



## Last night's TV

Ever wanted to get really drunk, sit on a goose and dance like a dervish? Then follow me ...



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I've been worrying about where to go on holiday this year. I don't like beaches, or swimming pools, pretty whitewashed villages, bougainvillea, sightseeing, calamari, the sound of crickets. I don't like camping, waterproof clothing, being outside - any of that. I don't like France, Italy, Spain or Scotland - especially Scotland. What I really want to do on holiday is get really drunk and sit on a goose. Then I want to disco dance like a dervish (or, better still, with a dervish) to Who Let the Dogs Out. I want to rob graves and watch young men boxing while off their heads on methadone. I want to stick metal skewers through my cheeks and go vampire-hunting. I want to go to a circumcision and then get even more drunk. And if there's a competition as to who has the most impressive collection of Turkish music cassettes, then that would be the icing on the cake. And now, at last, I've found a place that offers all of the above. It's called Shutka and it's in Macedonia.

You won't find Shutka - Roma capital of the Balkans, possibly the world - in any tourist brochures. I can't even find it on the map. But it looks like a brilliant place. And this, **True Stories: The Shutka Book of Records** (More4), is a brilliant film. It must have been a difficult pitch, and hats off to whoever had the foresight and imagination to fund it. So you want to make a really long documentary about a Gypsy town that simply zooms in on the lives of several of the inhabitants, most of whom are middle-aged men? Top idea, here's a whole bunch of money.

But hats off mostly to Aleksandar Manic, whose film this is. His device for stringing it all together is a joy: that in this place of superlatives, everyone is king of something. So Uncle Fazli is champion dervish; he can make a cucumber into a living being, or dematerialise you and rematerialise you in America, even if you don't have a visa. There are two people called Muzo, one a champion of poverty, the other of words. Alfonso is

champion of sex, Zedo is the champion graverobber. There's some dispute about who is champion of training fighting geese, and also who is champion goose.

The birds train with the boxers and are sat on to make their legs stronger. Uncle Jasher is champion of Turkish music cassettes (he does have 2,614, after all). Even our guide and narrator, Doctor Koljo, who is not afraid to laugh at his own community, is a champion - of fishing.

Everyone is laughing (when they're not fighting): at each other, with each other, on their own. I certainly was, throughout, and that's not something you can often say about a long documentary, with subtitles, about one of the world's poorest and most persecuted peoples. But that is precisely the beauty of this film. It is not about feeling sorry for the Roma, about hand-wringing and heartstring-tugging. It's a celebration - of their culture, humour, spirit, oddities and idiosyncrasies. And about the amazing music they make - the soundtrack to the film is, I imagine, what you'd hear if you simply wandered around Shutka.

Oh, and hats off to one more person: Dominik Miskovsky, director of photography, because it all looks so beautiful. You could pause any moment and have a beautiful still shot of life in Shutka. It does help that these people have the best faces in the world - so much expression. Aleksandar Manic is certainly champion of making memorable television. This was a lovely documentary, a party of a film.

How to get there then? None of the travel agents seem to go. I don't even know where to fly to. Skopje maybe? Got it: I'll get Uncle Fazli the champion dervish to rematerialise me in Shutka. And I have his number; he says it on the programme: Shutka 651825. The international operator says the code for Shutka is 00 389 2 (so it does exist: I was beginning to wonder if the whole thing was an elaborate joke). But when I add Fazli's six digits, I just get a continuous tone. Probably quite lucky. I can't remember how you say rematerialise in Macedonian.