

# "DOCTOR AT SEA" a monthly Column in The Islander Magazine

## Winter in Mallorca

It is difficult to visit the beautiful town of Valdemossa without being reminded of a winter in Mallorca shared by Chopin and George Sand in 1838-39. Her book of the same title describes a cold climate, a cold welcome and a cold world of culture.

This coming winter will be our first on the island having arrived in March this year. It is difficult to feel sorry for ourselves in the manner expressed by George Sand especially when we remember our first exploratory visit last December when I wandered around Palma in shirt sleeves shortly before Christmas. Back home in the north of England the local authorities were stockpiling salt and grit to keep the icy roads clear and the overnight temperatures in beautiful but rugged Northumberland dropped to minus 10 deg. The Mallorcan winter seems like a gentle release from the powerful heat and humidity of summer but it still does offer some particular health concerns.

Winter is the time of year when flu strikes. The virus mutates regularly and, as a result of climatic factors, fresh mutations spread to the north from October onwards after the southern hemisphere's winter. It is a few years since we had a full-blown epidemic but this may be in part due to aggressive immunisation programmes. The vaccine is developed each year to target the new flu virus mutations and offers good protection against a condition which is far more serious than the common cold with which it is often confused in the public mind. The elderly and children and those suffering from chronic diseases, such as heart disease, chest conditions, diabetes, kidney conditions, are particularly at risk of serious complications and ought to take up their flu vaccine during the last months of the year.

Occasional cold snaps can lead to unexpected ice on the paths and on the roads and can lead to accidents. It is very common to see older patients with a broken wrist at this time of year due to falling on an outstretched hand. I can remember a walking holiday here in March 2004 when it had been snowing in Palma and we saw the remains of the severe weather up in the mountains around Soller. It was bitterly cold and some of the walks went above the snow line. Similarly the arrival of rain on the road surfaces produces a low-friction film as lethal as ice. Any of these unfamiliar conditions can catch unaccustomed drivers by surprise and lead to more serious accidents.

Christmas is a time for celebration as the churches will rightly emphasise but there are lots of celebrations of a different kind fuelled by a different spirit. There has been debate in the UK at times on whether to charge patients for alcohol-related injuries requiring hospital treatment. It has not come to anything yet but far better to stay standing in the first place.

Even without a drunken accident, it is possible to feel the worse for wear the next morning. Much of this misery is caused by poor quality sleep and dehydration. The dehydration can be lessened by drinking more water during the evening, say by the generous use of ice or water or soft drinks. It is not a good idea to try more alcohol in the morning as a remedy and it is worth remembering that the blood level of alcohol may still be significant after a hard night. Each glass of wine, measure of spirit or half pint of beer is a unit of alcohol and we clear about one unit per hour on average. This can be relevant if we think about getting behind the wheel early the following day.

Here's to a safe and healthy winter in Mallorca and a happy Christmas when it comes.

*Dr Ken Prudhoe, MCA Approved Doctor, can be contacted at Club de Mar Medical Centre, Palma de Mallorca. Tel: (+ 34) 639 949 125.*