

ONE SPIRIT, ONE SOUL, ONE BODY, ONE MIND

I interviewed David (not his real name) in a small cafe not far from Ceti refugee camp in Melilla. He spoke excellent English, was very positive and grateful for his life. David is also a devout Christian.

"I'd been on the road for years, made it through many countries, had to beg for food and was also thrown in jail for three weeks in Algeria for being illegal. It was horrible. I had to leave Algeria quick after that."

David made it clear from the start that he was unwilling to say where he originally came from.

"In Algeria we slept in the desert, it was so cold."

"Where did you actually sleep?"

"In the desert? Just on the ground with our coats on."

"And after you made it from Algeria into Morocco?"

"We then need to cross into Melilla, but have to get past the Moroccans first."

"How many times did you attempt the fences into Melilla?"

"Dozens, so many times I can't count. They beat us back, we head back into the forests and try again another day. You have to be organised. The blacks all operate together. We run en masse and the Moroccan police are not so fit. But they used batons, stones, bottles, sticks, anything they could lay their hands on. They even drive their cars into us."

"On the morning that you finally made it over, how many of you were running at the fences?"

"Four maybe five hundred. We woke at 3am and made our move. Next thing we hear is police helicopter, flying in front of us and shining lights onto us. Many aborted, but I kept running, telling myself - One spirit, one soul, one body, one mind."


I try to imagine the scene - hundreds of terrified people, running in the dark towards huge razor wire fences with helicopter lights raining down on them....

George R Mitchell

NEVER A DULL MOMENT

George R Mitchell doesn't do tourism - he travels off grid, getting under the skin of a country, its culture and its people. He doesn't have internet on his phone, nor does he use Facebook or Twitter. While travelling, he lives in the moment. George has now racked up 80 countries and is currently in the world's most highly contested border areas, researching for his new book.

georgermitchell.com



"What happened at the actual fences?"

"Before the first fence, the Moroccans lay razor wire on the ground, it's dark and many run into it. This gets so many people with no shoes, their feet get cut badly and the hands and the body, some even fall on their faces. As we climb up, the Moroccan police are throwing stones at us. Over the first fence and you're in no man's land. Then over the middle fence, then over the third fence and you are in Melilla. Often the Red Cross are there and help us."

"What is the attitude of the Guardia once you make it over?"

"The Guardia do not fight us back, they are ready to accept us if we can make it."

While the fences are there to stem the tide, it is true that those brave or lucky enough to make it over are not sent back or persecuted by the Spanish authorities. David confirmed how well he had been treated from the moment he was over the last fence. Also, while I was there, one migrant was seriously injured atop the fences, bleeding to death his life was saved by a Guardia officer.

David then explained that he was taken to Ceti camp, checked for diseases and given an identification

tag. Ebola was the first word that sprang to my mind. A terrifying thought which made me realise just how easily this deadly virus could be spread.

"You've been here for a few months now. What's it like to live in the refugee camp?"

David smiled. "Compared to living in forests or desert, the camp is good."

It was at this point that I simply had to pick David up on something that had fascinated me all the way through the interview, for he had on numerous occasions referred to himself and others as "blacks".

"You keep using the phrase, black man. If back home I said I'd interviewed a black man, I would be seriously criticised for such a description."

"Why?"

"It's racist."

David was genuinely astonished and said "But I am black. You are white and I am black. How can it be racist to say someone is black if they are black?"

We shared a laugh. It was such an honest and simple explanation.

"What's next for you?"

"Well, the authorities move suitable people out of the camp and over to mainland Spain. I don't



Kids outside the camp



Close to the camp

mind where I go. I want a job, I want to work."

David is undoubtedly intelligent and has a burning desire to work, he's not interested in hand outs. Although the Spanish unemployment rate among the young in South Spain is over 40%, I get the feeling David will find work. After what he has gone through, he won't fail at the last hurdle.

"In Melilla, how do the local Spanish people react to you?"

"When I'm walking in the streets, most people are very friendly, they seem to understand what we have gone through to get here."

Nationalities inside the camp I learned include people from Sudan, Somalia, Syria, Cameroon, Lebanon, Algeria, Niger, Chad, Senegal, Gambia, Liberia. A mix of Shia and Sunni Moslems, Christians and Arabs. I asked David, if there were ever problems between them?

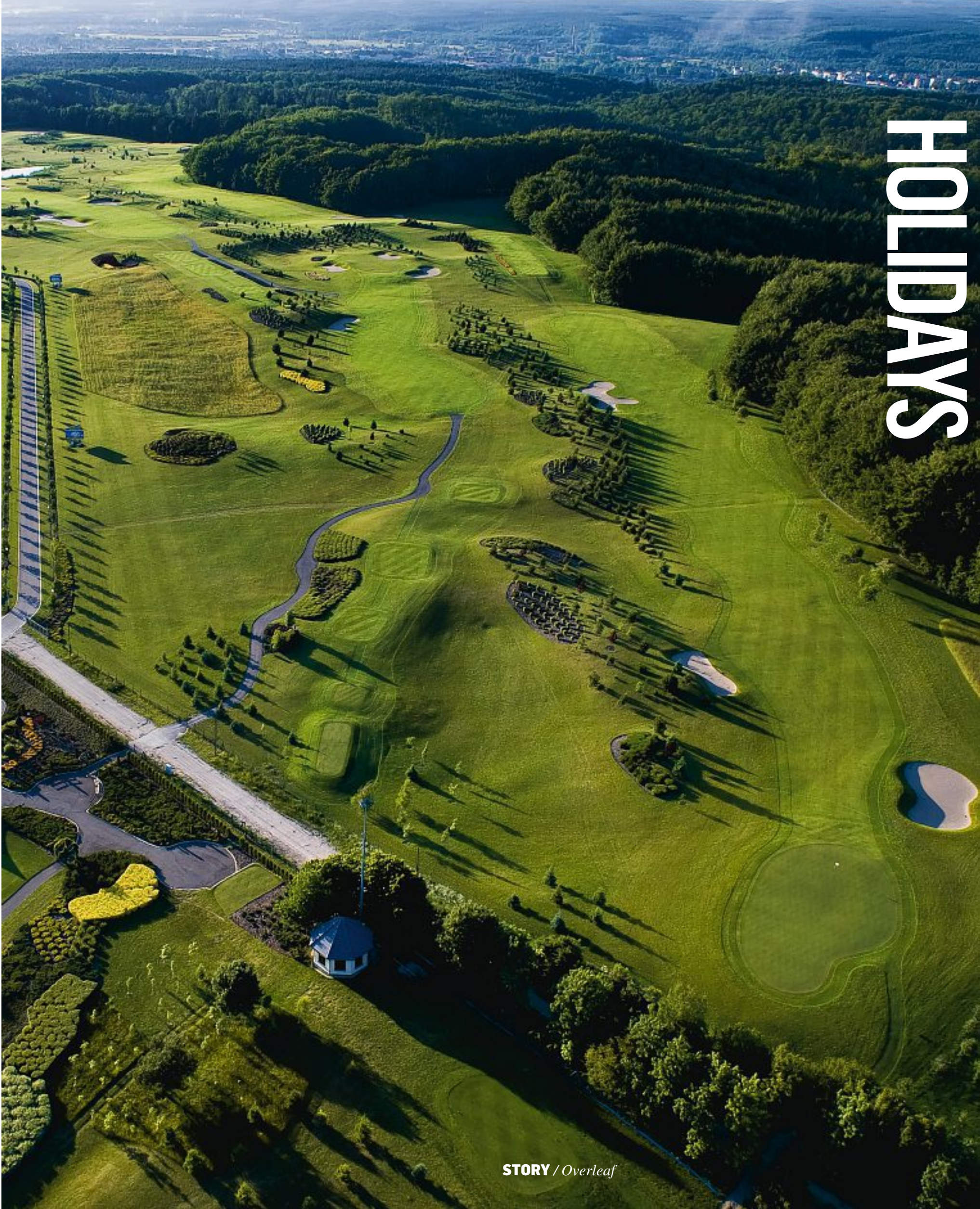
"No, thankfully there are no religious problems in our camp. But the Syrians always seem to fight among themselves," he said shaking his head and with a big smile.

I humbly shook hands with this remarkable young man and thanked him for his time. My full interview with David will be in my book Mankinds Great Divides.

NEXT WEEK:
Destination, The Middle East...



Syrian refugees



HOLIDAYS