

Vacation Traveler's Guide to Bed Bugs

By Douglas Stern, Managing Partner Stern Environmental Group

With spring break nearly here and summer vacation just around the corner, families are gearing up for vacation travel. Nobody minds bringing home a little sand in their shoes after an idyllic week lounging on the beach, but there's nothing that takes the joy out of a vacation like unpacking a few bed bugs along with the swimsuits.

Opera singer Alison Trainer got bed bugs while staying at an upscale Phoenix hotel in 2007. She told ABC News that when she woke up in the middle of the night, "They were all over the bed and the comforter and the pillows and I pulled the sheets off and they were just everywhere."

"They're like little vampires, like stealth feeders at nighttime," Michael Raupp, University of Maryland professor of entomology, told ABC News in the same report. While many people wake up with itchy red bites the next morning, nearly 50% of bed bug victims don't react. You may not know you've been sharing a bed with these blood-sucking insects until you return home from vacation.

According to a 2004 survey of pest control professionals by Pest Control Technology magazine, hotels and motels were the most common sites of bed bug infestations, accounting for more than one-third of bed bug complaints. Bed bugs are brought into hotels by guests; they are not a sanitation issue. These adept hitchhikers travel in luggage and on clothing. They hide in and near beds to be near their prey, the unsuspecting traveler. While they don't transmit disease, bed bugs feed on human blood and can traumatize their victims, causing anxiety, stress and insomnia. About the size of an apple seed, bed bugs have flat, oval, wingless bodies that are light to reddish-brown in color.

Nearly eradicated in the 1950s, the banning of DDT coupled with increased international travel has caused the resurgence of bed bugs in all 50 states. Hotels, motels, bed and breakfasts, hostels, resorts and cruise ships provide perfect breeding and transmission sites for these nuisance pests. Many tourist cities including New York, Boston, Miami, Chicago, Los Angeles, Honolulu and San Francisco have been waging war against an increasing number of bed bug complaints from tourists and residents. Concern about negative impact on the tourist industry has pushed several states to consider bed bug legislation.

Bed bugs are a vexing problem for the hospitality industry. Rooms that were pest-free one night can be infected by a guest the next. Infestations often go undetected, spreading to adjacent rooms through vents, ducts, plumbing conduits, even by housekeeping staff. When bed bugs are discovered, today's safer pest control chemicals require repeat applications. Infected rooms may be insufficiently treated before being assigned to new guests.

There's no reason to stop vacationing, travelers just need to take a few precautions to avoid bringing bed bugs home.

Before booking your hotel, check traveler reviews on popular bed bug reporting websites: TripAdvisor.com, BedBugRegistry.com and HotelChatter.com. Pack belongings in

snap and seal storage bags and consider protecting your mattresses and box springs with bed bug-proof encasements in case you bring bed bugs home.

Before leaving home spray your luggage inside and out with a bed bug control luggage spray. We sell one by JT Eaton and consider this Permethrin based product an innovation for travelers.

When checking in, inspect the room. Remove linens and check the mattress, particularly seams and welts, for live bugs, shed exoskeletons and black or rusty fecal stains. Use a flashlight to look behind the headboard, picture frames, in drawers, along baseboards. If you see signs of bed bugs, ask for another room or go to a different hotel.

While at the hotel, keep your suitcase and possessions off the bed, floor and upholstered furniture. Store suitcases on luggage racks or tables and keep them closed. Don't lay clothing on the bed. Hang purses in the closet.

If you suspect bed bugs or develop itchy red welts, notify the hotel management immediately. Ask for another room in a different part of the building or check into a different hotel. Trap bed bugs in a pill bottle or sealed plastic bag to show the manager. When you return home, immediately call a pest control professional before unpacking. Other insects are often mistaken for bed bugs and bed bug bites are similar to those from mosquitoes and other insects. A pest control professional can correctly identify your problem.

On returning home, unpack in a garage, cleared laundry area or bathtub, not on the bed. Inspect your suitcase and contents for signs of bed bugs. Sort clothing into plastic bags that can be emptied directly into the washer. Wash and dry (for 60 minutes) at hottest settings. Vacuum suitcases and store away from bedroom. Immediately dispose of vacuum bag and storage bags in outside receptacle. Items that can't be laundered can be sealed in plastic bags and frozen for two weeks or placed in a hot, closed car for 2 hours.

A new product has just hit the market called Packtite that is an enclosed heating chamber made for frequent travelers. This new product allows you to place your entire piece of packed luggage in the heating chamber and kill bed bugs and eggs before even unpacking. Although this product is not for everyone, for business travelers or families that travel abroad frequently the product is worth strong consideration.

For the next couple of weeks check your mattress for bed bug signs. Call a pest control professional immediately if you see any signs of bed bugs.

About the Writer Douglas Stern

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