



WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE,

but is it safe to drink? Here are 10 tips for obtaining safe water and other beverages when you're traveling.

TWO diners are seated in a restaurant overseas. One asks the waiter for a glass of water. The other says he wants the same, but the last time he was at this restaurant he was served water in a dirty glass and became ill. The waiter listens, leaves, and then returns with two glasses, saying "Which one of you asked for the clean glass?"

When you're traveling, drinking lots of water helps you stay fit—as long as the water itself is fit to drink, that is. Being well hydrated helps counteract some of the vagaries of travel such as fatigue and jet lag, altitude, and hot and cold environments, just to mention a few. Minimal dehydration occurs even before you

feel thirsty, subtly affecting your mental and physical abilities. But the available drinking water is not always fit to drink. Microorganisms that cause intestinal upsets may be present in tap water in developing countries, and sometimes even aboard cruise ships and airliners. Here's how to get the clean glass, so to speak.

- *Always drink bottled water when traveling.* Water everywhere contains some microorganisms. While your body is accustomed to those found in your tap water at home, those in water elsewhere—even where sanitation is good—may be sufficiently different to cause mild discomfort during the first few

days you're drinking it. Such discomforts are often blamed on jet lag and fatigue. Remedies for these include drinking water. If you drink tap water, your "remedy" worsens your discomfort. The more water you drink, the more likely you will be to ingest sufficient organisms to make you ill. Drink bottled water if you take antacids, but be aware that these reduce stomach acidity, which helps kill organisms. Bottled water is also best if you have diabetes or an immune problem, or you are pregnant or elderly. Intestinal illnesses are more troublesome with these conditions.

- *All bottled water is not created equal.* Bottled water is merely subterranean spring water or treated tap water, and unless it is optimally processed, it is no better than tap water. Where sanitation is poor, opt for well-known international brands since local brands may contain organisms and sometimes chemicals and other contaminants (arsenic in southern Asia, for example). Drinking carbonated bottled water adds a layer of safety. Carbonation acidifies water, killing organisms. Such water is known everywhere as "with gas," even by waiters who speak no English. Some bottled water is mineral water and contains calcium, sodium, and other minerals, often in large amounts. These may worsen certain heart and kidney problems, so read the labels. Some overseas spas tout their waters as being therapeutic for virtually anything that ails you—claims that are largely unproven.
- *"No ice, please."* Ice is acceptable in areas where sanitation is good, since a cube or two is unlikely to contain sufficient organisms to cause illness. But where sanitation is suspect, cubes are usually made from tap water, often in equipment that's difficult to clean. For ice addicts, you can cool drinks by placing the ice in a leak-proof plastic bag and inserting the bag into your drink.
- *Saying "no ice, please" doesn't necessarily mean you'll get no ice.* Often, when you ask for no ice in a drink that traditionally takes ice, you will still get ice. It's habit. When you remind the waiter of your request, they will take out the ice, but how? Do they: a) remove it—perhaps with their hands—and fill the glass with more of the drink?; b) pour out the drink and fill the same glass with a new drink?, or; c) get a new glass with a fresh drink? Hopefully, it will be the latter. In the first two scenarios the water from the melting ice is still in your drink, or adhering to your original glass.
- *Even 100-proof liquor on the rocks does not make for a 100-percent foolproof drink.* Alcohol does reduce the number of organisms in a drink, but slowly. The rate depends on the amount of alcohol in the drink,

the size of the ice cubes, and the types of organisms in the ice. If you're drinking at a bar, odds are that the bar will close before your drink is safe.

- *Canisters and special taps in hotel rooms labeled "safe to drink" may not be so safe.* Water in canisters is refilled from tanks wheeled down the hall, a process that is subject to lapses in sanitation. Water from special taps requires optimum disinfecting, proper storing, and clean pipes.
- *A ribbon can avoid intestinal upsets.* Tie a brightly colored ribbon around the tap as a reminder to use bottled water. However, when tap water is too hot to touch, it is generally safe. It is "pasteurized," having remained heated in the heater and pipes sufficiently long to kill organisms. Boiled water is always safe. Carry an electrical coil, a current converter, and a socket adapter, which are available in traveler's supply catalogues. Boiling for a few seconds—yes, mere seconds!—suffices to kill organisms. Note that boiling does not remove chemicals and other impurities.

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- *Opt for humdrum canned beverages over tempting fresh fruit drinks from street vendors.* Fruit drinks are usually squeezed in impossible-to-clean equipment and may be diluted with tap water and contain ice.
- *In the wilderness, never drink water from streams, lakes, or springs.* Crystal-clear water in pristine surroundings may contain organisms from birds, animals, and humans, so boil or disinfect natural water. Disinfectants and filters are available at sporting goods stores and on the Internet. Follow the instructions on the labels.
- *Recreational water is for swimming, not swallowing.* Even at well-maintained swimming facilities swimmers placing their heads underwater tend to have more intestinal illnesses than swimmers who do not, and waders have fewer illnesses than swimmers. Factors increasing risk include crowding, babies in diapers, and no chlorination such as the water found in lakes and rivers, for example. ☞