

Dead Beats and Dirty Books

The book clearly said room 9. I checked again, just to be sure, and it definitely said 9. All well and good, but as far as I could see the numbers stopped at 8...

Something told me this was not a good start.

It had all seemed so easy on paper. I once met a guy who'd travelled from Orkney to Prague just to meet Olympic athlete Emil Zatopek; all he had to do was wander into the tourist office, get the address, and an hour later he was having tea with his lifelong idol. So how come I couldn't even find a hotel room?

I should have figured that things would be different in Tangier. This is a city which, despite being a strategic and fiercely contested port for millennia, owes its reputation almost entirely to the period under international control between 1923 and 1956 – the infamous InterZone years. Even today the name smacks of glamorous seediness, of sex, drugs, smuggling and perversion. The heart and soul of the Beats belonged here, slumming it with Ginsberg, Kerouac, Joe Orton, Tennessee Williams et al. And then it spawned *The Naked Lunch*.

Ah, Burroughs, Burroughs. A young American writer comes to Tangier and in a few days produces this book, a sprawling, rambling, crazed, disconnected, unreadable confusion of everything the city stood for and never was, the ultimate Beat travelogue. This was the Tangier I had hoped to catch a glimpse of; room 9 at the El Muniria hotel, where William S. knocked out his flawed masterpiece, seemed like a logical place to start – but by the time I got there it had gone.

So had Tangier.

It's not immediately apparent to visitors facing the hassles and hustles on the Grand Socco or braving the touts around the port, but Tangier as it was is long gone. The locals know it; the *faux guides*, shop touts and drug dealers are no longer there because they're the best, but because they can't afford to leave. The city is clinging on to its last vestige of louche nostalgia, fighting against a gradual tide of irrelevance – even as a port of entry it looks threatened, with more and more travellers choosing the relaxed Spanish enclave of Ceuta as a hassle-free alternative. Tangier's shady past has finally turned against it, and at times the air of desperation is as palpable as the abandoned silence in former Beat haunts like Dean's and the Tanger Inn.

The irony is that Tangier still has plenty to offer, if only it could shed the hangover of its dubious heyday. Beneath the try-hard facade, the city has character in spades; architecture and art are strong here, there are numerous museums, the old medieval medina is lively and even fun on occasion, and the nightlife is more promising than elsewhere. Perhaps all Tangier needs is someone to bring it out of the forgotten past of Room 9 and back into the real world.