

The seaside way to health

by Zigrid J. Georges



This Australian woman got extreme MCS, had to flee the city, live in a van, and eventually found better health in clean air by the ocean.

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Only desperate people pass through the Bethesda Environmental Unit. Eight years ago I was admitted, and after months of testing, I was shown to be allergic/sensitive to their every test-chemical, and out of 75 test foods I could manage only three – coconut, sweet potato and fish. Apart from avoidance, there were no answers. I was sent home with an oxygen cylinder to negotiate the airport and the flight back home. I arrived in Canberra in a wheel chair.

Once out of the environmental unit, my situation became *in extremis*. The outside was a chemical nightmare, and inside my house was no better. There were carpet, cleaning fluids, smoke from heaters, passing car exhaust fumes, perfume, talcum powder and hair conditioners from visitors and so on. I even had to buy water for drinking and washing. Eventually a year passed, living in a room with a special A.A.A.-designed charcoal air filter and a huge oxygen cylinder. A farmer supplied rain water. Visitors were negotiated with a special face mask. It was unbelievably difficult, but I survived, with some taped music and recorded books.

At the end of the year I had to admit to myself that I had not improved and that living in a room could become a way of life. After some hard thinking I resolved to totally change my life style. Away from cities, air conditioned offices, polluted land, people and houses. Distant mountains or the seaside seemed to offer an answer. It seemed also that a moderate climate would be less stressful than extremes of temperature experienced in Canberra.

Northern N.S.W. [New South Wales, ed.] and Southern Queensland appeared attractive. I liquidated my possessions, bought a relatively non-toxic van for my dozens of glass bottles filled with filtered rain water and set out on my odyssey to a better life.

The journey was fraught with difficulty and dangers, especially through towns and from passing semi-trailers. I wore a mask and used a transformer to install my charcoal air filter in the car. I got wet under the stars, but that was preferable to sleeping in motels, hostels or caravans. Many days I cried from sheer anguish. Brain allergies left me befuddled and sometimes a danger on the road. I survived.

In June, northern N.S.W. was damp and cold and mouldy. No solution there. The sea air at Byron Bay felt fresh, but buying a house here was outside my financial capability. So once more on the road until I landed at Noosa Heads. There I collapsed by the sea in a caravan park right on the ocean. It felt great. After several weeks of sea air and no pollution, I recovered sufficiently to think that if I could find a house here, I just might stay for a longer while.

The odyssey through Real Estate Offices took more than four months. I was the despair of agents, for all their hot selling points were anathema to me – newly decorated, new carpets, paint etc. Old houses were uniformly dusty and mouldy. A state of hopelessness ensued. My survival was a thin light from a flickering candle on a stormy night. Despair and loneliness were my constant companions, offset by spectacular sun rises and long walks along lonely beaches. Eventually I bought a

wooden house that I kept open day and night, sleeping on the verandah. It had a rainwater tank that eased the stress of where to find the next bottle of water.

After six months I knew what to do. I purchased a block of land with ocean views so I would have permanent unpolluted sea breezes. I chose Besser block and weathered cedar for the house structure, with gyprock walls and cathedral wood ceilings for air circulation. The floor was to be wood with a biogenic polish. To gain privacy I surrounded the house with native trees and pawpaws, bananas, avocados, mangoes. It was on a quiet street that almost has no traffic. The occasional fume would be immediately blown away by the breezes.

The formula worked. Five years later now I am sufficiently recovered to again socialise, go to shops and even an occasional movie. A miracle. I still cannot tolerate cigarette smoke or exhaust fumes, but the recovery is quicker and my lifestyle largely avoids these elements. I can again eat most things except cereals, and there are months at a time that I do not even think of allergies. The essential ingredients for my recovery appeared to be:

- avoidance of all obvious chemicals and foods to which I was sensitive/allergic
- away from the stress of all doctors, testings, etc. Only have one now for emergencies like anaphylaxis
- fresh sea air and exercise (like running by the sea)
- fresh fruit and vegetables (some home grown)
- filtered rainwater from my tank
- a chemical-free house in quiet surroundings
- lots of positive mental affirmation with loads of patience
- living physically and mentally free of stress

So, when people write or ring me and say how desperate they feel, I know, I have been there. I try to encourage them to seek out a chemical-free place and to be patient. Things WILL get better. Nature heals, slowly, surely, reliably – given half a chance.

Probably the hardest thing to cope with, apart from the physical symptoms, is the loneliness. After years of living alone out of sheer necessity, I have now come to terms with it, and even prefer it for a large part of my life. Beyond all my expectations, I have formed a partnership and am about to embark on yet another odyssey – buying land, building a new home and living with at least one other person. There is some trepidation, but at least I know I can build another chemically free home. I write this to give courage to some other person out there who might also be going through a hard time.

Seaside to alpine summit sanctuary

Some of the happenings in the nineteen years since my last article: house building, overseas travel, mountains.

I did get a new house built next to Noosa National Park. The house was a success, but the location had problems: pollen, fires in the Park beyond the fence, building rubbish and burning smoke from neighbours. The prevailing wind came from South and East across occupied landscape and the accompanying pollution. So, distant seaside is not the solution – one needs to be within sight of the sea, preferably within a few metres of it.

After 1993 I became more confident. I travelled to India with some friends and to Latvia and USA by myself. Negotiating planes and airports was fraught with potential hazards everywhere.

I had an oxygen cylinder on plane and charcoal masks and silk scarves in airports. Kuala Lumpur International airport is a godsend to allergy sufferers. The other airports were just bearable. Denver airport was ok.

One thing I learnt – never expect your baggage to arrive with you. Always carry at least a week of emergency medical supplies and clothing with you. At the destination, have someone meet you to facilitate your exit from polluted airports, taxis, buses.

If using paid accommodation, be prepared to change rooms, even hotels. Get out into nature as soon as possible. I had a wonderful time in the Himalayan foothills and McLeod Gang (Dalai Lama headquarters) and Latvian gorges and castles. Colorado was wonderful for its mountains and hippie communes in the hills.

Most importantly, let the people you are travelling with or staying with know exactly what your problem is and what to do in emergencies.

Never ever travel without comprehensive medical insurance.

Do not assume that the medication you take in Australia is just the same in America. I had a major incident due to this very bad assumption.

One other thing: never become too confident. I signed up with a group to trek in Nepal, with a stopover in Bangkok. That trip was a disaster. Bangkok airport has smoking in cubicles so that the air circulates above the walls and into the airport. The travel agent had utterly stuffed up my bookings for accommodation as well.

For mysterious reasons, I was told I could not exit the airport and had to stay in that smoky environment for 24 hours. A major reaction ensued.

The only way I survived Bangkok International airport was by holding the thought "I refuse to die in Bangkok Airport". I managed to organise emergency rescue and after 24 hours flew onto to India to another stuff up. I got accommodation with no shutting windows and smoke pouring into the room.

Eventually I landed on the doorstep of the Australian Consulate in New Delhi seeking speedy repatriation to Australia.

I was too sick for that and they took me to Apollo Hospital. I am ever grateful for the wonderful efforts of the hospital's respiratory specialists in getting me back onto my feet. What is more wonderful, they came up with a diagnosis; "you suffer from allergic bronchial asthma". All the doctors and specialists in Australia had not been able to figure that out.

I got back to Australia, skin and bone, with pills and puffers for the management of asthma. However the allergies/sensitivities had degenerated to what they had been way back in 1984/5. I had become sensitive to just about everything, yet again. The end of the world loomed as a big black hole into which I would be sucked for eternity.

Quite on another issue, I met a wonderful physician who was also the sports physician for the Australian Olympic team and had done lots of research on asthma.

She settled on Singulair as the way to reduce sensitivity, and it did. Within a month I was back to my usual sensitivities, so I could again go to shops, see people, and so on. I ceased taking the tablets after two years because I really no longer needed them and I was developing some reactions to them. But they sure were good for the time needed. I keep them on hand for emergencies or travel.

The physician unfortunately died in a plane crash on the way to do the Kokoda Trail. I was devastated. I, and thousands of others, had lost a good friend and a brilliant doctor. I felt guilty as I was part of her inspiration to hike mountains. But I did advise her against the Kokoda Trail.

Another milestone in my way to health was the diagnosis of oesophageal ulcers, getting towards the cancerous stage. Going through records, it was discovered that I had had them for at least twenty years, but somehow no medical treatment had been offered.

Getting a resolution was another chemical nightmare. Only acid-reducing proton-pump inhibitors could help, but I found myself reacting to every tablet I tried. Desperation set in. Then I discovered tablets that could be quartered and still have beneficial effects.

So now my digestion has improved, my sensitivities and allergies and asthma have stabilised to what I can manage.

One would think, whoopee.

Unfortunately not. Now age is creeping up and I am having ankle and toe problems. After twenty years of running and mountain climbing, there now is a physical toll to pay. I am doing whatever I can to keep moving, for a life without moving is not very palatable to me.

Aside from travel, I have developed a love for Alpine areas – both NSW and Victoria. Clear air, no pollen, endless skies with drifting clouds. I have checked out several ski lodges and they offer fairly allergy free accommodation. Using a tent can be a good option in summer.

I see the Alpine way to health as a good alternative to the seaside way to health. Perhaps a combination of both: Alps in summer and seaside in winter. I have not yet experienced the lodges packed with winter skiers – I could strike some problems there. One needs an air bubble to get to these places, avoiding the natural and suburban jungle in between. My Subaru Outback is my safety capsule for going places.

The nineteen years since the last article was written have been adventurous, creative, and though there have been limitations, I have done many of the things I never dreamt I would do again.

The journey is not yet over. More mountains, more swims, more yoga and meditation, music and photography, perhaps even some writing. I have ancient Latvian folk tales to get out into the world.

I am most willing to talk with anyone going through a bad patch, or just needing a shoulder to weep upon, or a success to share.

I do in my daily life avoid as many chemicals as possible, even have an Austin Air filter at home. I eat a balanced diet within the foods I can tolerate. And I have an incredible joy in being alive and being out in nature is my version of nirvana.

Thanks to all the people who have touched my life and who still contribute in so many ways to keep me fairly sane. And a huge gratitude to some of those who are now dead, you have contributed so much that I never could give enough gratitude.

Sometimes one feels all alone, but really, one never is, not totally. I am grateful for that, even though in difficult times I sometimes push people away. Illness does that to one.

My photography friend has become my partner who has shared and sometimes inadvertently caused some of my ongoing difficulties. But he is still there, and not running away, which I find quite amazing.

I also have long term friends in Canberra who are a constant source of moral support.

No, one is not alone. Just reach out. Someone is there.

Thank you for reading this ramble. Hope some of these words help someone somewhere.

Editor's notes

The picture shows Zigrid with her van in 1986.

Canberra is the capital of Australia. New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland are the three states along the east coast of the country.

The first part of her story was published in *AAA News*, in August 1993. AAA here stands for Australian Allergy Association. The second part was published in *Sensitivity Matters* in September 2012. That magazine is published by the Australian MCS organization AESSRA, which merged with AAA and other organizations over the years.

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