There is a class of people who are raised to abhor the package tour. I am of that class. Such values flow to us with our mother’s milk, along with dislike of loud voices and intrusive behaviour. Virtually any group activity is suspect. Even some church gatherings border on the indecorous.

Nonetheless, I write this on the second day of a package tour. We are on a boat, plying the Gulf of Mexico—destination some Mexican resort. The boat is filled with doctors and their families, for a “learn at sea” symposium. We are actually only a small part of the passengers, perhaps 100 of a total 1500. I am faculty, given a free ride in exchange for a 2-h talk on Alzheimer’s—a disease I do not believe in. I am in a sullen mood.

All this humanity, and not just humanity, Texas humanity! One boat, 1500 Texans. I am a Texan. I love Texas. But 1500 of anything is too much. How to describe these Texans? Where to start? Two words come to mind: loud, and—I don’t know how to put this politely—fat. Lets start with fat. One reads in the pages of this and other medical journals that the western world is experiencing an epidemic of obesity. If you don’t believe it, take a cruise. 90% of the day is devoted to eating. I am reminded of Magic Mountain, but the five meals a day provided to the residents of the Sanitorium Berghof were required to stave off tuberculous cachexia. Not here. I will stop here. I will not proceed to the feedlot analogies. I will forgo comparisons to programmes for alcoholics based on the “all you can drink” premise. I am not that sullen. Let me turn to the loud.

There are many accents in Texas. Some are quite beautiful. The friendly drawl of Abilene, the soft gulf coast speech laced with Cajun tones, the soothing Hispanic cadence. But most of the world knows only the Dallas accent, that industrial shriek that has shattered stained glass throughout Europe. Dallas speech is such an anomaly, for in the cattle country of north Texas that surrounds Dallas, people would die (or, alternatively, kill) before they would raise their voices. This familiarity with the Dallas accent is not, as is commonly thought, because of its ubiquity in certain previously popular television series. No, the familiarity stems from the fact that the Dallas accent travels for an average of 17 miles. Two Dallasites in central London can be heard in Greenwich. Six Dallasites conversing in Greenwich would precipitate a precautionary closure of the observatory. Consequently, few members of the human species have escaped first hand knowledge of this dread speech. Dallasites occupy the bedroom next to ours. They rarely sleep. Or, perhaps like fish and swimming, sleep does not interrupt their seemingly incessant vocalisation.

I read my wife what I have written so far. She laughs. My sullenness begins to lift. I flag a waitress and ask her for anything orange in a tall glass with an umbrella. I drink. I relax. I smile. Soon my braying laugh can be heard across the deck. Then I remember. I am loud, too. Was I not once asked to leave a restaurant named The Monday Palace for suggesting sotto voce that it was named after the day when our food would be served? After a couple of drinks, my sotto voce is more what others would consider mega voce. So I am not as far from Dallas as I would like to think. Not 250 miles, just 3 ounces of rum. It is time for me to chill, to enjoy the cruise—the whole package.

James Goodwin