

**Determined** in spite of the problems

In some countries picnics are a way of life. We British were never meant to picnic but we **battle** on, regardless of the **wind**, rain and thick cloud that appears quicker than you can unfasten the leather straps on a picnic basket. Regardless of nettles and **wasps'** nest, and of barbed wire. We know that fresh air **sharpens** the **appetite** and lifts the **spirits**. Sunshine and a light breeze can make even a sandwich twice the meal it is indoors. In short, food tastes better outdoors. But there is more to it than that. The need to picnic is part of our culture and nothing is going to stop us.

Unreal but **unforgettable**

The **perfect** picnic exists only in a far off corner of our mind; an escape, a place to go and daydream. We never have, and **almost certainly** never will have, that idyllic outdoor meal on a tartan rug by a babbling stream, because as they say, it's all in the mind. What is so **mystifying** is the **similarity** between everyone's memories of the perfect picnic. So just when did we **experience** that magical meal in a buttercup-**strewn meadow**? And how come we can remember every last detail of it when we know very well that it never **actually** happened?

Disappointed but **cheered** up by the meal

The reasons not to picnic are outnumbered only by the several good reasons why we should. For every **hornets'** nest and forgotten **corkscrew** there are twice as many melting cheeses and sweet, **ripe tomatoes** for us to put in our basket. Each beauty spot littered with **abandoned** fridges is easily outnumbered by the thought of **loaves** of crusty bread and slices of cool **melon**. In other words, it is the food that saves the day. Get that right, and nothing short of a tidal wave can **dampen** our **enthusiasm**.

**Unplanned** but more likely to succeed

If it is to have a hope of turning our right, however, a picnic must be a **snap** decision. So, rule number one is never set a date weeks in **advance**. Picnics are part of life in countries with a steady **climate**. In Britain, they tend to depend totally on what the sky is doing on the day. Which means doing nothing until the last minute, like it or not.

Willing to accept that anywhere will do

Then we must find that secret spot. The correct location isn't everything. We can spread out our cloth in a lay-by if we must. We have been led to believe that it is necessary to picnic in an English meadow. But with one half of the countryside under a blanket of yellow rape-seed fields, and the other half turned into golf courses, we can no longer be so **fussy**. **Hardened** picnickers know that every place big enough to unpack a basket is fair game.

Soaked but happy with the simple life

I have to admit that I have a soft spot for rained-out picnics. Not out of a sense of spite, but because I like the smell of sandwiches, drenched dogs and **flasks** of coffee in a damp car. **Nostalgia** no **doubt**, but it is as fine a seasoning for a meal as salt and pepper. As far as I am concerned, five people in a car passing around packets of cheese and onion crisps and chunks

of meat pie is far more fun than pushing a china plate of expensive food around a white linen picnic cloth.

Bigger is definitely better

But you must be generous. No one will thank you for that miserable tub of dip and packet of pitta bread you picked up at the corner shop. There must be plenty to eat. A whole cheese costs less than lots of small bits and looks vastly more interesting. A huge bowl of cherries will make ten times the impression of a chopped up fruit salad. Think on a large scale, but think simple.

Sad but unfortunately true

If all this sounds a bit like battle plans, then it is only because that's what we will need. We can organise the food, the location and the friends. We can pack our picnic with care and even remember the mustard, but we need to remember also that we are dealing with something bigger than us all: the simple fact that the British were never born to eat outdoors.