

# Migrants between France and Britain: Ever-growing, ever-changing: Inside the Calais camp

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**The Calais refugee camp is starting to develop from tents to makeshift clinics, schools, cafes and more - but no one should have to live this way, writes Amy Corcoran**

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You can never quite prepare for the sight of the Calais camps, in which thousands of people from all over the world live out in the wilderness in a variety of makeshift structures. This is not just due to the fact that it is so surreal and saddening to see people living in this way, especially in the heart of western Europe, but because the situation in Calais is ever-changing, rendering full preparation impossible.

Recently I returned to Calais for the fourth time this year. On a previous visit I'd assisted in the mass move to the current camp, which was being set up around the new government-run Jules Ferry centre. People were moving themselves from the relative shelter of their previous camp, far down the road away from town, before they were removed compulsorily - an operation that experience dictated would involve violence. The new camp is located in and around sand dunes and wastelands; it is desolate and exposed, and not somewhere anyone should have to live.

Despite its location, the camp is growing and changing fast. A local group has divided the sprawling area into coloured zones for ease of aid distribution (information leaflets pinned to posts call out the government's lack of assistance). Doctors of the World have set up a temporary clinic complete with three beach hut-style consultancy rooms. And there are now toilet blocks and large communal buildings, including a 'hostel' for new arrivals who have no contacts in the camp. A number of new smaller structures have also gone up, many of them very similar to one another, suggesting a mass build - people are moving from sharing wind-battered tents to building their own dwellings, some complete with flower pots in porches.

## Permanent situation

While the presence of more hardy homes no doubt makes daily life in the camp slightly less arduous (and Calais' bitter winter will descend soon enough), there is something depressing about this development too. Are we admitting that this is to be a permanent situation - a never-ending stream of people desperately escaping war and poverty forced to live on France's northern shores in a

forgotten and isolated ghetto, so close to the life they desire but just out of reach?

What must it do to the psyches of those forced to live in this way? Struggling through something horrific is made more bearable when we know the end is in sight, that it will all be worth it. But in beginning to set up home one is acknowledging that this may not be the temporary measure first anticipated – this might just be one's new 'life'. Worryingly there are murmurs of a fence, and of a limit to non-residents entering the camp. Is it to become an open-air prison that will fall – or be pushed – off the radar?

In addition to other developments, a school has been set up by volunteers, among them both camp residents and local people. It offers lessons in English and French, and invites in women and children from the Jules Ferry Centre who are often separate from the main camp. Shops are springing up and doing good business (stocked mainly from the local Lidl), as well as cafes and one place selling chicken and chips. A large church has been completed alongside the few mosques already standing. When I visited, one solitary man was standing by the shrine quietly reciting prayers from a book. We saw a young Muslim man conducting his prayers outside later on, head bowed to the floor near rubbish piles and portaloos.

The camp is much more densely occupied than during my previous visit, when there remained a feeling of sparseness, of clusters of homes – mostly arranged by nationality – disappearing into the tundra. Not that space necessarily engenders comfort: the weekend when I visited in May saw some people lose their homes when fights between different groups escalated into arson – a testament to the underlying tensions that will inevitably occur when large numbers of people struggle for woefully limited resources.

### **Speeches to camera**

While the development of the camp was striking, the presence of reporters was equally so. It seemed that everywhere we looked there were smartly dressed people giving speeches to huge cameras. Some of them were clearly not welcome. One activist asked a group which newspaper they represented; she suspected they were from one of the British right-wing tabloids. They wouldn't answer, nor produce their press cards when asked, claiming they were in their car. They then walked back to their car and didn't return. This all occurred around the time Songs of Praise was filming at the entrance to the camp, and the tabloid's subsequent reporting of this fact all but confirmed the activist's suspicions.

A sign has been put up warning reporters not to take photos without consent. There is certainly a feeling of unease around this sudden influx of media: it is so hard to gauge what the resultant news stories will focus upon and where their sympathies will lie. The refugees living in Calais are torn between wanting the world to know about their situation and losing trust in media that so often betray their openness.

Many individuals, organisations, volunteer groups and charities are present in Calais – and have been since long before the world's press arrived. They are doing great work while France and the UK point blame at one another, and approach the 'crisis' simply in terms of economic and security concerns. At the time of writing, Doctors of the World were only due to remain in Calais for another few weeks. Should they attempt to raise further funds to stay longer, diverting their efforts away from their work in countries whose governments cannot support their citizens?

The need is certainly there – everywhere are individuals with broken bones from failed attempts at boarding lorries, or those coughing from exposure to tear gas. But it is not acceptable for charities

to shoulder this burden. Perhaps, despite its flaws, the presence of the world's media will in fact help those living in the camp, by not allowing the French and British governments to ignore this humanitarian crisis – however far out into the wastelands they push it.

### **Can't walk away**

And while my friends may not be representative of the UK population, it does appear that many more are now talking about Calais, as well as related issues such as immigration raids and detentions. Some have chosen to visit themselves, to take donations and show solidarity, and it's heartening to see that once people visit for the first time they cannot walk away. Part of that is no doubt the horrific injustice of the situation, and part is due to the people here themselves – their warmth, humour, resilience and openness in the face of the most appalling situations is humbling, inspiring and agonising.

However determined to continue supporting those in Calais I may be, each trip must come to an end as I head home to the country the people I have spent time with risk their lives to reach. As we left the camp to walk the long, desolate road towards town, I noticed a shiny 'Calais' sign where we emerged from the underpass. I couldn't remember having seen it before. Had it been put up recently to reinforce the obvious message of exclusion promoted by both France and the UK? I couldn't be sure, but I was suspicious nonetheless.

**Amy Corcoran**

*For more info:* [calaismigrantsolidarity.wordpress.com](http://calaismigrantsolidarity.wordpress.com).

*Find out how to share your home with a migrant in need:*

<https://www.facebook.com/events/507490422742760/>

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**P.S.**

\* "Ever-growing, ever-changing: Inside the Calais camp". Red Pepper. September 2015:

<http://www.redpepper.org.uk/ever-growing-ever-changing-inside-the-calais-camp/>