

THE RISKS TO HEALTH IN RIO DE JANEIRO

in 1904

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The official advice to travellers to the Summer Olympic Games in Rio this year warns that cases of locally transmitted Zika virus have been confirmed in the last three months. Travellers are advised that there is a risk to health, if one is pregnant or planning to become pregnant. They are also told that malaria is present in parts of Brazil; and that dengue fever is also a danger there during the rainy season (from November to March). Accordingly, it is sensible to take steps to avoid being bitten by mosquitoes.

Things were much worse in 1904, when Rio (which was then the capital of Brazil) suffered from overcrowding, insufficient clean water and sewerage systems and irregular collections of rubbish. Many diseases were rife, including TB, measles, typhus, leprosy, yellow fever, smallpox and bubonic plague.

In 1902, the President authorised the Mayor and the Director General of Public Health in Rio to take drastic measures. These included what was known as the *bota abaixo* (the 'throwing down or out' programme), which involved the demolition of older buildings, and the removal of thousands of poor people to neighbouring areas. Mosquito-Killing Brigades entered homes in order to exterminate the insects which carried yellow fever. In addition, Congress approved a Mandatory Vaccination Law at the end of October 1904, to eradicate smallpox.

Many people in Rio were unwilling to accept the degree of compulsion involved in these programmes, especially when it was rumoured that women would have to undress in order to be vaccinated, and that the vaccine would have to be applied to the private parts of the body. A popular revolt ensued. For a whole week in November, Rio became a battlefield. Shops were looted; trains were overturned; barricades were erected; and government forces were attacked, before law and order were eventually restored, the vaccination process restarted, and smallpox eradicated.

At least one British party of travellers was affected. On 21 October 1904, a steamship called *Véronique* had left Southampton, with the 7th Earl Fitzwilliam and a party of around 80 on board, consisting of the Earl's friends and relations, some Yorkshire miners and the crew. The Earl had bought the vessel (as one might in those days, if one was an aristocrat in search of adventure), to engage in a treasure

hunt on Cocos Island in the Pacific, the property of Costa Rica. Since the Panama Canal had not yet been built, this involved sailing, or steaming, down the Atlantic, and either rounding the Horn, or passing through the Straits of Magellan. Since steamships used enormous quantities of coal, the plan was also to stop off at several ports along the way. A voyage of several weeks was necessary.

I have recently published an account of Fitzwilliam's voyage and adventures on Cocos Island.¹ Suffice to say, however, that when the *Véronique* drew near to Rio in the middle of November 1904, her Captain was informed that he could not land there because of a 'dispute between two political parties concerning vaccination'. The travellers had to proceed, and drop anchor in Montevideo in Uruguay instead. Fortunately, Montevideo was free of disease; but politically, it also suffered from the same kind of instability which affected neighbouring Brazil. Certainly, George Eustace Cooke-Yarborough, a friend of Fitzwilliam who kept a journal, did not think much of the place. He wrote the following about the capital of Uruguay:

Uninteresting town. Streets all at right angles. The country in chronic state of revolution, which paralyzes trade. Two parties, red and white, always at one another's throats. On the smallest pretext, the party in opposition rises, and devotes itself to the wholesale destruction of the property of members of the government faction, which is promptly followed by counter-destruction by the party in power.

The risks to one's health in South America in 1904 were evidently more numerous than those which had their origin in insect bites.



Hunting Party in Costa Rica, Christmas 1904

¹ *Earl Fitzwilliam's Treasure Island*, available from Amazon.

