

# Travel Sick

Tea Break Travels, No 9

*Being ill is never nice, but being ill away from home is a real concern. A case of trots is bad enough, but being admitted to hospital is quite different. This story recounts a recent personal experience of ending up in hospital rather than on the plane home. (approx 2,700 words)*

*It is from a collection of travel related stories called "Tea Break Travels". They are designed to be read in a short break from work or whatever, and at a cost around the same as a biscuit, transport you somewhere else! Some are true, some embellished, and some fictional. Some are from near 20 years of too much business travel, or our holidays, others are relayed from friends and acquaintances, yet others are just plain made up!  
Enjoy.*

A long weekend in our place in Tenerife was just what was needed. The British spring was late in springing and some sunshine and general R&R was certainly called for. So we put a day before the weekend and 2 days after to make a nice break. And it was a nice break, caught up with friends on the Island, had some nice wines and food, and took on some rays as well.

Monday gave the warning signs that all was not well. My right foot was sore and bit swollen around the big toe joint and it hurt a little to walk. Tuesday it was worse and instead of enjoying a nice long walk along the coast and ending in our favourite fish restaurant in La Caleta (I'm not saying which one, they're all good!) I demanded a taxi to get us there. The meal was good and took my mind off the throbbing foot. But after the taxi back and starting to think about packing up and heading for the airport the pain from the swelling was clearly indicating all was not well. And the thought of extra pressure from the flight did not make me happy. I finally decided that I need someone to look at it before committing to the four hour plus flight.

Various doctors we contacted all advised the same things – get it looked at, and go to Hospiten Sur, just a few kilometres away. So we did. We arrived in Casualty, registered at the desk and went through to the waiting room. We never got to sit down. The doctor appeared and called my name before we managed that. (An aside: that's very different to my experiences in the UK – six hours waiting when my GP had already arranged the bed! But we'll continue these little comparisons!)

I explained the problem to the Doctor, who spoke reasonable English and he looked at the foot, squeezed and prodded until he found the bit that really hurt.

"When do you fly back?" he asked. "In about 4 hours," we replied.

"No! No flight today. Do you have gout?"

"Not that I know of."

"Have you knocked it?"

"No."

"Uhhh. I think it's Cellulitius, but we'll need some tests."

And so tests we had. An "IV" was installed, three blood samples taken and we were left in a side room for about ten minutes, when another sample was needed. After that it was a wait of about twenty minutes until the Doctor returned and told me they had found an infection in the samples that was most likely causing the Cellulitius and they were admitting me for treatment. Nothing too serious, just drugs and rest really.

"200 euros deposit please." (Aside: That's also different to the UK!)

"Will you take a card?"

"Of course." And the nurse with him just happened to have a chip and pin handset with her – such foresight. Stethoscope, thermometer and chip and pin machine – standard kit for the Spanish nurse!

So my wife got on the mobile to the Travel Insurance company and was calling them, from outside the building of course, when the nurse arrived and took me to the ward, well one bed in a room of two, and the room had its own bathroom and sitting area. Really quite civilised apart from the fact the two beds were next to each other despite the size of the room. I had a roommate, a gentleman from Budapest who turned out to have severe prostate problems. His English was limited, but not as much as my Hungarian – I know one word, “igen” which means yes, and if you keep saying that it is bound to land you in trouble. So conversation was limited but I was not really feeling up to a chat in any case.

My wife found me a bit later – reception had sent her an SMS with the room number – and she relayed that the Insurance would cover the situation provided my UK doctor confirmed they had not treated me for this condition for the past year. Well it is now nearly seven pm both in Tenerife and the UK so no chance of doing that until the morning! This was only after getting past the initial call centre however. On first contact she had explained the situation and they said, “Ok, so you’ll be flying home as planned and we’ll make arrangements for husband when he is released.” How well they understand the emotional bond between partners! We agreed a list of people to be informed of our change of plan and my wife left to return to the apartment and do calls and emails as needed. Good job we have our own place and no renters coming in, or the evening would have been complicated by needing to find a hotel room as well.

The hospital was well set up for dealing with non nationals and on the Doctor’s evening visit he was accompanied by an interpreter who explained the amenities, diagnosis and medications to me in English. In fact the hospital had a whole department of interpreters who doubled as admin staff. This is very reassuring if like me you still only have good intentions about learning the language, and especially welcome when you are getting somewhat concerned about your health. Full marks there, I wonder how many tourist area NHS A&E units are as well provided for? (Aside: this is an honest question. I don’t know the answer.)

An evening and night of various drips passed and really I felt little different in the morning. The foot was more swollen if anything. And I was a little concerned about an injection the translator didn’t mention.

“I need to give you this,” said the nurse wielding a syringe, “in the belly button.”

My mind made a strange connection with what I think was an Agatha Christie story about a murderer who killed his victim by injecting cobra venom into their navel. It apparently causes a heart attack and the puncture mark can’t be seen. I was immediately suspicious.

“What is it?”

“You have thick blood. This will help the other medicines work.” Later I was informed by friends in the know that it is a derivative of rat poison. Good job I didn’t know that at the time.

Breakfast appeared around eight, followed ten minutes later by a nurse with a wheel chair to take me for an ultra sound scan. She turned out to be from Budapest as well. What is this? An undercover invasion of Tenerife by Hungarians? No just sunshine really. She told me she couldn’t stand the Hungarian winters and moved to Tenerife fifteen years ago! It was great news for my roommate however as the interpreter services did not stretch to Hungarian.

Well Doctors came and went, as did nurses with various drips and the dreaded injections, and so did the days. The promise given on admission of being out on Thursday was broken, but on Thursday afternoon they said if all continued well they could discharge me on Friday. While I was being medicated and rested my wife was doing the emails to my office, her office and progressing the insurance paper work. She was now on first name terms with “Harry” who was dealing with our “case”, our local GP had faxed the needed confirmation – after a phone call to buck them up and the hospital had the confirmation that they’d get paid. This all takes a lot of time, arrangements and sometimes dogged follow up to make it happen. I’m glad to say I had a real professional on my case – my wife! To have had to do this myself while feeling around twenty percent would probably, no certainly, been too much. Travelling with a companion is always better.

Friday morning dawned and after the doctor's visit, again with interpreter, they said I could be released but warned the administrative process, involving them passing paper work to the insurer, the insurer confirming payment, and them finalising the release documents, including a certificate that I was fit to fly, could take time.

And it did. The doctor left me at 9:30 and we finally walked out of the hospital at 5 pm. Again it needed a few chasing calls to get the faxes moving, but the penultimate step need pure luck.

Having waited so long my wife went to see if the ward nurse knew the status. On the way she chanced by the Doctor from Casualty on Tuesday.

"How is your husband?" he asked, recognising her.

"He's been released, we're just waiting for the paper work so we can go."

"When was that?"

"9:30"

"That's not right, let me see!"

And he did, only to find the ward had been given the instruction to let me go some two and a half hours ago. Words were said. (Aside: seems the same as the UK!) So we went to the Interpreters office to settle up. They had all the paper work done, including the release report, the certificate saying I could fly, the prescription for continued medication and schedule of when to take what. They had translated the rules for me: "Take all the medicines; Don't standstill too long; When you sit, ensure your foot is level with your knee; and don't do heavy things!" They also had the bill. But thankfully all we had to pay was the insurance excess of 62 euros. (Aside: Now that is different to the NHS!!)

"Is there a hospital pharmacy?"

"No, here's a map. The nearest is 5 minutes walk."

"Oh." (Aside: In the UK every hospital, NHS and private I've been to has a pharmacy that dispenses to discharged patients. Obviously a business opportunity is being missed in Tenerife!)

It might be five minutes if you haven't got a swollen, sore foot. More like fifteen minutes hobble. Still they had all four drugs needed, including the pack of ten syringes to continue treating my "thick blood". I never knew blood had an IQ. Anyway more on these later. Ever grumbled about the UK prescription charges?

Don't! 208 euros was the bill.

So we were back in our apartment now for Friday evening and both feeling a little fragile. One due to medication and the other due to sheer exhaustion. The Insurance company came up with a flight back to Luton on Sunday, paired with a car for the two hour drive from there to our home in Surrey – it would have been just thirty minutes from Gatwick, ah well! They said they would book two seats for me, one for my bum and the other for my feet, so the hospital's rule of keeping my foot raised when seated could be adhered to. I envisioned they would book two seats one behind the other so I could sit normally in the one seat. Then wondered about the flight the person next to my feet would experience!!

We turned up at the airport, collected the tickets, for no less than four seats and then went into the next issue. We had only gone for a few days and explained we just had hand baggage.

"Good for you," the assistant replied.

"Yes, but the issue is these syringes. We can't pack them as we have no hold baggage, so we'll have to take them on board. And we need one at least for the injection during the flight. Is this going to be a problem?"

"As long as you've got all the papers saying you need them that should be OK."

Well that seemed reasonable so we went to check in. Thanks to Monarch for allowing us to use

their frequent flyer check-in as the queues for the normal desks were very long, and the “don’t stand too long” rule would certainly have been broken long before we got to the desk. After a bit of delay due to a party of golfers not accepting their bags were “out of gauge” I joined my wife at the desk wondering just how the seats were going to be arranged. But the seat arrangement wasn’t the problem. We were two passengers with four tickets. Did she issue two boarding cards or four? She puzzled for a while, asked the person at the next desk who just shrugged, then tried phoning somewhere to find the answer. The number was continually engaged and after many minutes trying she walked off to go get the answer in person. By this time, with the combination of the golfers and us, the rest of queue for the priority check-in were not amused. It took a long five minutes, endured with visual daggers flying into our backs, for her to return. The answer was two boarding cards, one with two other seat numbers written on it in biro. (Aside: worth a try next time you want some space around you!) However the three seats allocated to me were all in one row, which was just not what I was expecting, but it seemed workable and to cause her to walk off again would probably have resulted in violence from the waiting passengers behind us. We proceeded to the security check, fully expecting problems with the syringes. Well they contain liquid, so they must go in the resealable clear bag, but they are also sharp (believe me very sharp) objects so should not be in hand baggage at all. At the first opportunity I explained to one of the security staff what the issue was, already starting to get the hospital report, prescription and schedule out, but before I could there was an “is ok” and dismissive wave of the hand. We sailed through with more problems about me not removing my Swatch watch than having a pack of syringes. (How much metal is there in the budget Swatch?) I have to say I’m not sure whether this is a failure of security or a great triumph for common sense. Overall I think the later. Mind you there were some worried murmurs during the flight when my wife started to wield a syringe!

As the seats were three in a row, then sitting with my back to the side of the plane seemed best, but very uncomfortable. The armrest of the end seat does not fold up and is just not designed to support a back for a moment, let alone four hours. I asked if they had a cushion / pillow / blanket to make the “seat” more comfortable, but alas they did not have any such thing. They did have a five pound comfort pack, so we settled for one of those and between the blanket and inflatable neck support life was bearable. The feet did react to the lower pressure, but taking some of the anti-inflammatory tablets got me to Luton. The last stage, the two and half hour car trip passed without incident and we were eventually home.

Home and much the wiser I think. We now knew the answer to the boarding card question, and that Tenerife hospitals do work, with just a little of the manana flavour one expects from the island. We also knew not to assume all will go to plan the next time, and that travel insurance is worth it! And that having someone with you is priceless.

Just a final thought, if your holiday home / favourite get away is only served by a “low cost” carrier with no seat allocation, how do you get back if you need to keep your leg straight / up level with you knee. By the time you staggered to the plane the chance of getting two seats together, let alone ones to rest your leg on, would be gone.

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