

frequent flaws

Caviar when you crave chicken soup; trekking in Tibet when you'd rather be watching the telly... As Sally Feldman discovers, life as a travel writer can be a mass of contradictions

When I tell people what I do for a living, they react in one of three ways. Most drool with envy. If they're 'serious' journalists, they roll their eyes heavenwards. If they're my mother, they tell anyone who'll listen at the supermarket checkout.

I earn part of my living writing about travel. I say part because I've found travel writing tends to cost rather more than you earn, what with the sleeping pills, trekking gear, earplugs, physio... It's like negative gearing with frequent flyer points. So, to pacify my accountant (and long-suffering partner), I spend marginally more of my time banging away at a computer than plunging into uncharted waters.

I know I have an enviable life. I get to luxe it up at resorts where I could barely afford a hand towel. I occasionally get to sit in the pointy end of planes and rifle through toiletry bags packed with luxury potions. And I get to visit the sort of places most of us only watch on the Discovery Channel.

It's a life less ordinary, all right, but for a mere mortal like me it creates an irreconcilable existential struggle: the eternal conflict between travel junkie and inner homebody. So, in the midst of a lavish dinner with precious wines, surrounded by scintillating and invariably better-dressed people than me, my jet-lagged thoughts turn wistfully to a night on the sofa eating shepherd's pie in front of *Wife Swap*. Conversely, as I tootle between the office and my renovator's delight in my micro-car, I relive glory days of purring along English country lanes between five-star hotels in a Jaguar XJS.

The more fabulous the accommodation, the more bewildering the shower...

Frequent travel has afforded me myriad dilemmas such as this (as well as an abiding distrust of resort-wear) and the following is a glimpse into why it will be ever thus.

- 1. LET THERE BE LIGHT - PLEASE** There is one thing that any traveller can be sure of: no matter where light switches are positioned in a hotel room, or how numerous they are, none will correspond logically to the appropriate illumination.
- 2. SHOWER TERROR** The more fabulous the accommodation, the more bewildering the shower. A recent visit to an otherwise delightful hotel brought me face to, er, torso with a shower that, if not handled with care, was like being hosed down by riot police in a banana republic.
- 3. INERT AND ALARMED** There's a reason they're called alarm calls, as we travellers know only too well, after being woken with a heart-thumping lurch by an unfamiliar shriek in a pitch-black

room (see point 1) in a bed so vast that it takes five minutes to get to the bedside table to stop the racket.

4. PILLOW TALK Not only will it take you five minutes to get from one side of the bed to the other, but, before you curl up between those Egyptian cotton sheets, you'll spend another 20 minutes trying to find somewhere to offload that pyramid of decorative scatter cushions so you don't fall over them in the middle of the night on your way to the bathroom (see also point 1).

5. PUTTING ON THE RISK Competitive-travel syndrome is found generally when coming into contact with one or more 'independent travellers', where the conversation turns to cruelly prolonged point-scoring. Encounters will invariably include: a) a slide show involving white-water rafting; b) ancient pottery; c) a communicable disease.

6. JUST SAY NO Ethical travel rightly creates moral dilemmas: is it unseemly for a travel writer to snaffle hotel bathroom products? My head says yes, but my heart is a pushover for designer shower gel. Once home, the

pretty little bottles line the bathroom shelf, a potent reminder that there's no place like, well, The Ritz, actually. **VE+T**

