



along by the dustmen of Venice repeating 'pronto soccorso', nodding and smiling until we came to the most grand, marble-floored hospital I'd ever seen.

Neither the doctor nor the hospital staff spoke any English, but we all had a bit of French and somehow managed to hobble through the experience with that.

A Russian root canal

A friend in St Petersburg once told me that Russia was a good place to have dental work done. I politely nodded, thinking this imparted wisdom would never prove useful to me. And yet there I was, groaning in the railway carriage en route to Smolensk, with a toothache that felt like a constant jackhammer in my jaw.

I was delighted that the staff at the dentist's office in Smolensk spoke some English, then devastated when they could not locate the source of the pain. They prescribed some heavy painkillers and I trudged off miserably to continue my work around the city. A few days later, in the lovely Russian city of Oryol, I sought out my second dentist. Practically in tears, and with my meager Russian, I begged her for help.

With my St Petersburg friend Sascha translating over the phone, the diagnosis was that I needed a root canal, which would be done in two stages over the course of a day. In between procedures, the dentist's husband graciously volunteered to chauffeur me around town so I could finish my research. Sascha was right: I couldn't have asked for better all-round treatment.

Flu stricken in Singapore

Stephanie and I had big plans for Singapore, the last leg of our epic, three-week Asia Pacific vacation. I was looking forward to introducing my partner to the bright lights, excellent cuisine and well-ordered pleasures of the Lion City - but the horrible flu we picked up in Brisbane had other plans.

Immediately upon arrival we traded our Hawker Centre crawl for a trip to the medical clinic across from our hotel in Katong, where the doctor prescribed a series of heavy antibiotics, medicated eye drops for conjunctivitis and at least 48 hours of bed rest before boarding our next flight - in exactly two days. 'You run the risk of damaging your eardrums by flying while congested', the doctor cautioned.

We headed straight from the clinic to the plush room I'd booked at the Grand Mercure, where we spent the rest of our trip swallowing pills and applying medicated eye drops, me heading out sporadically for Hainanese chicken rice while Stephanie sought advice on the internet. All queries confirmed the consensus that chewing gum during a flight can help reduce ear pressure. Problem solved: we'd pick up a few packs of gum at the airport.

Alas, the sale of chewing gum is prohibited in Singapore. The leathery dried guava slices were a pale substitute.

Big toe remedy, Hong Kong-style

My two children and I had been snorkeling around Malaysia's Perhentian Islands for a week,

