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

The World is your Oyster

Delivery voyages, Atlantic crossings, round the world adventures, long-distance races, far-flown chartering – these are some of the reasons to account for the continuous turnover of yachties on the island. In our experience, we enjoy getting to know a small group during training courses and then realise, as we say sad farewell, that the group is about to scatter to the far corners and will probably never regroup as a whole in the future. The open sea gives vast opportunities for travel far beyond the lifestyle or the dreams of most land-based people. Like all adventures, these opportunities are not without risk but it is possible to minimise the risk to health by taking some sensible precautions.

Most developed countries have comprehensive public immunisation policies to cover conditions such as tetanus, polio, a number of childhood illnesses, tuberculosis and some forms of meningitis but a number of other conditions may not be covered because they are not endemic in the country or are only considered high risk for certain groups, for example hepatitis B in health workers. Before embarking on international travel, it is essential to look at protection against hepatitis A (a form of food poisoning), more seriously hepatitis B (a mainly blood borne liver condition), typhoid (from contaminated water or another victim) as well as some less common conditions such as rabies or yellow fever, and there are others – the list becomes very long and checking out on a travel website or with a doctor is good advice. Yellow fever immunisation is mandatory for travel to some countries – the vaccine is well tolerated and the certificate is valid for ten years but is only available at certain designated centres – there is one in Mallorca at 7 Casa del Mar in Palma (open 9am to 1pm weekdays, appointment not needed – no advertised telephone number)

One day a malaria vaccine may be available but, until then, good personal care and preventive tablets are necessary. The condition results from a bite from an infected mosquito so it is better to wear long sleeves and long trousers, to apply insect repellent on remaining exposed skin and to use mosquito nets when sleeping – probably better to stay indoors around dawn and dusk when the midgies are active. Malaria is commonplace amongst some populations to the extent that it is accepted casually but it remains a killer with a million deaths each year and is best treated with respect. There are different malaria bugs and the distribution and potency varies so it is crucial to get proper advice about preventive medication in advance.

It is not possible to prevent every illness or to avoid every accident but many vessels now carry extensive medical kits on-board and also have crew members who are trained in the use of the contents as well as be able to act as the eyes and ears for radio-medical advice should the need arise.

The luxury yacht provides its own security against many local hygiene hazards but there will always be trips ashore to explore the culture and customs of the many destinations.. As I write this article, my wife Rosemary is visiting one of our children in India and, apart from a horrible cold, has come through unscathed by taking sensible precautions where hygiene may be suspect – avoiding suspect water and food (or ice) prepared from suspect water – drinking boiled or bottled water – snacking on bananas rather than biting into the skin of a local fruit. The list of advice goes on and on and I have found much sound advice for myself in some of the well-known international travel books or from the internet.

The bottom line is that we each need to take responsibility to prepare with proper immunisations and techniques for personal care as well as have remedies and the trained crew on-board to know how best to treat if things go wrong. Given these precautions there is a good chance we will keep meeting up in and around Palma with tales of successful voyages rather than trips spoiled by galloping gut rot or high fever.

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