

Don't go near the water

Last April I was at a dinner party in Libya and fell to chatting about traveller's ailments with a charming gentleman on the cushion next to me. He turned out to be a doctor and senior government health official who often traveled to Third World nations.

How, I asked him, did he cope with all the gastro-intestinal nasties in those places? His answer dismayed me.

"I bring all my own food. Tins of tuna, sardines, cheese and crackers," he explained. "It's suicide to eat the local food." Now, when Libyans are scared to eat the local fare, what about North Americans whose delicate digestive systems are not trained for hand-to-hand combat with Force-10 bacteria?

Well, I am not about to lug bags of tinned food around the world but I did go off to get my pre-departure shots and drugs. Planning a trip may be half of the fun, but not when a gloomy-looking doctor ticks off things to worry about.

First of all, hostile *E. coli* bacteria that produces runny miseries known as Montezuma's revenge, Delhi belly or pharaoh's curse. I was once pleased when in Egypt to see a bunch of green-faced Mexican tourists moaning about "la turista" — poetic revenge for laughing at the gringos.

E. coli is mere child's play. Next comes hepatitis A and B. A recent study suggested that 48% of all people in the region from Iran to Burma have been exposed to hepatitis A, which is passed on through food and water. The deadlier B variety is caught in the same way as AIDS, through blood or other body fluids.

Then there's airborne meningitis, against which I just got vaccinated, plus those old favorites cholera, typhoid, yellow fever and bubonic plague.

But the really big danger remains malaria. In spite of all the fuss and hysteria over AIDS, malaria remains the world's No. 1 killer. Millions in Africa and Asia die every year from this mosquito-borne disease.

Until fairly recently, the drug chloroquine was generally effective in preventing malaria. This

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drug was an updated version of quinine, which people used to mix with their gin in the form of tonic water to ward off the deadly malady. But many insect varieties have now grown chloroquine resistant.

A powerful new drug, Fansidar, was then used in areas where resistant mosquitos were found, but it has evil side effects and even caused a number of deaths. In rural Thailand and Laos, for example, mosquitos have even become Fansidar-resistant, so other potent drugs are being used.

Malaria is not, however, a major danger in urban or most tourist areas. In remote rural areas of Asia and Africa precautions must be taken, such as staying indoors after dark, wearing socks and long sleeves, and using insect repellent.

Parasites are another major problem. They come from food, water or — as the dreaded schistosomiasis — from tiny snails that live in stagnant water and enter the body through its pores. Getting parasites is easy. Getting rid of such infections can be difficult, slow or even impossible.

Most Third Worlders suffer from some degree of intestinal or blood parasites, which debilitate and expose them to opportunistic infections.

How to defend yourself, aside from taking your own food and water, or staying inside a large plastic bag?

Eat only cooked food from reputable kitchens. Avoid all shellfish. Don't eat fish when you are not at the sea. No salads or uncooked vegetables. Only fruits that you peel. No ice cubes, and watch anything to which water may have been added. Be careful of all dairy products. Steer clear of cold buffets, mayonnaise and other sauces, and even coffee or tea if the water used to make them has not been boiled for five minutes or, better yet, 10.

Drink soda water, beer, soft drinks and fizzy mineral water. Watch out for "purified water" you see in hotel rooms — how do you know the maid has not filled it from the tap?

Starchy foods are okay, such as bread, rice and potatoes. Parasites hate onions, garlic and hot peppers. Yogurt is also generally safe. Anything loaded with sugar — which kills just about anything — is reasonably non-threatening.

Be careful of swimming pools in the tropics. If not properly chlorinated, you can catch parasitic and bacterial infections from the warm waters. Never touch your eyes.

Always, as an old friend taught me, bring a bottle of disinfectant to clean your sink, toilet and tub. Anyone who believes in those little "sanitized" paper strips also believes in Santa.

And, of course, give a wide berth to local Delilahs lest you get an infection like the infamous "bull-headed clap" that, as an army medic once told me, "eats penicillin for breakfast."