

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE: INSIDE THE CALAIS REFUGEE CAMP

Edward Jonkler went into ‘The Jungle’ at Calais to document the reasons people are risking their lives to come to Britain

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Twenty miles from our shores is a refugee camp known as The Jungle. It is closer to London than Manchester or Birmingham. The Jungle has become a symbol of Europe's refugee crisis – chaotic, apparently permanent and subject to bad-tempered debate.

I decided the only way to discover – honestly – what has drawn so many people here (it's estimated the population of the camp is 3,000) was to go myself and ask them. So I loaded up a van with donations from my friends and neighbours and drove down there.

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I met people from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Syria and Iraq. I met PhD students, lorry drivers, government officials, actors, engineers and nurses – all of whom are eager to find work and restart their lives. Most were happy to talk, anxious to explain they are not looking for a handout or benefits. Many were embarrassed at their circumstances and apologetic for their living conditions.

Pro-British graffiti is scrawled throughout the camp. The UK is their main destination because many have relatives already there. The refugees look to the UK as a kind of promised land, the last hope that there is another place where things will be better – a hope that has kept them going since they started long and difficult journeys.

The Jungle started as a temporary staging post for crossing attempts to the UK but it has become a semi-permanent place, as the French authorities have cracked down on people trying to make the journey to Britain. Some refugees have given up trying to cross the border because so many attempts have resulted in death or injury – people jumping on to trains from bridges or being crushed by lorries.

You can see the change in the more permanent wooden structures springing up across the camp: a makeshift church, makeshift mosques, several shops, an Afghan restaurant, all opened by the most enterprising or whoever has enough money left after their journey to buy equipment and goods. Although the different nationalities have tended to camp in separate areas, many are now working together to build huts and share materials.

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But the sense of optimism in the camp is fading. There is a struggle to stay warm and dry as winter sets in. People are starting to get sick, especially the children. Volunteers from charitable groups like L'Auberge Des Migrants and Médecins Sans Frontières are working in difficult circumstances and don't have the support of government. They organise the food and clothes donations coming in on a regular basis but they also welcomed donations of non-prescription medicines – cough medicine in particular. The migrants believe European governments want to do as little as possible in the hope that they simply give up, leave and become someone else's problem.

Many of the refugees have travelled on foot for thousands of miles, and showed me injuries and disfigurements as a result of these journeys. Being robbed, extorted by smugglers, beaten by authorities and losing friends and relatives along the route were all common occurrences.

I asked a Sudanese man named Abdul why the camp is called The Jungle.

“Because we are animals,” he told me. “We are not considered human. We have no papers, we have no recognition of our status. I must get to the UK or I will die trying.”



Above: Ahmed owns a small shop, one of between 15 and 20 in the camp. He has been in The Jungle for a few months, having fled his home when the Taliban started approaching his town.



Maqsood: "When I left Afghanistan I was an official at the health ministry. It's much harder to cross to the UK now, so many people have stopped trying and don't know where to go. I have a wife and two young children in Afghanistan, and I worry about what will happen to them."



Above: An Afghan restaurant has been set up in the French camp.



Mohammed, from Damascus, Syria: "I don't want to show my face but you can show my feet. I walked for days and days and they were badly injured - they swelled up. I don't want to live in war. I want to have a family. I want to start a business. I want to buy a car."



Hussein (with wife Nasra and son Ali): "We lived in Syria. Our house was destroyed by a bomb and we had nowhere to go. I was a truck driver and spent \$6400 (£4,300) to get us in a boat to Greece. I have brothers in the UK. My cousin tried to get on to a truck in Calais and slipped. He was crushed and died. Both my children are very sick and the French government doesn't provide anything."



Above: Despairing refugees praying at the entrance to a makeshift church.



Nazari: "I was living in Kunduz. The Taliban took over and the police station was closed down. Then I knew I had to leave. It took me nearly six months to get here. I came through Iran and would walk for days at a time. In Afghanistan I was a painter and then a mechanic. It's too dangerous to try and cross to the UK now, so I don't know what I will do."



Safi (in the middle): "Before it was okay here but in the last four weeks the border is really closed so nobody is trying to cross any more. I came through Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Greece, Serbia, Hungary, Austria, Germany, to France. At least the shops in the camp have what we need."