

LAURA'S TB STORY: FINDING FREEDOM FROM AN UNWANTED TRAVELLING COMPANION

“Remember, remember the 5th of November.... I'll never forget the date I was told I was suspected of having tuberculosis. To the noise of fireworks exploding in the damp, dark dusk I walked home from hospital in a state of bewilderment and shock.

How could I have TB, that Victorian disease which killed off Nicole Kidman in Moulin Rouge? No one in the UK got it anymore. Plus, I felt fine. OK, so I'd had a bit of a cough on and off for almost 10 months, but I was fit and healthy.

There's never a good time to find out you have TB, but the timing was perfectly awful. My boyfriend and me had planned our "epic-six-month-around-the-world adventure". With ten days to go, we'd handed in our notice, put our flat up for rent and bought the flights. And here I was, being told I was highly infectious and shouldn't even leave my flat, let alone the country!

The coughing had started in February, after a spell of feeling under the weather. My GP told me to take it easy and get in touch if it hadn't stopped by Easter. When I went back, the cough was dismissed as a lingering virus. I was seen by a total of six doctors over nine months. Each one dismissed the cough as a minor irritant.

In hindsight, I think the doctors saw a healthy, white, 29-year-old female who didn't fit the stereotypes. TB never crossed their minds. Finally after visiting an asthma clinic, I was referred for a chest x-ray. I fully expected the x-ray to come back clear but I was immediately referred to the on-site TB clinic, where tests showed I definitely had TB! Instead of leaving drinks with friends, I was reeling – I really did have tuberculosis.



A strict regime began. Nine pills a day alongside blood tests to check my liver function. The next three weeks were easily the most stressful of my life. I didn't want to risk infecting anyone else so I stayed quarantined at home. I wasn't sure what I was more worried about – being homeless, being unemployed, travel, TB or the side effects of treatment.

The TB team were immensely reassuring and gave me clear information from the outset. I was shocked to find that TB is still one of the biggest killers worldwide.

After three weeks of medication, my consultant told me I was responding well to treatment. I was no longer infectious and, as long as I maintained the regime of pills religiously and had regular check-ups, I was free to go abroad!. So off we went, backpacks weighed down with my medication. We had an amazing adventure, climbing volcanoes in New Zealand, scaling peaks in Patagonia, visiting Machu Picchu at dawn and salsa dancing in Colombia. I thought about the TB every day but, while I sometimes felt a little nauseous and had joint pains in the first few months, it didn't impede me in anything I wanted to do.