

# Health

## Mind Over Matter

**T**ravelers face a multitude of health hazards. Even during those seemingly peaceful hours we pass on planes, trains, ships or buses our bodies are under siege by alien flu bugs brought on board and coughed into the air circulation system by other passengers and staff. Flu bugs are nothing compared to the maladies that threaten us in distant lands. From amoebas to tse tse flies, travelers are susceptible to a formidable army of germs, viruses, bacteria, insects and assorted poisonous plants and reptiles.

If you think much about the awful possibilities, you have to wonder how anyone ever gets past the stage of armchair traveler and out into the wonderful but insecure world. Of course, the answer is that determined travelers don't think too much about all the afflictions that might befall. In fact, we know the chances are good that most undesirable invaders can be handled by one's own internal defense system and by taking certain precautionary measures. We get the proper inoculations, take care what we eat and drink, wear sun screen, practice safe sex and use common sense. Don't we?

I recall in Australia, reading a sign that said, "Your first encounter with a Sea Wasp will be your last." In Zimbabwe I read, "Beware of Bilharzia." Both signs meant stay out of the water, so I did. But I have to admit that traveling brings about predicaments and circumstances that defy common sense strategies.

In Bangkok, for example, I could not resist the charm of two youths who invited me on a short expedition down the Chao Phraya River to visit a family





of fruit farmers. My adventurous spirit leapt at the chance to experience Thai lifestyle, but six hours later in 35C degree heat, 99 percent humidity and the last of my bodily fluids dripping off the end of my nose, I was grateful, if squeamish, to accept a glass of murky river water – boiled they said. Of course river water was all the family had, for cooking, washing, bathing, and drinking, just like everyone else in that river side community. I drank the water and survived without so much as a grumble in the tummy.

The experts say that eating salads and ice cream in “third world” countries is asking for trouble. I can’t disagree, but again I have to admit to having carelessly tempted fate in that regard on more than one occasion. Still, I survived.

Solo travelers are especially vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases while on the road. After all, virtually no one wants to be alone all the time. And when you need a little human company, a chance encounter with a stranger may lead to harmless flirtation. If the vibes and circumstances gibe, flirtation may induce raging hormones, weak knees, fluttering heart, and nature is liable to dictate its course heedless of safe sex techniques.

Some experts say that good health has as much to do with state of mind as anything else. For me, that logic had proven true five months into my around-the-world journey. Up to that point, the only disagreeable invasions my body had endured were a few excess pounds of fat, which were lodging on my hips as I began my sojourn in South Africa.

At that time in South Africa, the “Apartheid” regime, though losing grip, still had a place in law. I wanted to see and feel for myself what this Apartheid idea was all about, and I intended on spending at least two months in the country.

At first I was encouraged to find that the system seemed much less restrictive than I had expected. Within hours of my arrival in Johannesburg as I checked into a hotel located in a so-called “white” district, a black woman checked in just ahead of me. I recall lunching at the five-star Carlton Hotel and noting white waiters serving customers both black and white. In banks and other institutions, I observed all races working side by side. In Cape Town I rode the public transport, sitting beside people of every color. I saw prosperous looking black men driving expensive Mercedes and BMW’s. Black artists seemed well regarded and represented in all media. And I was delighted to hear that the most popular television program of the day was *The Bill Cosby Show*.

As time went on, however, I also experienced the true depth of racial prejudice. In countless small ways, remarks overheard, expressions observed, warnings given, fears expressed, I soon understood

that ethnic feelings go very deep in South Africa, not only between whites and blacks, but also between whites and “coloreds,” coloreds and blacks, and between blacks and blacks.

Though I never saw a single incidence of trouble myself, newspapers were full of township hooliganism, horrendous “necklace” trials, and riots at miners’ hostels.

White society lamented the state of things and what they feared would be the loss of “their beautiful” South Africa, a country not only bountiful in resources, scenically diverse, and blessed with an extraordinary cultural heritage, but also functional to European standards.

By the time I had been in the country six weeks, a vague but growing sense of discontent began to darken my mood. Why? The weather was great, the living cheap. I could afford clean, pleasant lodgings, and the food was comfortingly familiar. Something difficult to define gnawed at me, but what? The answer dawned while riding a segregated bus – one of only two I encountered. I was traveling along the “Garden Route,” that spectacular stretch of mountainous terrain bordering the southern coastline of the continent. A sheet of metal walled off a few “white” designated seats from the rest of the bus, but I figured the black African passengers had a better time of it than I and two other white tourists, because we had to tolerate the driver’s non-stop musical renditions of his American country western favorites delivered with a South African twang.

Out the window I could see passengers embarking and disembarking at the back as we stopped at every little burg between George and Knysna. That’s when it occurred to me that my South African experience had so far been shallow and relegated to a superficial “white” viewpoint. I had seen but not associated with even one black South African, except for hotel servants.

In Knysna, a pretty little resort town, I wanted to stay by the seaside away from town center, but without a car I would be isolated out there, the only transport being a “colored” bus. There was no law against my taking it, but as I was told, “It just isn’t done, too dangerous, you being white.” I could have but didn’t argue. Instead, being lily-livered, I gave up the chance for a restful seaside retreat.

Apartheid had succeeded in stirring up fear in me. Disgruntled, I moved on with a feeling of oppression weighing on my mind. In Port Elizabeth I stopped over in a good quality three-star hotel. The city was rife with political argument. A black man had challenged the “whites only” law at a local beach. An international team of diplomats had arrived to impress world opinion upon city officials. Tension was palpable. Although it was an extremely fascinating time to be there, I felt low in spirit. Next came nausea, then stomach cramps, then for two miserable days I was very ill, managing only to stagger between bed and bathroom.

Something I ate or drank? I suppose so. I only know for sure that the sterile environment of Apartheid had stymied my bodily defenses whereas Bangkok river water had not.

[See Going Solo Tips](#)

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*Health Issues*