

# ALL YOU CAN EAT BUDDHA

(Dir. Ian Lagarde, 2017 – 85 mins)

By Madeleine Wall

The resort is a space of the unreal. A chance to go away, but to a place that is still familiar. Everyone speaks your language, the food is what you're used to, and the boundaries of the resort keep out anything truly foreign. Ian Lagarde's *All You Can Eat Buddha* pushes that fantasy to its limits, taking one man's reprieve into literal fantasy.

*Buddha* is slowly paced and perfectly framed, a formal equivalent to the resort time his subjects are on. But Lagarde makes sure to undermine each point of the white Western fantasy that takes place at this resort. The beautiful ocean is sinister and magical, the staff have nothing but contempt for guests while practicing their well-worn greetings. The foreignness of this place is not the unspecified Spanish speaking country, but rather its sterility, the pools and pathways that has become coded as safe through money. These spaces are about wish-fulfillment, with doting staff and benevolent guests.

Mike (Ludovic Berthillot) is an outlier from the moment he steps off the bus, surprising even the seasoned Valentino (Sylvio Arriola). Disembarking last from the bus of elderly tourists, Mike is huge, peering over the other guests, overweight and already uncomfortable in the heat. Lagarde always keeps him in the centre of the frame, each shot postcard-perfectly constructed around him. Mike eats alone, well-aware of the stares he is getting from fellow tourists. He watches activities from a distance, stays in his hotel room during the fireworks show watching the local news, and even in a crowd is always separate. There's the sharp loneliness of being by yourself in a foreign country when your trip is not as you imagined, but Mike, after missing the return bus home, decides to stay on longer. "An adventure?" Valentino asks him. "No," Mike replies, "the opposite."

This decision to stay changes his fate, which is in turn made literal when he frees an octopus who'd washed up on shore. The other tourists gather round, one even taking photographs, treating this suffering animal like how they treated Mike. He is the only one who acts, breaking the boundary between the resort and the nature that surrounds him. The octopus, psychically, thanks him, telling him their lives are bound.

Legrande initial makes Mike a kind of spectacle, mostly silent, used to the isolation that comes with his size. But now he turns back on the gazes, and armed with powers from the octopus, changes lives. The gaze of the staff, always looking at Mike through trees and doors, becomes sincerely adoring, including his chambermaid Esmerelda (Yaité Ruiz) whose notes frame the film. The mocking gaze of his fellow tourists, looks he knows well, turns to gratitude, even creating acolytes.

Mike stays on as the season ends, gorging himself daily on multiple plates of food as he becomes one of the only guests, his body slowly dying as he neglects his physical form. The local news becomes increasingly violent, as the country is in the midst of a revolution. The resort and Mike begin to simultaneously fall apart and for a while it seems like Mike is on the path to *La Grande Bouffe* (1973) territory, with even the resort DJ telling him "you're literally letting yourself die." But this Buddha, as the title suggests, takes a different path.

There's a cognitive dissonance about travel, the desire to go somewhere else, but not too different. There is the desire to not be a tourist, but rather experience the place 'authentically', like a local, which can never truly happen. The affluent white Westerner comes to this much poorer country to gorge themselves on what little the nation has to offer, always forgetting what the locals must sacrifice in order to satisfy their guests' voracious appetites. What Legrande does with *Buddha* is take a fantasy to its logical end, undermining all the structures that come with it, to reach a state of bliss that no money (but perhaps a psychic octopus) can buy.