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Things which bite!

As you will now know, Sri Lanka is a greenhouse of natural life. It is so humid, wet and hot that everything grows faster, bigger and more extraordinarily than anywhere else I have been in the world. You therefore have to expect close encounters with things like unusual species of leeches, ticks, mosquitoes and scorpions, snakes, dogs which lie in the middle of the road and don't move until you have nearly run them over, thieving monkeys that pinch your bags, cameras and food and elephants that do pretty much as they like, when they like. But the compensations are birds so magnificent they look surreal, huge butterflies, bats, moths and wild flowers in colours and varieties which seem greatly enhanced and landscapes which are truly magnificent.



So, if you are happy to venture beyond the mainstream tourist sites, the towns and cities, western plumbing, food on tables with plates and are happy to sleep in the jungle or on a mountain top, eat off leaves, wash in streams and walk behind a man with a machete who cuts a way through undergrowth, you need to be prepared to be stung, bitten, and mercilessly harassed at certain times of day by the millions of insects and bugs for whom this jungle is a natural habitat. You are the intruder, your skin is pale and soft, your blood tastes of western food and not a lifetime of spicy eastern food therefore you are a wonderful feast for all that bites.

You may also find, if you are like me - very fair skinned, a tendency to sunburn badly, reddish hair - that you have a more violent reaction to bites than other people do. Villagers tend to gather around me, exclaiming at the extent of my skin reactions, the fame of which has usually gone before me so much so that the first thing people do on greeting me is grab my arm, turn it round so they can see the bites, or draw my trouser leg up to inspect the blood

and leech damage. It is always a great topic for discussion as they confer, mutter and pronounce the causes, the effects and the remedies – though nothing yet has worked so far so I am resigned to being much eaten, bitten and full of angry red blotches with swollen ankles and wrists.

What to do then? Well, forget going home with an overall suntan, cover up and accept you are going to get bitten. The extent to which you are devoured is directly related to how much skin you expose. Your choice. There are some tricks and ideas you might want to try but the only thing to do really is COVER UP!

Know your enemy!

Sometimes you will never know what bit you. In September 2008 we spent the night on the summit of this mountain.

Looks beautiful, but on top where we slept it was virgin jungle and the locals who went with us said nobody had ever been up there before. And nobody had ever seen the likes of the bites I accumulated that night which didn't come up to full, evil fruition until several days later. I was the only one of four people who got them too. Just me – a tasty western treat for creatures that must have thought it was Christmas.



I knew I was being bitten despite wearing socks over my long trousers to protect my feet and stop things crawling up my legs, long sleeves which I pulled down over my hands, a hood over my head and lashings of insect repellent. Luckily I didn't know how much until the next day when I found my hands and feet covered in tiny red bites and when I got to a stream later on to strip off and wash, I found more on my upper arms, tops of my legs and other inaccessible places too. Heaven knows how they got there as I was strapped up overnight tighter than an Egyptian Mummy.



After three days, some but not all of these bites for I think some were midge type things or ordinary mosquitoes, developed translucent bubbles which seeped clear liquid. Nothing hurt, but they were a nuisance as they kept leaking over my clothes and did not look very nice either. But then they burst, another head formed and then they went yellow and filled with pus and the wounds they made got deeper and deeper so they were like bullet holes deep into my flesh. Now they hurt - because of the stretching of the skin.

Some said they were tick bites, but they didn't itch, weren't centred around areas where you sweat like your armpits.

The villagers tried Ayurvedic natural and ancient remedies, the chemist tried antiseptic cream but nothing seemed to stop these things getting deeper and more vile. It wasn't until I returned to the UK and was given a triple dose of anti biotics by the doctor for two weeks, that they began to heal and now, four months later I still have pink, burn like scars where the bites were. If anyone knows what these were, please tell me and more importantly, what I do about it!

Leeches

Leeches may sound horrible, they are horrible too but I would much rather be leeches than suffer from whatever it was that caused those bites above. Leeches do not hurt, you don't know you've got one - or a dozen – until it is all over and in the olden days, people use to use them as part of normal medical practice.

You get leeches where there are cattle or water buffalo so if you go to The Abode at any time except the height of the dry season you will accumulate a few. The first time I went I was innocently unaware there were any things on this planet like leeches and gamely trekked 2.5 hours up to The Abode in heavy rain, the dark and through streams of flood water running off the hillside. I only found blood when I put my boots on again after wading through a river.



Some people freak out when they find their legs streaming with blood with no memory of pain for we always associate bleeding with pain. I must admit I was puzzled. Why were my legs bleeding in streams to form their own pools on the earth? It was only when the villagers sprung into action, emptying my socks and boots onto the ground, did the leeches emerge, black, fat and engorged that I felt momentarily sick to my stomach. Those things, eating me alive? Sucking my blood?

What happens is that leeches are very small, so small you have great trouble seeing them before they attached themselves to you. Think of a little thin pencil line, which almost leapfrogs and somersaults vertically as it climbs – the action has to be seen to be believed. It can get through your socks, your boots your trousers, anything, even leech socks despite what the manufacturers tell you. They attach themselves to you where there is a good supply of blood. I had one at the back of my knee once, where the vein is deepest and I got that sat in the car outside a fruit staff – not a jungle in sight!

They inject your blood with a mild anesthetic, which is why you won't feel it, and also an anticoagulant which stops your blood clotting, then they suck until they have engorged themselves so much they appear to swell like great big slugs. Above is the one Sid picked off me when it had drunk its fill!

Then your blood runs freely and that is when you know you have been leeches, it trickles down your legs, or arm or whatever. The leech that got the back of my knee opened up such a drain that I had to stand in the shower for ages before it stopped bleeding and there are many ways of trying to counteract the anti coagulant. Some use salt, but I bet that stings.



I prefer the villagers' remedy. They carry old newspaper with them, torn into tiny squares. Once you have started bleeding they attach these tiny squares like tissues on a shaving cut and the carbon in the newsprint acts against the anti coagulant in the leech bite and eventually it stops bleeding. So you spend time walking around with bits of newspaper hanging off but don't remove them too soon or the bleeding resumes and you have to start all over again.

Over time you become sensitive to leeches attaching themselves to you. I know I did after one trek when I gathered about ten leeches every hour and the villagers will teach you how to get them off at the early stages without leaving parts of them embedded in your skin, which can cause infections. You learn to check your feet at every water break on the trail and remove them. After the first time, you stop being squeamish, well may the tenth time, and there is always the comfort of knowing that you have been well and truly blooded of all your toxins and must be very health indeed!

Ticks

I don't think I have been bitten by these, yet, as I have had none of the lumps people describe to me. Ticks too are very small so you will never see them. They gather around animals and water, especially paddy fields and are nothing like the crab like creatures you see in the west which attach themselves to domestic animals such as dogs and that you may have burnt off with a cigarette end. These are super tics and worm their way like leeches into your sweating areas, like your armpits, your groin, your buttocks.

I've been told they itch badly and you cannot stop scratching but that raises red areas, and they can become infected. Again there's not much you can do about them except cover up and keep them clean once you know you have them.

Mosquitoes and midges

There are lots of these. Dawn and dusk are the usual times though I did get bitten under my long skirt at noon in a wayside café once and within minutes my legs were a rash of ferocious red, itching bites. So don't wear a long sarong in wayside cafes, ladies no matter how stylish you think they look. Stick to trousers with socks on and work on the principle that if it is at all possible for an insect to work its way up your leg to bite you in the most inaccessible places, it will!

Mosquito repellent works if you are not sweating so much up a mountainside that it all runs off within minutes of application and DEET products are best but smell unpleasant and you cannot use them for long periods of time – the instructions give you warnings about over use. Once again, covering up is the only reliable method and does deter midges and mosquitoes.

Bed bugs



I was bitten to death by bed bugs in a government run tourist lodge which was quite expensive in 2006. But I have never experienced bed bugs in village houses, living wild in the jungle or anywhere else for that matter.

These government bed bugs were very itchy and appeared everywhere with one particularly big one on my stomach which swelled to an enormous lump and took weeks to go down. So beware the more respectable establishments – the price might include hidden offers. I take my own sleeping sheet with me, pillow case and sleeping mat too so that I

have my own protection against suspect bedding, no matter how expensive the hotel or guesthouse.

Odd things

I once felt something crawling up my leg when I was lazing in a hammock at The Abode reading a book. I casually flicked it away a few times until I got fed up and had a look. I saw a brown spider-like thing grazing my thigh and got my book and swatted it off yet again then decided the hammock wasn't big enough for the two of us and got out to sit on the ground. A while later Sid came over and I asked him to take a look in the hammock and tell me what manner of insect this was that had been such a pest.

He took one look, upended the hammock into the jungle and told me I had been very lucky. It was a scorpion. If it had bitten me in the twenty minutes I had spent idly flicking it away I would have swollen very painfully, been in agony for hours and there was no remedy.

It was only then I began to shake a little.... The moral of this story is that scorpions aren't always black and look like those things in a James Bond film.

Another night I was in a house in the bottom of a valley when something caught my eye. Everyone else was talking and did not seem to be taking much notice of this creature. As it moved I became rather alarmed as it was enormous, had many articulated legs, was bright green and had feelers that stretched twice its length as it ambled towards me. It looked like a Triffid and must have been a foot long and heaven knows how wide if it really stretched out.

I squeaked something to the nearest person, who looked casually at the thing and carried on talking. I squawked a bit louder and one of the women looked amused, got a broom and swept it out of the door. But what was it, I asked?

A cricket – super sized because of the jungle.

No wonder they make so much noise at night if that's how big they are! Now I keep my legs tucked well in of an evening as there is no way I would want one of them running up my leg!

So, my advice?

If in doubt, watch what the villagers do about bugs and bites. They tend to use low technology solutions which work in harmony with the wildlife as many are practicing Buddhists.

Prevention is all. The main idea is to check yourself all the time, between your toes, your fingers, under your watch strap and down your neck so that you can spot leeches or anything else as quickly as possible before they get too much of a hold. The villagers will help you and watch out for you as you go along. For instance, the person behind me when walking in single file will watch my heels as I walk and tell me if anything attaches itself and I do the same for the person in front.

One idea which works but is messy, is to cover yourself with cocoa nut oil. This is the stuff you buy in bottles at any stall, wayside boutique or supermarket and anyone who lives in the remote areas has always got some somewhere. The theory is that if your skin is covered in oil the creeping creatures, like leeches, find you too slippery to get a purchase and therefore slide off or find someone not as hard to cling to. Locals also use cocoa nut oil to put on after they have been bitten as it eases the itching and inflammation so both ways round you get some relief by using it. And you can, of course, cook with it as well.

Always sleep under a mosquito net if there is one. You will find they are tied up like this and look quite



decorative. But make sure that you have emptied the inside of the net before you get in. Sometimes there is more wildlife already in there which makes you a captive audience once you have tucked it in all round you under the mattress. You can't get out easily and there is nothing more disconcerting than thinking you are safe to go to sleep than seeing a huge beetle, like a great cockroach, amble across the pillow towards you or find mosquitoes buzzing inside your net all night. As well, check the net for holes as insects are very determined and if there is a tiny hole be sure they will find it and you will be bitten in the morning.

Always ask for a mosquito coil to be lit and burnt in your room, keep windows and doors shut after dark and watch out for the huge incubator of wildlife, the bathroom or toilet – if you have one of course. In there the heat, the water and dark corners make a wonderful habitat for great lizards which coil their way round the mirror or hang from the wall – scary but harmless – and larger than life articulated creatures which scurry but make you feel very uncertain about tripping off for a shower.

Wear flip flops in the bathroom, so you don't slip more than anything as they can be awash with water and not well drained and try not to look too closely round the edges of things. In some places I guarantee you will take the option of washing in public in a river before venturing to try the plumbing. That, of course, if

another subject and worthy of its own chapter but suffice to say that western style toilets in remote areas should be treated with the utmost caution as liquid can fly in any direction. A rudimentary knowledge of how the mechanisms work is a must as you will often find you need to employ a bit DIY with pieces of string and bits of wood to make the cistern fill up and flush.

Sleeping out can not only be cleaner but more interesting too. On top of a huge mountain slab, on sheer rock, our guides once drew a circle round the tent with kerosene – to keep the snakes away. As we had seen one on the way up, which had glowed luminous blue in our torch light, I did not mind the smell, far better than a snake bite!

And a novel way of keeping biting ants at bay when you are sleeping on a rock in a river, is to take ash from the fire and draw a circle or a barrier between you and them in hot ash. The ants, sensibly, avoid it, smartly change direction and go somewhere else. Nothing is killed, you are happy not to be bitten – ants do have a nasty bite - and you sleep soundly too.

But above all, enjoy it, keep your reactions in proportion no matter how big the insect is and stay calm. Nothing gets dealt with if you scream or panic. Remember you are the intruder in this environment, there are many more insects than there are people out there so it is no contest really. You will be surprised how soon you will take leeches in your stride and take pride in coming back home after every holiday with fewer and fewer insect bites instead of a deeper and deeper tan!

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