

The hungry traveller

Eating local food is one of the best things about travelling abroad. To this day I remember my first taste of fried plantain: the sun was setting, and we had just hooked up with a group of young Tanzanians. They tried to speak English, and we tried to speak Swahili. Everybody was laughing and eating a plate of fragrant plantains. It was wonderful. Of course, eating the local food can also be one of the worst things about travelling abroad. For example, many travellers to India suffer from the infamous “Delhi belly”. And sometimes menus are written in a different alphabet. Then you have no idea what you have ordered. You can just hope for the best. I have ordered baby rats called “pinkies” in a restaurant in China, followed by steamed frog-legs. The frog-legs were surprisingly good. They tasted a little like chicken and a little like fish.

Proudly presenting: rotten cheese

If you don't like the food you've ordered in a restaurant abroad, you can refuse to eat it. But what do you do when your foreign host proudly presents the local speciality, and you cannot bring yourself to even taste it? This happened to me in Sardinia, where I was offered their famous formaggio marcio cheese. This cheese is left outside so that flies can lay eggs inside the cheese. Soon the cheese is crawling with thousands of maggots that help the fermentation process. Some Sardinians remove the maggots before they eat the cheese, but many do not. The larvae can jump 15cm high, so eating this cheese can be a shock! I risked insulting my host, because I did not eat the cheese.

Other local specialities

In Asia many people eat scorpions, tarantulas and other insects. The insects are usually fried, and sometimes they are cooked in a soup, or coated in chocolate. They are very popular with tourists. I think this is because eating an insect makes a good photo. There isn't really a special taste – only the flavoured oil the insect has been fried in, but it is exotic to eat a crunchy tarantula as a snack-to-go when you are walking around an Asian market. The local people don't understand why tourists take photographs of this food. For them a spider dipped in chocolate is just an ordinary snack.

Civet-poo coffee

Many of the odd local specialities around the world remain local. But not always. Sometimes travellers like them so much that there is an international demand for the product. For example, now you can buy civet excrement coffee in shops in London. Civet coffee, which comes from Asia, is made from coffee beans that have gone through the digestive system of a civet. Farmers allow the weasel-like animals to eat their coffee beans. Then they collect the droppings which make a chocolate-flavoured beverage.

Dangerous menus

The worst of all food moments is when you are offered something dangerous or poisonous. For example, the famous Japanese puffer fish or the Indian Ghost Pepper. The journalist Leo Benedictus ate puffer fish and said: “... the translucent flesh has little taste, but you have to chew it more than most raw fish.” Most travellers won't have puffer fish, because it's a very expensive delicacy. But many travellers visiting India will have a spicy curry. And the hottest curry will be spiced with the famous Ghost Pepper. It is four hundred times hotter than Tabasco sauce. Local people in north-east India smear it on fences to keep wild elephants away. Until recently, this pepper was the hottest in the world. Not only is it used in curries and chutneys, but police around the world use it in a spray to control and disperse mobs. Once I tried a little (a very little) Ghost Pepper in a curry. At first it was not so bad, but then my mouth got hotter and hotter. I started

On Track 2

sweating. My heart started beating faster. My eyes watered. My tongue was on fire. I thought I had just eaten my last curry on this earth. It was wonderful.

Which is what a traveller wants: a wonderful experience.