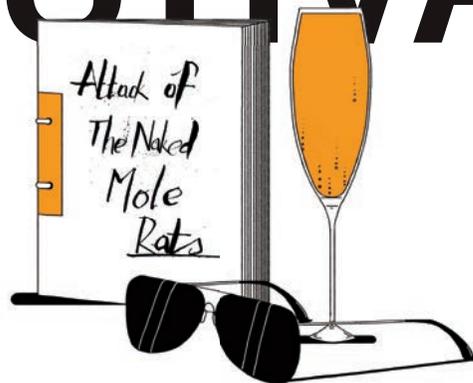


THE CHALLENGE

*Each month we send a
writer on a different travel
adventure*

Task № 17 May 2014

CRASH THE CANNES FILM FESTIVAL



...and blag your way to a red-carpet lifestyle

WORDS ▶ CHRISTIAN KOCH ILLUSTRATION ▶ CHRIS MARTIN

“MATT DAAY-MON! MATT DAAY- MON!”

The autograph-hunters, amateur paparazzi and random crazies kettled behind metal barriers at the photocall outside Cannes’ Palais des Festivals aren’t letting up. “Shaar-on Stone!” they howl at the perma-youthful Hollywood siren. “Michael Doog-las! Look at meeeee!” The silver-haired star on the red carpet does just that, flashing a retina-scorching smile and clubby wink before heading inside with his chums.

It’s mayhem. For two weeks every May, this chi-chi resort on the French Riviera is deluged with thousands of film professionals, from Tinseltown stars to penniless indie directors, for the movie world’s most glamorous gathering: the Cannes Film Festival. But while they’re here to buy, sell or promote more than 2,000-odd films (plus competing for the prized Palme d’Or for best film), Cannes also teems with less glitzier flotsam – the hangers-on. Today, this group includes yours truly, armed with a bold mission: to schmooze my way past the type of heavily guarded doors that Damon, Douglas and Stone have just disappeared behind.

The catch? I’m here with no accommodation, no party invites and – thanks to a broken debit card – just the cash in my jeans. Instead of swanning aboard oligarchs’ mega-yachts with diamond-encrusted jet-setters, I’m trapped in the

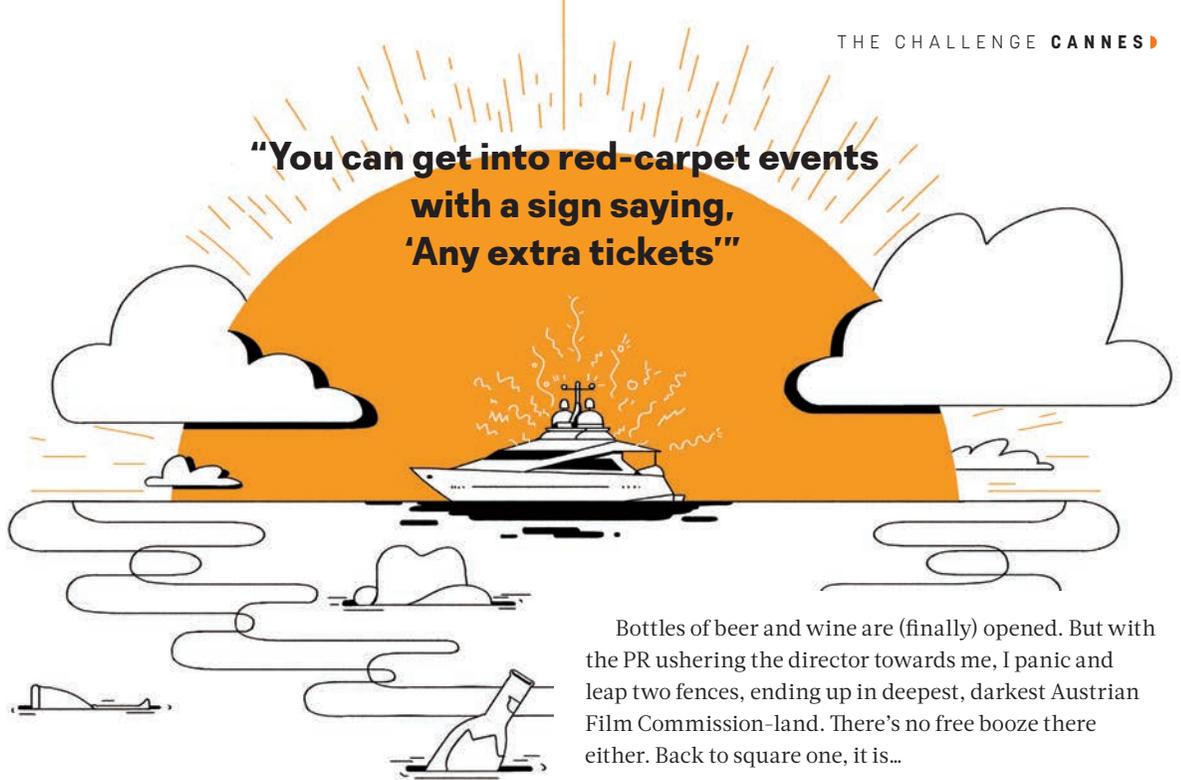
Palais’ maniacal melee; broke, sweaty, lugging a half-broken suitcase and with a rabid Matt Daay-mon fan yammering in my ear. Still, it should be fun, right?

TASK 1 FIND ACCOMMODATION

Sounds easy, doesn’t it? But, then, rooms at Cannes are notoriously expensive – Hotel Martinez’s penthouse suite costs €38,000 a night during the festival – and many are booked months in advance. There are other options though. Before flying out, we spoke to Cannes in a Van (cannesinavan.com) founder Andy Greenhouse, who – when not showing indie flicks from the back of his van on the Croisette (Cannes’ palm-shaded promenade) – sleeps at a campsite. “Professionals stay too,” says Greenhouse. “Our neighbour is an Israeli director. It’s funny to see people emerge from tents in tuxes.”

Alas, *Traveller* is sans tent, Couchsurfing.org proves futile, and Cannes’ only hostel is full. An internet search throws up an apartment in suburb La Bocca, the only lodgings for less than €200 a night. It is, predictably, horrid. Mildew blackens the bathroom wall and unwashed crockery clutters the kitchen. And it’s a fair trek from the strip. Heading into town on the No 2 bus,





Bottles of beer and wine are (finally) opened. But with the PR ushering the director towards me, I panic and leap two fences, ending up in deepest, darkest Austrian Film Commission-land. There's no free booze there either. Back to square one, it is...

I'm sandwiched between coughing pensioners, a poodle dry-humping my leg and noisy school kids. By the time I arrive on the Croisette 15 minutes later, with OAP spittle on my lapels, I'm about as ready for red-carpet action as I'd be after watching 10 Eurovision finals back-to-back.

TASK 2 DRINK FOR FREE

Down on the strip, a weedy-looking man sidles up to me. "Are you famous?" he asks. "Can you sign my train ticket?" Does he think I'm Owen Wilson's pudgier younger brother? I sign, shake his (grubby) hand and strut away, feeling elated but a bit creeped out. Is this how celebs feel?

Before heading to Cannes, Kathy Hill, whose cinéma vérité documentary *Down & Out in Cannes* follows expat squatters in the Riviera resort, told us parties at Village International (harbour-side tents housing a UN-like array of national film commissions) were easiest to wriggle into because, "they're interested in people coming along and learning about their country".

Having emailed Film Commission Norway, I find myself at their 'happy hour', seemingly the Village's only booze-free shindig (next door, Film Finland are having a rip-roaring time). The publicist mentions she'll get a Norwegian film director to speak to me. Cripes. Any minute now, I'll be having a conversation with a leading Scandinavian *auteur* about a movie I've never seen.

TASK 3 BLAG YOUR WAY IN

"Blagging's difficult," warns Michael Leahy from insider website Cannes-or-Bust.com. Indeed, Hill tells me, "I've visited Cannes for 10 years and every time I spend some of it in tears feeling I can't get in. Everything's in this pecking order. It's brutal." An estimated 30,000 film professionals attend every year, swelled by 200,000 extras – gawping tourists, pouting wannabes and fake-pass toting showbiz hacks – all jockeying for an invite that could lead to their big break.

It's tough work, but there's some hope. Last year, a South Korean business consultant gatecrashed parties pretending to be Psy, the *Gangnam Style* singer. Also, as Leahy suggested, "You can get into red-carpet events without knowing anybody. Just stand around with a sign saying, 'Any extra tickets.' People give them away." Sure enough, outside Palais des Festivals, which hosts premieres and press conferences, 10-15 tuxedoed desperadoes drift hopelessly, clutching signs reading, 'INVITATIONS PLEASE!'

I've no choice but to join them. Scrawling, 'PARTY INVITE NEEDED!' on a sheet of A4, I mooch around, receiving looks that suggest, 'Back off, you weirdo.' ➤

It's demeaning work, plus the creepy autograph hunter/my No 1 fan is now here too. After 20 minutes, I quit.

Then, finally, some luck. There's a Film in Scotland bash taking place on the beach. Having contacted the publicist (I was forwarded the details by a journalist I met), an email pops up informing me I'm in. Result! Inside, there's tartan and Calvin Harris tracks, neeps 'n' tatties at the buffet and a dance floor dominated by a sloshed, potbellied man, who's yelling, 'I'M THE WHISKY KING!' I stock up on free shots and venture out in search of something with more glamour – after all, even moochers have standards.

“If you're well dressed, you can get away with pretending to wait for somebody”

TASK 4 HANG OUT WITH CELEBS

Down by the harbour, I meet a man gazing wistfully out at the Bond villain-style yachts. “That's where the real parties are,” muses the chap. He says he's in “sales and distribution (S&D)”, which I gather is akin to bottom feeding in the film industry. He soon proves useful though: he's got a contact for a party on the Arte TV yacht. As we arrive, people guzzle fizz on deck while bad Euro-trance blares out. We swagger towards the clipboard robots. “Hi, we're here to see Andy the DJ. I'm a friend of Christina's...” Silence. Then, “You can't come in without an invite.” We splutter something about it being lost, but it's no use.

Turning around, I hit a blinding wall of paparazzi flashlights. It's none other than Sharon Stone again, walking the gangplank from Roberto Cavalli's yacht. The celeb us-and-them chasm couldn't be wider.

Unperturbed, I decide to change tack. Cannes has four A-list hotels: the Carlton, Martinez, Miramar and Majestic Barriere. When Hill was shooting *Down & Out...*, she stayed in the Carlton lobby, “sitting up all night. If you're well dressed, you can get away with pretending to wait for somebody.”

Outside the Majestic, people crane their necks to gawp at celebrities. Looking confident, I slide past the doorman. I'm in! However, the oppressively posh bar isn't *le buzz* I'm looking for.

Next, we try Petit Majestic, a boozier heaving with film-makers and journalists. I recognise a broadsheet film critic. Sadly, I don't know enough about “ Fassbinder's early oeuvre” to barge into his conversation, so I try to befriend him by smiling in a non-gay manner. Then in a gay manner, just in case. He looks nervously away.

TASK 5 MAKE CONNECTIONS

Having spent all afternoon in my hovel, ringing publicists and only receiving out-of-office Los Angeles voicemails in return, it all pays off when an invitation ➤



to the Lova World Images party at Bâoli Beach (rumoured guest: Bono) appears in my inbox.

I breeze in just behind Princess Charlene of Monaco. The Champagne is free, the sashimi freer and there are iPads in the corner, where euro billionaires donate thousands in charity auctions. Julian Lennon holds court; there's some shades-wearing loon wearing a leather jacket studded with Steven Spielberg's face, and a lone berk waddles around wearing two different shoes. Not knowing anybody here, I sink into my smartphone, pretending to text people. I've never felt lonelier.

However, a Hollywood acquisitions executive starts talking to me. The conversation goes well. He mentions

something about a villa party in the hills above Cannes, before asking about my job. I consider telling him I'm working on new horror flick *Attack of the Naked Mole Rats*, but hand him my business card instead. He looks at it, then silently tapers off.

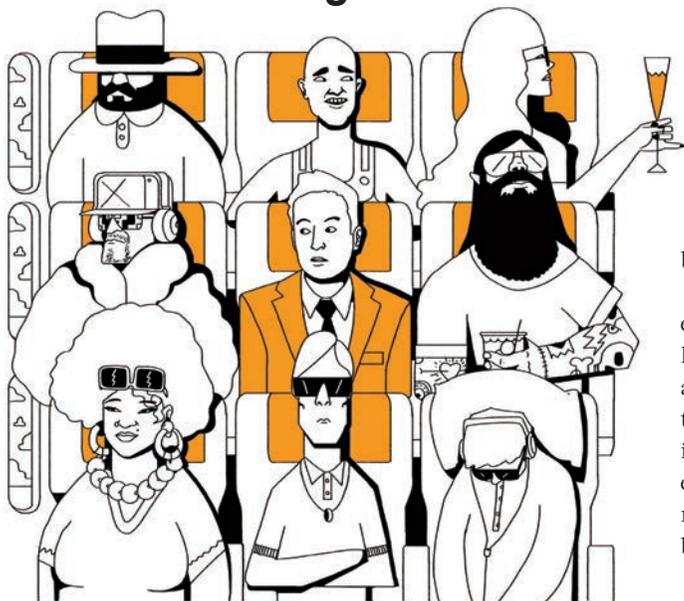
"Once people realise you're nobody, they shut you down," my S&D friend told me last night. How true. You see, Cannes is a hustler's paradise, where business is king. If you haven't read that morning's *Screen International* or can talk volubly about newly inked deals, you're left feeling like a snivelling wreck. Indeed, it's probably best to view Cannes for what it is: not a red-carpet event, but a gigantic trade fair.

"There's no point in going if you're not there for film," warns Greenhouse. And that's where I've failed - my *raison d'être* was parties, not brokering deals or bragging about movie-biz connections.

On the way home, I grab a €2 can of beer from a Croisette street stall while a firework display explodes overhead. I pass Cannes in a Van punters watching short films in a yellow Ford Transit. It dawns on me this is what Cannes *should* be about: a launchpad for film talent at all levels, not scoffing caviar with low-rung studio blowhards who can't be bothered to ask your name.

The following evening, travelling home on easyJet's flight from Nice, a European sports legend walks down the aisle, while an up-and-coming Hollywood actor snogs a transatlantically famous popstress in the row in front. It's the most scintillating celeb-spotting experience I've had all week. Forget Cannes: next year, I'll stick to ogling A-listers on DVD box sets. Or just get an easyJet flight instead...

"Cannes is a hustler's paradise, where business is king"



Cannes need to know

(1946)

Year the Cannes Film Festival was founded to rival the Venice Film Festival



Hotel Negresco

Overlooking the Bay of Angels, this Belle Époque-era hotel has four-poster beds and a private beach. hotels.easyjet.com

(200,000+)

Number of actors, directors, journalists and fans who flock to the festival

easyJet Holidays

Three nights room only at the three-star Appart City Nice Acropolis, departing Liverpool on 1 June, costs from £195 per person. easyjet.com/holidays*

(12)

Days the festival lasts for, this year from 14-25 May



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