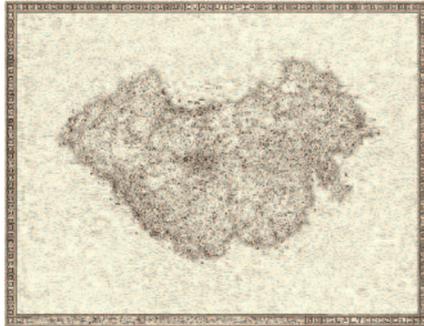


The Visitors' Guide to Nova Utopia

by Stephen Walter



The following description of Nova Utopia is taken from a well-known travel book about the island:

Nova Utopia is place of dreams! A large leisure island state about 200 miles across, defined by its isolation, its beauty and the immense diversity of its landscapes and resources. As a destination, Nova Utopia sits somewhere between the wonderful, the beautiful, the entertaining, the rich, the sublime and the ridiculous. Despite recent environmental and social concerns, there's a wonderful array of places to visit, and a tour of the island provides a fascinating insight into this unique and ever-changing country.

HISTORY

Ancient Utopia

Little is known of ancient Utopia. Its early inhabitants left no written accounts; only their stone monuments and burial mounds remain. These fascinating sites are often aligned to major 'ley' lines that spread throughout the island, some of which are still followed today by sections of paths. These were probably trading routes. Key landmarks and summits acted as sighting points, while marker stones located major meeting areas and crossings. One of the most famous, the 'Sacrum Line' (Sacred Line), leads to a huge stone circle or henge built by the 'Druids': its origins and meaning remain a mystery. The majority of these sites (some of which appear to be astronomically aligned) are located in the Sacrum region and are popular among 'alternative' tourists, who often walk the ancient routes.

Utopia: Traditional Period

According to local folklore, the ancient name for Utopia was 'Navel of the Earth', but the earliest written records call it Utopia (No-placia), the name given by the traditional settlers who came to the island in the Conquest of 244BC. They eradicated the old druid culture and established a large state system in its place.

Built into the ancient philosophy of the period was the idea of the 'mainland'. Medieval documents speak frequently of Utopia as if it were situated at the end of a peninsula: in fact the island stands magnificent in its isolation, a beauty spot sitting on a huge body of water. These early references remain a mystery, although scholars believe that the notion of a powerful landmass close at hand acted as 'stabling block' for island politics – fostering social cohesion, sedating competitive spirit, and sheltering the island from foreign influences.

The Transitional Years: 1500-1800

The famous traveller Raphael Nonsenso was the first to describe Utopia to the Western world in 1516. He continued to visit the island and espouse its culture for the rest of his life. By the Renaissance period in Europe, Utopia had developed into a prosperous state with 54 splendid towns spread across the island: because of its central position, Aircastle was where most national decisions took place, but otherwise little separated them in terms of size or influence. Utopia operated as a moneyless state that sought to preserve the structure of its society before the freedoms of individuals. Its leadership system consisted of Stywards, Bencheaters, Bishops and Mayors, who were granted jurisdiction by the citizenry through a series of elections.

The Utopia of 500 years ago was strict and ordered, but fair and just within its own systems, which centred on a strong sense of equality within community. The country stockpiled foreign money but had no currency of its own; islanders would ridicule the outside world's obsession with precious metals. Private land ownership was essentially a cardinal sin, and goods and services were shared evenly around the close-knit communities, where people lived and dressed simply. Individual travel was only undertaken with the written agreement of the local Styward, with the stipulation that the traveller help with the daily tasks of their hosts. Everybody worked, but labour was carefully shared: slavery and penal servitude were the punishments for crime, but law-abiding society was free from the working inequalities of their contemporaries in Europe. Utopians were tolerant of all religions, a tradition still observed today in the island's Open Churches, where people of all faiths share facilities. The Priests' influence is minimal on the island today, but they were traditionally held in extremely high regard both at home and abroad: so high, in fact, that they alone were considered to be above the law.

The rise of Capitalism: 1800-present day

Over time, foreign influences increased as travel and trade routes extended across the globe. As stories of great men and powerful technologies began to permeate the Utopian imagination, the previously unchallenged authority of the Bencheaters and Stywards began to decline. A growing wave of entrepreneurial aspiration emerged, which ultimately paved the way for revolution.

The Revolution of 1900

In 1851 a number of Utopian dignitaries including Diego Savo (then a young member of the Open Church) visited Europe and The Great Exhibition in London. The visit is considered a defining moment in Utopian history, ushering in calls for social change. A few decades later, public anger erupted following the 1890 Priesthood Scandal, when a spate of unpunished paedophilic crimes, committed by a section of the Priesthood against children in their care, came to light. Father Savo (by then head of the Open Church) promptly resigned as the 'high father', taking many of his priests with him to join the 'Entrepreneurs', a growing political force.

In calling for priests to be answerable to the law as well as God 'The Parent', Savo and his followers managed to separate themselves from the crimes of their old order. Meanwhile, some of those loyal to the old Priesthood joined the Utops (the hard line wing of the traditional system at the time) in the repression and occasional destruction of certain international publications, arranging book-burning demonstrations and ostracising those who promoted learning. Many Utopians were excommunicated and large numbers of 'free thinkers' and 'individualists' were forced abroad. Still more were oppressed, intimidated and punished as dissenters at home, where violent skirmishes were commonplace. Advocating personal wealth and freedom, the Entrepreneurs quickly emerged as a popular opposing faction, and by 1895 Utopia had become a divided nation.

The Entrepreneurs found their leader in Father Savo who, in 1899, joined forces with excommunicated Utopians and the mercenary Venalian Army to lead the country in Revolution. The Venalians were generally perceived as a 'savage'

nation of fighters, but were often paid by the Utopian state for military support. Their allegiance with the Entrepreneurs, bought with the promise of payment from the national currency reserves, was a final nail in the coffin for the old system. The Utops, desperate to hold on to their old way of life, congregated in the northern regions of Feo and the area surrounding Father Utopia's home-place, which quickly became their stronghold. The Venalian forces led a failed invasion via the Mouth of Feo in 1899 but successfully landed in early 1900, in what is now called the Bay of Venalia on the edge of Cosmo and Flosris. The two sides fought the decisive battle on the fields of Feo: the Entrepreneurs crushed the Utops on 23rd April 1900.

Nova Utopia

From this point on, the island was known as Nova Utopia, and the new century heralded the complete restructuring of Utopian society into a capitalist state. The promotion of wellbeing, good child-care, gardening and farming, and religious openness all continued, but the wealth of the nation was to prosper alongside that of the individual. Citizens were permitted to own or inherit their homes, and the island saw unprecedented housing and baby booms, along with a sharp rise in immigration. The free town of Venalia was established in light of the mercenaries' role in the revolution, while under the auspices of a new smaller state machine, individuals and small groups nationwide were encouraged to create their own, exclusive Utopias away from the tight rules and regulations of the old societal system.

The country established its first currency, the *de Niro*, which was an immediate success. Much of Utopia's foreign currency reserve was exchanged for the new money and spread throughout the population in the form of business

investment schemes. Mining and the exploitation of raw materials, the sale of land to foreign investors and the new wealthy citizens, and the development of the island as a tourist destination, all brought in new revenue. Novi, as some affectionately came to call it, quickly became a prosperous nation, an attractive place to do business and a 'dream island destination'.

Confidence in the 'market philosophy' and 'consumer capitalism' grew rapidly as the island saw sustained growth and productivity, and the feeling of positivity was rife as citizens operated free of the aristocratic hierarchies that plagued other countries. The ideals of old Utopia had been irrevocably compromised: private enterprise and land ownership paved the way to what the Entrepreneurs heralded as Utopia's 'Golden Age'.

Present Day

Nova Utopia today is one of the world's must see tourist destinations, and is widely known as the 'Leisure Island'. The diversity it offers is second to none, with a plethora of activities available, from the mass tourism of the Prora coast to the small projects and communities scattered across the island.

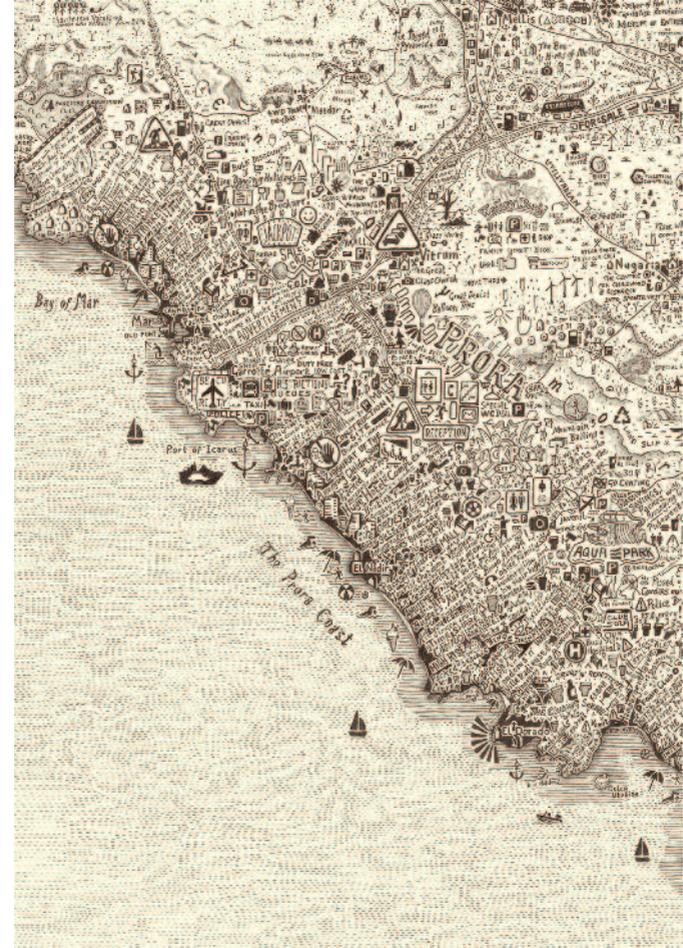
Where to go

The Prora Coast

The Prora Coast offers great value package tours and is a Mecca for sun lovers, with fabulous beaches offering miles of unbroken sand. The popular region has seen massive development in recent years as millions flock to it. The coastline is littered with concrete apartment blocks that hug the beaches and cater for families and large groups. Many complexes provide in-house catering and entertainment. Fast food kiosks, bars, British-themed pubs and amusement arcades are common here, with El Dorado being a particular hotspot for drinkers and stag parties.

In recent years, concerns have been raised about the environment and over-development: landslip warnings are in place in various locations, and the recent closure of the entire Prora Forest Park due to an unknown tree disease was a major blow. The authorities are tackling these problems, but some feel they have acted too late: the lost forest was considered the jewel in the region's crown, and the once beautiful savannahs are now feared to be unsalvageable.

More adventurous travellers may want to steer clear of this province, but Prora offers a huge amount to do and see, and the laissez-faire attitude of its natives means the region has a fun loving atmosphere. Popular attractions include Walley World and Aqua Park that are great for the kids; the large nudist colony of Mar; Cera's wax works factories; and the Prora Desert with its Jagged Pyramids, which offer both an Oasis resort, Caravan and 4x4 excursions. The old historical town of Mar is particularly interesting: it houses the Slavery Museum and maintains something of its old grandeur in comparison to newer towns like El Nadir.



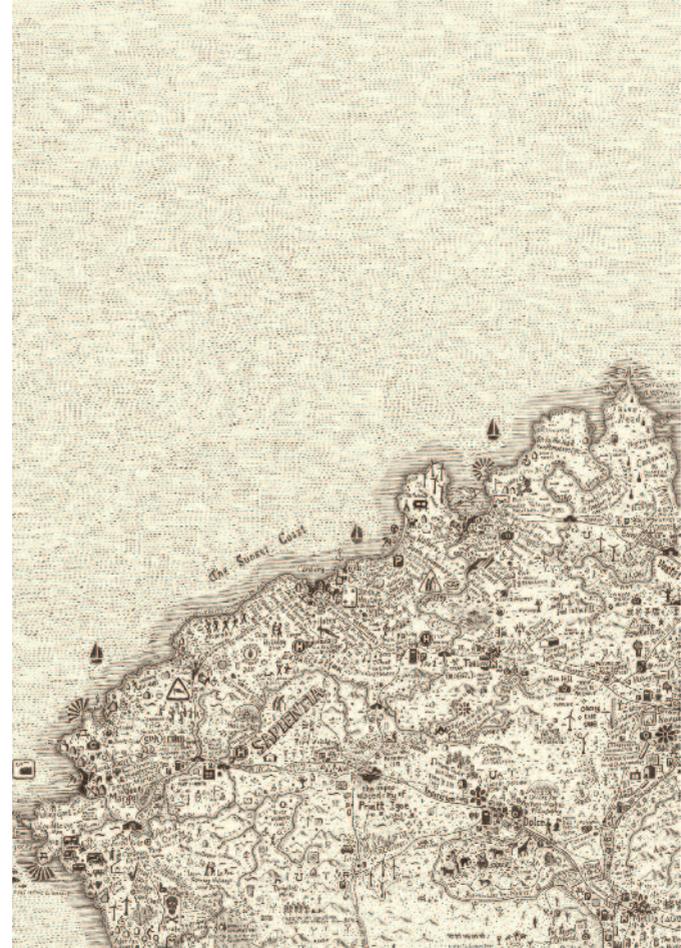
Activa

The region of Activa is hugely popular with the young and sporty, and the area is a centre for water sports. The windswept beaches of Mustus and Activa are great for surfing, while the awesome Activa Lake is known for its activity holidays, skydiving and bungee jumping. The accommodation in the region tends to be low-key and relaxed.



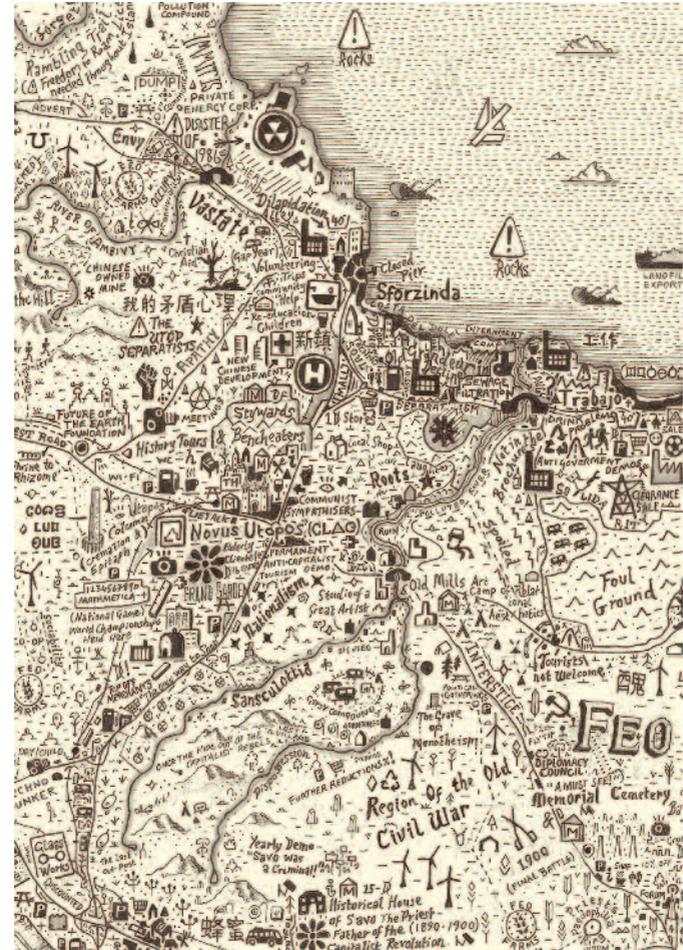
Sapientia

Sapientia caters more for an elderly and retired clientele. Stannah, Cordurer and Gurning Bay provide sleepy retreats away from the hustle and bustle of Prora. The water tends to be colder than further down the coast but the region still has wonderful stretches of coastline, Tales Head being the most atmospheric. The town of Margo is one of very few places on the island that maintains something of a traditional Utopian feel. Newcomers may find the food and the culture here bland, but it is a popular resort among natives. Those looking for a bit of authentic Utopia and holiday sun would do well to pay this town and its surrounding hamlets a visit.



Feo

For those interested in social history, the old industrial heartland of Feo is a fascinating region. Tours go to many of its manufacturing sites but several others are not mentioned in official brochures, so ask around. The Feos are fiercely proud of their heritage and claim the city of Novus Utopos – the birthplace and resting place of Father Utopos – to be the country's legitimate capital. The founding Father's epitaph column is as much of a shrine as it is a tourist attraction, and the grand old town is the spiritual centre of the region. The province has been in steady decline for half a century, and many of its once grand coastal towns are now run down. In some areas, such as the dilapidated Sforzinda, the maintenance of amenities is in serious question and towns struggle with social problems stemming from mass unemployment and low wages. However, those looking to get off the tourist track and meet the locals will find great conversation here: Feo's inhabitants have warm hearts, a rich language, and are steeped in political and local knowledge – and they like a drink or two. Ironically, the low rents and relative social independence are beginning to attract artists and musicians, transforming pockets of the region into hip cultural locations. Gentrification may well be on its way.



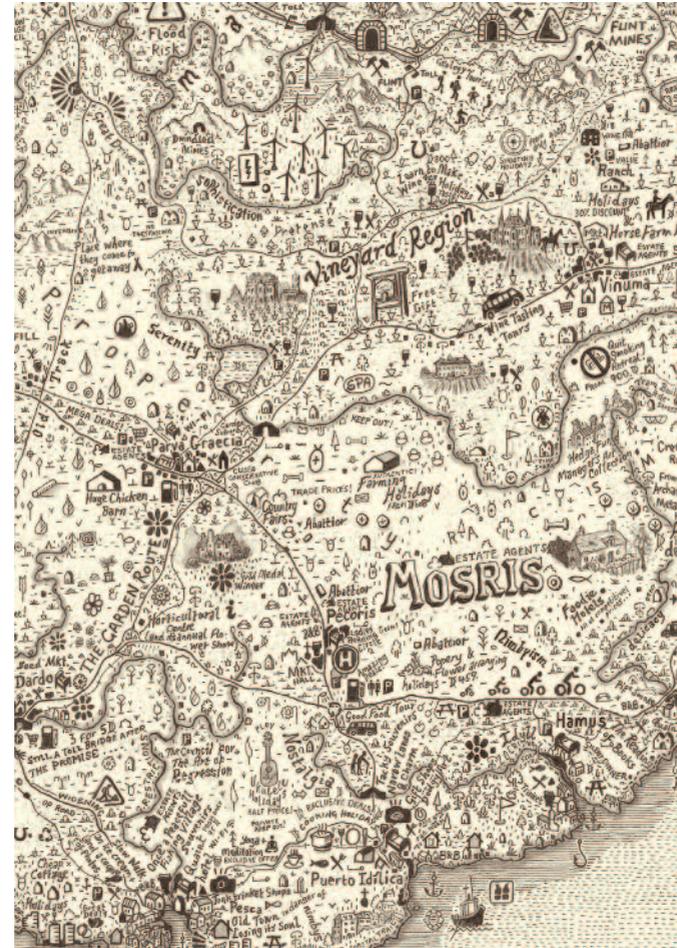
Munus

In the Munus region the star attraction is the central city of Aircastle (Castillo Aire), which has long been Utopia's capital and financial district. It has a vibrant centre and an active arts scene, and its charming museum and Latin quarters are perfect for short city breaks. The city is now far larger than any other in the country, but it's best to stick to the central areas; the outskirts are generally tatty and of less historical or cultural interest.



Mosris

Mosris is one of Nova Utopia's less populated counties and is ideal for those looking for a rural retreat, and fine dining. Its delightful coastal hamlets have a quintessentially traditional feel. Over-fishing in the past has led to extreme quotas, but the small fishing communities are just about kept alive as heritage industries and the region is still known for its great luxury seafood. Holiday cottages are to be found everywhere in this shire and many fine farm houses and retreats are available inland. The old tradition of gardening prevails here: there are some splendid award-winning gardens to be seen along its Garden Route. Towards the top of Mosris is the island's wine region, with many of its chateaus providing tasting tours for enthusiasts. Much of this province is fiercely private in an attempt to maintain the landscape: you will not find any footpaths here, so pre-booking your visits and transport is strongly advised.



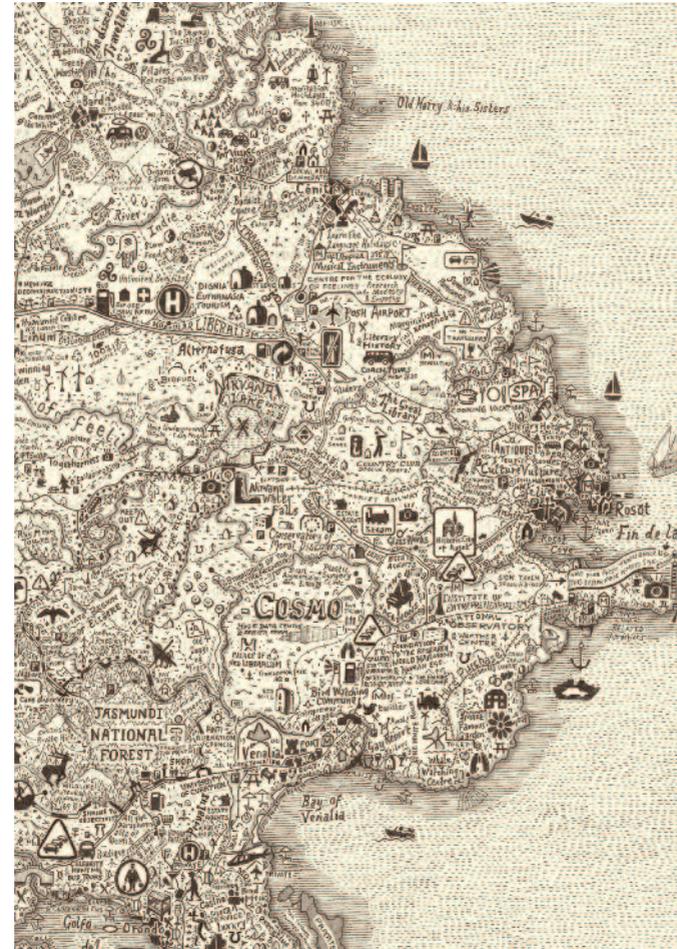
Temor

Mosris' pleasant scenery is owing to its proximity to the spectacular region of Temor and the Maumturks mountain range. This wonderful landscape is popular all year round: vast resorts cater for skiers in the winter months and mountain walkers in the summer. Jasmundi National Park is considered the most beautiful park on Novi. It has the largest area of pristine forest in the country and is strongly connected to the Romantic Movement. Except for this park and the unspoilt territory of Eligere, many areas have been marked by human intervention; but it's still hard not to be captivated by the wonderful scenery.



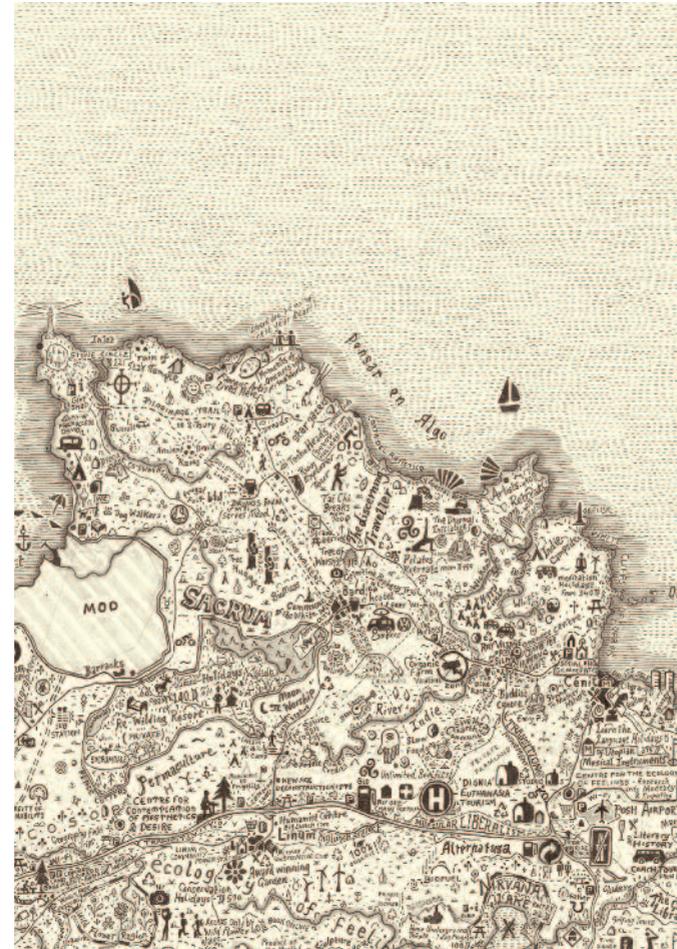
Cosmo

Cosmo is a diverse and occasionally controversial region, well known for its scientific research and for being the first province to set up one of the institutions dubbed 'centres for hope'. Euthanasia tourism has become the defining feature of the region for many people, but it also boasts a rich literary heritage and is widely considered to be the cultural capital of Novi. Rosot is a must see for all culture vultures, famous for its theatres, galleries and cosmopolitan café lifestyle, while the Bay of Venalia is a hotspot for gay tourism. The region's tourist railway, which winds its way from Rosot to Venalia, is a popular attraction and the Nirvana Lake and Falls are magnificent, although high entrance fees have triggered widespread indignation, largely limiting access to the wealthy. The private territory of Eligere occupies some of the island's most luscious real estate. This principality charges astronomical local tax rates, but what these funds go towards remains something of a mystery. Visitor or staff passes are required to roam at all times: if you cannot present one when asked, you will be removed – the area has its own private police force. The notion of devolved mini-states such as this is becoming increasingly popular, and the multi-national Eligerians are keen to extend their borders, offering adjacent homeowners huge purchase sums for their properties.



Sacrum

Part of this territory borders the province of Sacrum, a famous refuge for alternative cultures in opposition to privatisation. Community projects promoting sustainable living are common, as are artistic and holistic retreats, farms and food groups. From the growing towers of Mirus to the Transition movement in Esilita, the region is proud to champion emerging cultures of ecosophy. The region is famous for its Green Footpaths, which offer free public access to an unrivalled variety of routes. These have proved extremely popular (they can be crowded on summer days) and have generated renewed public interest in the ancient stones that litter this part of the country. Although Cenit is its regional capital, Sacrum does not have any one particular point of focus. Beyond the Paths and ancient sites, the landscape is fairly sparse (the scant natural resources in the region were stripped long ago) but the new natives regard this as part of the area's peculiar charm, and it is the perfect getaway for anybody tired of the island's more mainstream tourist traps.



General Information

Getting around

While the privately operated rail network does cover the whole country, it is generally expensive and offers poor value for money: once the pride of the nation, the system is in massive need of investment. Make sure you book in advance as the price of purchasing on the day tickets can be extortionate. The best option for travel is by road, but bear in mind that the roads are congested, so allow plenty of time to get around. This is not helped by many holiday makers and 'part-timers' on the island often opting to bring their own vehicles over on the long ferry journeys. The ownership and parading of material products is a national pastime; this most certainly includes cars.

Staying in touch

Communication is easy on the island, you will have no problem being connected: Wi-Fi is widely available in all establishments and most homes and resorts have internet connection.

Money, Costs and the Economy

The local currency on Nova Utopia is the *de Niro* (D). It's very easy to change and withdraw cash throughout the island, particularly in the larger towns, cities, and tourist sites, and all places accept major credit cards. Increasingly, everyday purchases are semi or fully automated: ATMs and self-service checkouts are commonplace. The fully staff-less Supersaver Deals Shopping Mall on the outskirts of Aircastle is the first of its kind in the world and offers the cheapest deals on the island.

Known across the world as 'Leisure island', Nova Utopia's success as a tourist destination has completely changed its cultural and physical landscape. Before the revolution, Utopia was essentially self-sufficient, but today the country relies heavily on imported goods as increasing sections of its cultivated land are cleared to make way for tourist developments. Wealthy immigrants and second home-owners are flocking to the popular holiday areas, while traditionally industrial regions such as Feo are in decline.

Just about everything on Nova Utopia comes with a price tag. Be prepared to pay entry fees to the vast majority of attractions, book in advance, check the map for estimated prices and budget carefully before you visit.

Regional Culture and Politics

Regional distinctions in Nova Utopia have evolved organically over time, but have been accelerated in recent years by the government's attempts to devolve legislation. The increasing geographical (and economic) separation of different areas has strengthened some local communities but reduced interaction between them. Many people now socialize primarily in like-minded groups and online, which has resulted in a declining sense of national identity as different regions and organisations compete rather than cooperate. People have started to use the Island as a place to set up their own 'little utopias' or 'dolce utopias' as they are known.

The government has had a rather aggressive policy of selling off land, normally to stakeholders of large companies in the expanding tourist industry. Virtually all of its land is now privately owned. This is a cause for concern in some provinces, especially Feo, which struggles with social and economic issues but retains a strong sense of local solidarity, refusing to become what the locals call 'butlers to the world's rich.'

Political unrest

A number of new political organisations have emerged on Nova Utopia in response to anti-capitalist feeling among the island's citizens. Most notorious of these is Feo's Utop Separatist movement, who argue that the morals which kept old communities together have slowly dissipated, resulting in a more unequal society. They call for a return to self-organisation in the region, but as so few own their own land here this seems extremely unlikely.

There have been reports of growing political tensions on the island and a sharp rise in the number of demonstrations at certain sites: the annual demo outside the old house of Savo near Mellis has occasionally turned violent. Although tourists are not deemed to be at risk of attack, some caution is advised in hotspot areas: contrary to official statements, you can now expect a frosty exchange with some locals outside the resort complexes especially in and around Feo.

Beacons of hope and the Picnic Movement

The segmentation of much of Nova Utopian society has become a concern to many on the island in recent years. The effects of overpopulation, the Internet and the automation of daily life have compounded the decreasing levels of interaction and a wider national identity.

This has contributed to the surge of interest in Zocola days and Big Lunch projects. These community parties promote local interaction and creativity. The first events were held in the village of Esilita in Sacrum but they are now widespread, offering mainstream society a way of bypassing the commercial influence of Nova Utopia's big Brands and Corporations.



One of the most interesting recent phenomena on the island is The Picnic Movement. Some of the only swathes of land left in public hands are the road networks. Picnic areas can be found on many of the lay-bys here and it is in these places that this curious movement has evolved. These 'centres of focus' are now areas where people organize meetings and families BBQ. Interactions of all kinds are nurtured through a system of bartering, volunteering and cooperation. New subcultures have emerged through performances and gatherings free from monetary exchange and away from the commercial spaces of the motorway service stations.

A growing complex of 'green footpaths' now links these spaces with other farms and plots whose owners believe in free access and who in turn benefit from these exchanges.

The Picnic Movement is calling for a change of attitudes towards concerns such as financial worth and the commoditization of society. Its followers seek social value, arguing that we should talk to each other more and cooperate in order to learn and promote new ways of living and new languages. 'Relational' issues and 'social interstice' are some of the buzzwords at the moment and as more people adopt their philosophy, be ready for changes on Nova Utopia. By their very nature the majority of these new gatherings and networks aren't aggressively advertised, so the best way to find out more is to go online and also to get out there and ask.

Nova Utopia, 2010 – 2012
by Stephen Walter
Notes from the artist

nova

a star that unexpectedly becomes very bright and then returns to its normal brightness over a period of months or years – Macmillan Dictionary 2012

There are many small utopian projects and communities around the world today; from slow food centres and sustainability camps, to community art projects, education foundations, and private follies. The balance between what is 'imagined' and what is 'practical' seems more attainable on a local level today than it does on a national or international stage. Beyond the fences of these small local hubs is a landscape that has grown sceptical towards the future. The world we envisage is not necessarily one of sustainability, equality, peace and harmony, but one of compromise, and fighting over limited resources in an overpopulated world.

The recent history of Western Europe has led many to question grand utopian projects. The oppressive architecture of the Hitler and Stalin regimes, the failure of Modernism to create a lasting 'universal language' for the masses, and the rubble of the infamous Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St Louis, USA – all remind us of the hubris of such big ideas and their practical manifestations. The foundation of the universal welfare state and the NHS in the UK, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and many other institutions around the world do show us that vast bureaucracies can be forces for good: but overall it seems that, having conceded to a nuclear future and the commercialisation of our world, political Utopianism is less relevant today than at any other time since World War II.

Of course 'Utopia' can't be seen as one concise idea or movement. It is and always will be a non-place, where one man's treasure is another man's trash. The term 'Utopia', coined by Thomas More in 1516, remains an enduring and symbolic concept. It speaks of a human desire to establish order and unity in the world, to found a republic where people live in harmony with each other and their environment, and where justice prevails. It is an imagined and idealised place, an egalitarian state.

Can the consumer capitalism of today deliver a sustainable, prosperous and healthy future? We live in a time when the gap between the rich and poor is widening in our society. Concerns over population, the environment, 'terrorism' and the banking collapse have led to a time of uncertainty, when the idea of a Utopia that one can either move to or create becomes radiant. But as far as our monetary and economic systems go, it's pretty much business as usual, a few tweaks here and there. The old market forces of supply and demand still rule, and we seem unable or at least unwilling to look beyond them.

Running alongside the ideas of the European community and its single currency – a force that wishes to create a huge union and bureaucracy – there is a tendency nowadays to veer towards 'the local' for concrete and pragmatic ideas. The ambivalence surrounding these questions, and the almost anachronistic nature of the Utopian idea today, provides the backdrop to the making of this piece, *Nova Utopia*.

My map illustrates how I imagine the island of Utopia to exist in the present day, 500 years on from when it was first described in Thomas More's book of 1516. More's protagonist Raphael Nonsenso described a healthy and prosperous egalitarian state that lived at one with itself and its environment. Utopia was essentially a republic where there was no private ownership of land or individual material wealth, only that of the collective. It had no currency of its own, but

did stockpile foreign monies from its exports for security reasons. Utopia was a strict but just society that dealt harshly with its criminals and was proudly incorrupt. Resources were spread evenly throughout the nation, no one went without, and community life and learning was encouraged over and above the whims of any individual.

I depict the island a century after a capitalist revolution in 1900 and adopt Abraham Ortelius' 1596 map of Utopia as my aesthetic template, echoing its coastline and rivers. Ortelius drew on a variety of languages for his place-names to highlight the fiction at the heart of this 'no place'. I remix them here using English, Spanish, German, French, Latin and Mandarin Chinese, and occasionally a hybrid of these.

My Utopia is essentially a tourist destination, a 'leisure island' where dream holidays and activities familiar from today's advertisements mingle with historical utopian ideas and fictional cultures. The concept of 'Utopia' is loosely played with here to form a compendium that includes certain dystopian consequences. Many of its elements remain in the realm of credibility, while others defy contemporary reality.

In many ways this piece mirrors issues in the UK today, with pressures on its landmass and its capitalist ambiguities. It could be seen as a Britain in the sun, where the price its culture has to pay for peace and prosperity is over-tourism, and where its proletarian natives have to bear the brunt of a system that inevitably has its winners and its losers.

Using the back-story of Thomas More's Utopia and geographical features influenced by Ortelius, I illustrate where certain communities and particular types of people have congregated on different parts of the island. Sapientia has become an ideal destination for the retired; the coast of Prora and its

beaches for package holidays; Activa for the young; Sacrum for the alternatives; Cosmo for the culture vultures; Mosris for traditionalists; and Flosris for the rich. The island has both a desert and a vast skiing resort on the mountains of Temor.

Polemic patterns have emerged with the towns of Zenith & Nadir and the regions of Feo & Idilica found on opposing sides of the island. Although it is a depiction of a wonderful place, the nation finds itself at a number of precarious tipping points. It is in danger of selling its soul to tourism and selling its lands to exclusive communities, intent on building their own private visions of Utopia. Clues and historical references are buried in the work, to be deciphered with a closer look.

Nova Utopia is a map that glories in landscape, semiotics, etymology and the intricate details of life. It ultimately displays a mixture of positivity towards modern culture and consumerism, and concerns about over-commodification, issues of private and the public good, and the politics of space. The traditional and formal continuity of the work cloaks the uncertainty and contradictions that lie within it.

The Hagioscope Frame

hagioscope

hagioscope, also called squint, in architecture, any opening, usually oblique, cut through a wall or a pier in the chancel of a church to enable the congregation – in transepts or chapels, from which the altar would not otherwise be visible – to witness the elevation of the host... – Britannica Encyclopedia, 2013

The maps I have produced over the past twelve years have influenced the way I make marks. Every sign and symbol within them has a back-story but also relates

to the other symbols around it. They are all informed by a certain politics of space, where each area is denoted according to its particular appropriation of the land. This slows down an otherwise expressive mark-making process, pulling it into a graphic form. Every segment takes into consideration the other constituent parts. My own artistic expression has to be filtered through a wider public language. This is slow work.

Lying at the heart of this particular piece is the anachronistic nature of Utopian fiction today. Utopia feels like an obscure thing to be looking at now, after so many failed attempts to achieve it. Thomas More alluded to the inherent fiction of Utopia throughout his book, describing people from the country of Nolandia and the river Nowater. Utopia is in many ways a ridiculous aspiration but it is an enduring one.

In his 1932 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' Walter Benjamin put forward the idea of Art's traditional 'aura'. He argued that hand-made, original artworks are inextricably linked to the rituals and traditions of their makers, and possess a sense of enchantment, which the viewer can internalize. By contrast, the reproduced image lacks this particular 'aura' but gains a new power, one that is dilated away from a singular vision. Its value is altered by its new accessibility, its 'displayability', communicating to a wider public in ways the original cannot.

I wanted to explore these ideas a little further, and as printmaking plays a major role in my work I decided to exhibit the original alongside its reproduction, contrasting the former's unique 'aura' with the latter's open accessible display. This method also takes into consideration the nature of semiotics: signs and symbols lend themselves to reproduction, emerging from a public language which has evolved steadily over time by being copied, reconfigured and modified.

I had the idea to present the original drawing in a hagnioscope frame. This fully encapsulates the work, so that it is visible only through a single, movable portal fitted with a magnifying lens. The viewer cannot stand back from the work, and can take in the entire map only by attending closely to its various sections in turn. The frame itself, with its walnut veneered shutters, forms the rest of the visible frontage; it is a piece of Victoriana with a contemporary twist. Only one person can view the map at a time: this exclusive experience is at odds with what traditional Utopia claims to be – an egalitarian, inclusive state.

Stephen Walter
Nova Utopia
2010 – 2012

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