unfortunately I'm weeping into it and somehow cannot control my tears. The food was given to me, masses of it, by Sami, a wonderful Afghan man, who is a refugee living in the Jungle. They obviously have very little, but the food is lovely and made with skill and love. He said he didn't want me to get hungry on the journey back to London. Maybe I could share some with my mother or my boyfriend, if there was any left, he said, smiling. I'm also wearing a scarf from Bader, a sparkling 18 year-old from Iraq who insisted I take it because I didn't have one and might get cold. He also lives in the Jungle and he doesn't have any proper shoes.

I was invited to Calais by the renowned jazz singer, actor and broadcaster, Ian Shaw. I had admired him from afar for years, and didn't know him well, but boy was I about to. Over a few months I'd been following Facebook posts from him and a few others who go out to the jungle regularly. I hadn't been able to forget the images. I had also seen the front pages and the newspapers, and saw that there was a disconnect in how things were being reported. I found myself wondering, what's really happening? I wanted to go and see with my own eyes. I wanted to muck in and try to help in some small way - to deliver food or clothing, to meet people and see if it was possible to show some support and friendship, in what is a seriously challenging situation.

But I have to admit, I had some questions. Why were these people not claiming asylum in France? Even if the UK were more desirable for whatever reason, surely official asylum in France would be better than the unbearable conditions and limbo of living in the jungle? On hearing about riots and fights, police brutality, tear gas, and more - was it sensible or even safe?

We arrived at the local budget hotel in Calais to dump our stuff. The staff greeted Ian with affection, but explained that 'migrants' were no longer allowed in the hotel. (Think about that statement for a moment). Ian usually invites a couple of his friends from the camp to stay over so they can get a shower and the respite of a good night's sleep in a warm bed. On questioning why this decision had been made, we were told that other customers had complained about the loud behaviour and drinking of his guests. When in the lift, Ian grimaced and explained that they are all tee-total and utterly well-behaved. I

was about to find this out for myself that day, but more on that later. The point is, this was straight-up, good old fashioned discrimination in action.

We drove towards the camp, all the roads lined by a double fence of razor wire, 3 metres tall. There were armed police dotted around, dressed in black with shoulder pads that made me think of the ninja turtles (!). These police are called the CRS and are a different branch of law enforcement than the local gendarmerie. Some of you might be interested to know that they are 85% funded by the UK taxpayer. It will become clear why as I go on.

Sometimes the CRS won't let people in or out of the camp. It seems to be a random decision whether vehicles are let through or not. Ian was receiving messages from friends about which entrances might be clear. There's a long street that runs from the two extreme ends of the camp. Lining this street are some basic self-builds, made only of wood and tarpaulin but great craftsmanship. We drove past a few shops - selling food, toiletries, even a barber shop. It's extremely tatty and makeshift, but there's a vibrancy about the place, and people were waving and smiling at us as we drove through. This was when my apprehension started dissolving.

We arrived at Sami's - one of these big wooden structures, that is really impressive. Ian built it with some Afghan and Syrian guys, who work together to feed their friends and make a communal space. People poured out to greet Ian, and I was met with warmth, respect and loveliness. Seats were offered, plastic cups of tea were handed around, questions, smiles, conversations in whatever languages were possible. Many speak good English or French. All around, Pashto, Arabic, Urdu and Farsi were being spoken. As I said in my first post - it's not an exaggeration to say that I can't remember the last time I felt so welcome in a place.

Next we went to meet Shakir, a nurse from Pakistan. As we walked, I saw what lay behind the shops on each side of this street. You've all seen the photos, but this was utterly galling to see in real life. A sea of tents and makeshift structures, bending in the wind, some flooded. We spoke to Shakir. Whilst he was in Pakistan, a man had arrived to his home with gunshot wounds to his legs. He claimed he'd been injured by celebratory fire after a wedding, and Shakir treated his injuries. Off he went. A few days later, a government official arrived to say that the man he'd treated was in fact a Taliban fighter and that Shakir was now under investigation and house arrest. He publicly protested his innocence and denounced the Taliban, who then got wind of what he'd said and went after him - he had to escape. He's now in the jungle in Calais, providing medical treatment to refugees 24/7. There is no consistent medical assistance in the jungle. Sometimes Doctors Without Borders/Medicins Sans Frontieres are there, and sometimes there are independent medics who come to donate their time and

skills. These presences are invaluable but irregular, and only during daytime hours. Ambulances are often refused entry to the camp, and teargas and rubber bullets are routinely fired in among the tents during the night, so this is when the main casualties take place. Some of the refugees showed me videos on their phones of the teargas attacks. Apparently this happens every few days, without warning or provocation. I did not experience any tear gas or rubber bullets during my three days there. But I did meet people who had been beaten by police, with visible injuries - which I will describe shortly.

Shakir's medical centre is a small caravan. 4 - 6 people sleep there, when demand for medical attention lulls. The rest of the time, there are queues of people outside - everyone has a cough from sleeping in the cold. Shakir took me to meet a man who had been attacked with a knife by one of the gangs that maraud Calais (more on them later.) His face had been slashed from his right temple all the way down his cheek, his eye was swollen shut, and his hand was badly cut too. All of it was held together by stitches that Shakir had sewn without anaesthetic, in the medical caravan. The ambulance had been called but not allowed into the camp. All this would be shocking enough, but coupled with the squalor of the conditions and lack of basic care, it was appalling.

We also met Doreen (I don't think that's the right spelling), who lives in a caravan with her two young daughters, and they are from Afghanistan. Her husband was killed and they have close family in the UK. Doreen was a lecturer at Kabul university. Her two daughters speak beautiful English and showed me poems and songs they had been writing. We were given tea and biscuits, and had some lovely conversations. They didn't want anything from us. Doreen is trying to keep up the education of the camp's children, and runs what you could call a school from the yard of her caravan, four days a week, or whenever possible. All the while, we were accompanied by Aziz, a beautifully gentle and calm soul.

The next day was spent doing food runs with Ian, filling up gas canisters and petrol containers, attending to generators. This is so that a little light can be provided after dark and so that people can cook some basic food. These implements are not efficient enough to provide heat (anyone with a portable heater knows how much power they rinse!) and so heating is non-existent. There were a couple of places where small outdoor fires had been built, which people gather around. I don't have to describe the cold - it's how you imagine. After that, we were invited to eat at Sami's place, and it was a friendly affair. There are two boys who hang around at Sami's - they are both about 8 and the sweetest children. Everyone was making a big fuss of them and they are obviously welcome and cared for very much by the other refugees. If only they could go to a proper school, have enough food and clothing, and not be sleeping outdoors in the cold! This is an aspect of the camp which is deeply shameful.

The fact that there is a refugee camp in France, in 2016, is nuts in itself, but that there are children there... within all the responsibility shirking and finger pointing and elusion of our governments, what exactly is the explanation of this aspect?

Ian and I had settled down to sleep, and in the middle of the night we received a call from Shakir. Almost every night, people try to jump on to passing trains in order to get to the UK. I remembered having seen this on the news, and it was very surreal to meet some people who are actually doing it. It is such a dangerous thing to do, and utterly mind-boggling. I would never encourage anyone to do anything remotely like this. But I also have to say, that once you have seen the camp with your own eyes and heard with your own ears the worries and fears of these individuals, you may well suspend your judgement. One of them had slipped and was badly injured, lying alone in the woods that run alongside the train tracks. Shakir had gone out in a van with another volunteer to find him and take him to hospital, but the police hadn't let the vehicle pass, despite explanations of what they were trying to do. So Shakir set out on foot. He soon realised that he was being followed... not by the police, but by a mysterious gang that seems to roam at night, dressed in black, with no obvious affiliation. They have been beating up refugees, and there are several who have actually gone missing and never returned. There are fears that they're being bumped off in the night. This a scary enough prospect for any person, but for those who are unofficial, unaccounted for, non-existent in the system, and deeply marginalised, and apparently fair game for any local thugs, this is terrifying. Shakir asked us to come and get him in the car. I doubt either Ian or I have ever leapt out of our beds as fast.

We drove out to find him, and he came out to meet us in an industrial estate that backs onto the woods. He thanked us and immediately set back off into the woods to find the injured boy, with a handful of the other refugees and three amazing women volunteers from Italy and Poland. They had asked us to wait in the car so that once they had found the boy, we could take him to the hospital. So we waited.... and waited.

As soon as they emerged from the darkness, carrying the injured boy, the police roared up, screeching to a halt in two cars and a van. They must have been watching from a distance. There were about 15 of them and they all had machine guns. We were motioned to get out of the car, and then all of us were ordered to line up against the wall, with the headlamps shining on our faces. They were incredibly aggressive and I have to admit that although I stayed outwardly calm, my heart was in my mouth.

We were ordered to take everything out of our pockets - and not to hide anything or 'we would regret it'. We were all told to say our nationality, and

then all of us were frisked roughly. One of the Italian women was vociferous and demanding to know why we were being treated in this way. She was very impressive. I stayed quiet and was waiting for it to be over. Although I was very afraid, I felt somewhere deep down that I was unlikely to be harmed. That feeling arrived after I said that I was from the UK.

One of the weirdest things within all this was a moment that seemed to last forever. I found eye contact with one of the policemen. We both held it for a very long time, it was like a spell. I wouldn't say that his face softened, but something leading to that perhaps. It was very bizarre. I suddenly became afraid that he might think I was provoking him, so I broke it and looked away. But having really looked into his eyes, it made me think that the police, despite their aggression, are victims too. Their task - to control and keep down thousands of traumatised people - is impossible. They have become hardened to the suffering before their very eyes, and indeed, worsened it, because it seems like the only option for them. And this will have made them suffer too, even if deep down and currently unbeknownst to them. The political impasse between the French and the UK is untenable and cannot go on. Refugees will become increasingly fed up of their situation and treatment, and the police will become increasingly heavy handed.

Eventually everyone was ordered to leave. The injured boy had been trying his best to stand up according to the orders, but had sunk to the ground. An ambulance had been called and no-one was allowed to travel with him to the hospital. We offered a lift to some of the refugees, and when one of the policemen overheard he snarled 'if you're a refugee, you WALK.' It was just unbelievable. So off they went. Ian and Shakir and I had got back into the car to leave, but I was concerned about the boy waiting for the ambulance, and the 15 armed police who are notoriously violent to the refugees, the nature of which we had seen a glimpse of moments earlier. I got out of the car and went and sat beside him on the pavement. The policemen were staring, snarling somewhat, shining torches in our faces, but did not stop me or tell me to leave. I spoke to the boy. He was from Syria. He had fractured his thigh and it was swollen like a balloon. He was very calm and dignified but said quietly under his breath, 'thank you and please don't leave me here alone with them, I know what they will do to me if you leave'. I want to remain dispassionate in recounting this incident, but I cannot go without saying that this moment has been burned into my memory forever. After a few minutes the ambulance arrived and off he went. I got back in the car. We went to see Louisa, an amazing woman who dedicates huge amounts of time and resources to helping people in the camp. Two lovely people were staying with her in the hotel that night, a Syrian and an Iraqi, two very sweet young people who I had got to know in the past couple of

days. They were hugely concerned about Ian and I, and if we were OK. They were embarrassed about how we had been treated.

I'd like to pre-empt to anyone reading this who thinks that we somehow behaved wrongly - what would you have done? We weren't breaking any laws and were simply trying to get an injured person to safety, whose welfare was incredibly low down on the list of anyone official.

The next day, we went for more supplies, including medical things for Shakir. News filtered through that a new family had arrived in Calais - a mother, father and baby. They had been traveling with their three sons as well, but they had drowned during the sea crossing from Syria. They apparently have family in the UK. Volunteers had clubbed together to put them up in a hotel for the first couple of nights, but this day was to be the day that they were shown their new home - a tent in the Calais jungle. This, to me, was the most grotesque moment of all. Can we, as a civilised society, as one of the richest nations on earth, a key player in the EU, who prides itself on it's wartime spirit of togetherness, human rights, strength... can we not do better than this?

There's so much more to write about all of this. Some important things to consider are:

- There are no official charities working in the refugee camps in France, apart from occasionally Medecins Sans Frontiers. No Amnesty International, no Red Cross, no Save the Children. The controversy of the situation and the fact that many of these charities are financially tied to governments means that the only help is from volunteers. There aren't many, but the numbers are growing, as normal people open their eyes to the situation and realise how simple it is to help once you've made the first step. People like Ian Shaw - a jazz singer, who has very quickly and impressively learned about first aid, construction, mediation, crisis response. Mostly just ordinary people. Without these ordinary, big hearted people, the residents of the Calais jungle would have starved or frozen to death.

- I heard from several sources that the French are now routinely denying the majority of asylum claims, regardless of where the claimant is from. Most of the refugees have family or friends in the UK that they are trying to reach, and many speak good English. Many would also settle for France if they had faith that their asylum would be granted but there are serious fears about that being reality. I would like to look into this more and would welcome comments from anyone who has more information or knows where to look.

- The French authorities have put several freight containers in the camp, and numbered them, and offered for some refugees to move in. This is called the

container camp. It is surrounded by a tall razor wire fence and you have to give your fingerprints to get in - a biometric identification system. Each container houses 12 people. I didn't go inside, indeed, I wouldn't have been able to. According to the refugees who were offered this, it is even more cramped than the tents, and there is no communal space. They are deeply mistrustful of this part of the camp. From where I was standing it looked unbelievably grim, but having not been in there myself I can't comment further.

- Under the Dublin III agreement, displaced children who are unaccompanied and who have family in the UK are legally permitted safe passage here and are entitled to assistance in reuniting with their family. Since the camp appeared, it is only within the last three weeks that 3 children and one other family member were granted safe passage under this agreement. This is a great success, and was spearheaded by a group called Citizens UK. Please look them up if you are interested in what they do. Unfortunately this was too late for the dozens of minors who have died trying to reach their family, somewhere between here and France, and whose pleas for assistance were being ignored and constantly delayed. A little over a month ago, a 15 year old boy called Masud suffocated in the back of a lorry because his case was not being dealt with. How many more children have to die before this law is taken seriously and our government takes responsibility?

- I went around and spoke to lot of people from lots of countries. I didn't meet any 'economic migrants'. Literally every person I met was from a country torn by war and persecution.

- Many people ask why it seems to be young men in the camps than women. There is also a women and children's camp, which has marginally better conditions, and is more private. Anyone whose family has a history of having to flee a war zone will know that it is has often been more sensible for the father to take the treacherous uncharted journey alone and send for the family once he has found relative safety and a viable route.

- Some people have asked me why these people are not taking up arms and fighting to defend their country. Let's take Syria as an example - there are two main warring factions. The bloodthirsty and barbaric regime of Bashar al-Assad, and ISIS. Who would you fight for?! Intense aerial bombardment makes any ground warfare futile. I don't subscribe to the notion that all of us should be paralysed with guilt about the history of the British Empire, and I'm not full of self-loathing for myself or my fellow Britons. But I do think we should have the humility to recognise that our relative comfort and wealth has not been accrued by the virtue of our talents alone, and that we should do our best to educate ourselves about why things are as they are. (You won't learn about it at school. There's more to British foreign policy than defeating the Nazis.) And whilst we

have our fingers stuck in the middle-east, we cannot absolve ourselves of partial responsibility for the current situation.

I know so many of us are struggling in the UK, especially people I know. It's financially hard, we're all tired and depressed by world news. The refugees are not to blame, although it makes a handy scapegoat for a government who would like to continue screwing us and the current generation of British children with top-down policies, self-interest, undercover deals, an increasingly elitist education system and a fractured NHS. How embarrassing that a wealthy, advanced country like ours saw a general strike of our doctors!

Lebanon is the size of Cornwall and currently is looking after 2 million refugees. Turkey is no longer deemed stable. It is hard to stomach or even think about as a concept, but the reality is that the ordinary people of a great swathe of the globe has had to uproot and flee. This is now the biggest movement of peoples since WW2. It is perhaps nicer for some people to imagine that this would have no consequence to Britain, or even the whole of Europe. But we have to face the reality and take our fingers out of our ears, open our eyes. If we don't all share the load equally and fairly, it will be one the biggest catastrophes the world has ever seen. The alternative is that we let them die. And if that is it - if that is the mark of our society - than what exactly is there left to save? Things might need to change a little bit. With some brave leadership, and good organisation, we can manage, and perhaps we will learn a little bit as a society from helping our neighbours in need. Kindness begets kindness, and we may find ourselves growing in ways that we never imagined.

We are one of the richest nations on earth. There is no reason why we cannot provide for our own, and for a few more thousand people in Calais who have been treated so disgracefully.

I generally try to share only positive things on Facebook, and am often wary of backlash from being political. I've tried my best to be factual and dispassionate with what I've recounted. I'm not a politician, a social scientist or boffin. Neither do I blindly defend left-wing immigration policies whatever the cost. I also don't want to preach, I am an imbecile at the best of times. But I'm speaking from my heart and my brain and from what I saw. I am also sorry to anyone who was not expecting to read this and whose dinner I have ruined.

I'll go again to Calais and try to help with more things. If anyone would like to join me, or contribute anything, you are warmly invited. We need clothing, footwear, books - in English, French, Arabic, Pashto, Farsi, Urdu. Paper, pens. We need mobile phones and credit top ups. Money for supermarket runs. We need people to come to the camp and have a normal conversation with other normal people who are just as bewildered and devastated by their situation as

you or I would be. Please don't hesitate to write to me if you can help. Look up Care for Calais, Calaid, Side by Side Refugees. Or come with me. Or write to your MP. Or extend a welcome and helping hand to any refugees who have arrived in your neighbourhood. Extend a welcome and helping hand to people in your neighbourhood full stop. There's no them and us. Just us.

Peace and love to you all