

Faint hearts never won fair Europe

Amazed, I think, is a good word to describe my reaction to people who tell me they are cancelling their vacation trips to Europe because of terrorism. But I must be in a minority since travel bookings to Europe this summer are down, according to some reports, by 80%.

Forget the Greek isles, the Holy Land, never mind the Eiffel Tower, nix the Vatican, scratch the Tower of London. Americans and Canadians, it seems, are shoaling en masse to such hotspots as Disneyworld and Vancouver's Expo. The non-American world has suddenly, for them, become a very dangerous place.

"Well, a chicken-hearted traveller asked me, 'would you go to Europe with all those Libyans and bombs and things?' My answer was a thundering yes! Far better, I say, to die with a glass of Beaujolais in my hand, sitting in the French sunshine, than to vacation in ghastly Myrtle Beach or unspeakable Orlando.

Actually, the number of North American tourists killed or injured in Europe over the last year is less than the number of people mugged or slain by urban terrorists in New York City. Two weeks ago, when I was visiting there, a Jewish jeweler who had managed to survive the horrors of Auschwitz was murdered in cold blood by Puerto Rican robbers. The next day, a man snatched a woman's handbag in the subway and pushed her in front of an oncoming train.

In 1985, there were 11 murders in the New York subway and countless muggings and rapes. More people were killed by urban terrorists last year in New York than in Belfast. Crime in the New York subway system — called by a friend of mine "The Electric Sewer" — is up 30% this year. Statistics show that a

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tourist visit to New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco or Houston is far more dangerous than a visit to France or Britain.

Yes, air travel is scary, what with Palestinian wild men trying to blow up airliners. The answer to this terror is tighter security, not abstention from flying. The Israeli airline, El Al, which averted a bombing last week, has the right answer. Super-tight security, multiple checks, a level of seriousness other airlines should adopt. I feel safer on El Al than on, for example, the large U.S. airline which almost lost its contract to fly U.S. military personnel because of questionable maintenance.

One problem here is that North Americans have only the fuzziest idea of geography, a subject barely taught these days by our trendy, liberal schools. To many people, the rest of the world is a murky, menacing place filled with bomb-tossing Libyans, nasty maitre d's, cheating taxi drivers and garlic-chewing ruffians. Most Americans and Canadians could not tell you whether Libya was next to Belgium, Pakistan or Burma. They look on Europe the way an old Virginia farmer once described it to me: "That thar place across the great water."

Europe is a big place. The chances of getting blown up there in a terrorist attack are about the same as having a chimney fall on your head while walking down the street in Pocatello, Idaho. In France or Italy, the greatest danger is still the *crise de foie* (liver attack) brought on by rich food and drink.

Would-be voyagers to Europe should calm the fears raised in their breasts by months of media hysteria. We somehow survived the last media orgy of hysteria over AIDS and I suspect we will also survive the current frenzy of travelphobia and Libomania. While all travel has inherent dangers, going to Europe is no more dangerous than staying in North America. Going to Mexico, Latin America and the Third World is a different story.

In Israel, about 280 people have been killed by terrorist attacks in the last 40 years, less than the percentage of New Yorkers killed by muggers and robbers. You are safer in Tel Aviv than in Manhattan. In Cairo, you can walk in the poorest area without feeling threatened or uneasy. In Athens the risk of being killed by madcap Greek drivers is 1,000 times greater than dying from terrorist bombs.

Enough of this hysteria. People who cancel their plans are doing precisely what terrorists want. Care and caution, not Chicken Littleism, is required. Besides, there is a bright side. I find Europe between June and September to be unbearable, one massive traffic jam of bus-tour visitors. For those of us who don't give a fig for all the terror hysteria, Europe could be a most delightful place this summer. It will take more than a few Mideastern crazies to keep me away from my Armagnac and *fromage*.