

The global elite seek their pandemic retreats

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... But the Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious. When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys ... The abbey was amply provisioned. With such precautions the courtiers might bid defiance to contagion. The external world could take care of itself. In the meantime, it was folly to grieve, or to think.

Edgar Allan Poe, *The Masque of the Red Death*

The devastating impact of the coronavirus pandemic is being felt by billions of people the world over, most acutely in densely populated working class areas and among the poorest layers of society, where social distancing is a physical impossibility and economic desperation makes lack of income life threatening.

For corporations the rising death toll cannot long be allowed to disrupt profits or their usual operations, while parasitic marketeers are increasing their speculative creation of fictitious capital requiring renewed exploitation of the labour power of the working class—however dangerous the conditions.

Against this polarised world situation, the most grotesque picture emerges whenever an occasional news report shines a light on the behaviour of the super-rich.

Last week, it was reported that French authorities refused to allow ten passengers of a British private jet to disembark at Marseille-Provence airport. The party had planned to travel onwards in three private helicopters to a £50,000-a-night luxury villa in Cannes.

The party comprised three male billionaires in their 40s, three female escorts in their 20s, a secretary, a translator and bodyguards. The trip was organised by a Croatian businessman working in a finance and estate agency in Britain, who reportedly had “paid for everything.”

Travel into France is still permitted, but the government lockdown includes restrictions on non-essential trips. Travel to a holiday villa for weeks on end is not included.

Police turned back the three helicopter pilots, fining

them for breach of lockdown regulations. The passengers were not fined because they were not allowed to step onto French soil.

The arrogance and self-entitlement were palpable. The businessman had booked the flight with French authorities in advance, hence the police being in place on their arrival. One of the businessmen told press that they were not holidaymakers but were on their way to complete a deal that would have seen the creation of nearly 1,000 jobs.

The businessman blamed “the stupid ignorance in the time of COVID-19.” According to one source, the party’s leader told police, “I have money, let’s talk,” when they boarded the plane. The party also “tried to make use of their connections and made a few phone calls.”

Nine of the party returned to Britain. The tenth chartered another plane and flew to Berlin.

The unsuccessful jaunt to the French Riviera points to the phenomenal resources the rich can call upon. A police source told press the businessman was “looking forward to the break,” intending to lockdown at the villa.

Little wonder. The 17,200-square-foot Villa Alang Alang is the most luxurious in the south of France, valued at \$70 million and is rented out for £360,000 a month. It has eight bedrooms, a private cinema and nightclub, wine cellar, gym, spa, steam room and indoor pool, an outdoor infinity swimming pool and a jacuzzi. Its multiple terraces overlook the Mediterranean and a private beach. Decorations include a “living wall with a tropical water feature” and a dinosaur skull overlooking the marbled entrance hall and its three flights of steps.

The flight on an Embraer Legacy jet that cost £5,300 an hour and the three helicopters were organised by London-based firm PrivateFly. Such companies internationally are reporting an upsurge in bookings. US-based FlyEliteJets was reporting a nine-fold increase in weekly inquiries by the middle of last month.

Many are chartered to fly the super-rich to private islands, with rent or purchase already a boom industry. Gladden Island, off Belize, for example, is extremely

popular because it is totally private and only has one residence. Staff for the property stay on a separate island and must turn on lights remotely to let guests know when they are coming. The island usually costs \$2,950 per night for two people, but this is a sellers' market.

The same company—Private Islands, Inc.—is also handling 700-acre Blue Island in the Bahamas, which has attracted attention because it has a private runway. This has led to an increased interest from those with a private jet and nowhere else to land it. It costs around \$70 million to buy.

Private Islands' CEO, Chris Krolow, said recently that he had been receiving calls from people on yachts, sailing around islands "trying to find a safe place to go and willing to pay a premium."

Private companies hiring luxury yachts are making landing an option for those who can afford it. This is not shipwreck survival stuff. Reporting one seven-week charter by a family, the CEO of Burgess Yachts said the children would be home-schooled aboard and would also receive cooking lessons from the crew's chef and be shown the ship's engine room. It was unclear who would be doing the home-schooling. British property services' companies report an increase in requests for private tutors from parents taking their children out of school, as well as a large demand for places in boarding schools.

Manufacturers of bunkers and bomb shelters in the US are reporting a spike in orders. The Rising S Company has seen a fourfold increase in business on this time last year, with business coming from many countries they had not previously supplied. The average cost of a bunker being considered is \$150,000.

For the slightly less well-off, who have been unfortunate enough to have contracted COVID-19, the Maldives government has built a coronavirus quarantine resort, including a luxury hotel built in just 10 days on Villingillivaru island, with 30 air-conditioned rooms complete with en-suite medical care.

The rapacious quest for hideouts by the super-rich starkly demonstrates the waste of societal resources under capitalism. London property services company Quintessentially Estates has been inundated with calls from those looking for isolated castles, islands, mansions, yachts and jets. One client was after a new property with a large spa so that his wife would not need to leave the house for her beauty treatments.

Quintessentially's CEO, Penny Mosgrove, told the *Evening Standard* that a client with a £35 million mansion in upscale Mayfair was looking for an apartment to rent

when he came back to London. He did not want to return to his own mansion "in case he infected the premises" and was looking at renting a four-bedroom duplex on Grosvenor Square in Mayfair for £18,000 a month.

Despite all this, the elites have continued to socialise within their own circles, at disastrous human cost. Last month, half of Uruguay's sudden proliferation of positive cases was traced to a society wedding attended by a fashion designer recently returned from Spain.

In Brazil, the elite Rio de Janeiro Country Club has been heavily hit by the virus. At least 60 of its 850 members tested positive shortly after a dinner given by members of the former royal family. Over half of the guests at the dinner also tested positive. It is difficult not to think of Edgar Allan Poe's *Masque of the Red Death*.

The vast squandering of plundered resources for the benefit of a tiny handful of profiteers stands in stark contrast to what is available to the working class. Public spaces are closed even for essential exercise, workplaces remain open without regard for the welfare or safety of workers, and health care is subordinated to the demands of profit and the market. Every day the pandemic is laying bare the urgent need for a revolutionary overturn to sweep aside this brutal and barbarous system. The vast reserves of wealth must be expropriated by the working class, and a rational and organised deployment of resources put into combating the pandemic and protecting the health and future of the population.



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