

on the fly



Travelers buy fried spiders by the roadside near Skuon, Cambodia.

THINK GLOBALLY, GRUB LOCALLY

BY ELIZA REID

Scarfing down a slice of pizza, a falafel, or cautiously slurping spoonfuls from a plastic bag of Penang curry may not be considered haute cuisine, but dabbling in a bit of street food is an instant way to experience a local slice of life in any country.

Imagine it: high noon. You're strolling the streets of Bangkok, Copenhagen or Lima and suddenly realize your stomach is crying out for chili-flecked pineapple, a hot dog with ketchup or a lightly grilled guinea pig. As it turns out, it's your lucky day. Within a few paces, your hunger can be satiated by cheap, fresh and often memorable local cuisine. If you're really fortunate, some of the most enterprising businesses will have even placed a few rickety plastic chairs next to their portable woks or vats of boiling stew for you to relax and enjoy your mid-day snack.

From Dakar to Delhi and Tokyo to Toronto, forking over small sums for succulent street food is a custom almost all vacationers partake in at some point. Diving into the best a nation's roadside vendors have to offer is a good-value way of getting a glimpse into local culture—and perhaps some souvenir bacteria. Those who regularly indulge in this form of dining are proud to share their horror stories. Says travel consultant Tanya Orr: "I'll never forget the horrible tale of gastrointestinal woe I suffered in Zimbabwe after eating something that turned out, on closer inspection, to be tinned dog food. It wasn't my best day."

Whether from digestive mishaps or culinary wonders, the experience of eating *al fresco* is not one that travelers soon forget. "The local culture has figured out the best snack for their country already," says Andrew Evans, author of Bradt's Ukraine guide. "So why the hell go buy a Snickers or a hamburger?"



A boy with a basket of mopane larvae, South Africa.



Suburban entrepreneurs in the US.

Thinking of diving in?

Atlantica suggests sampling some of the following:

ANIMAL WONDERS

If you've ever thought you'd do well on *Survivor*, there's no shortage of rodent or insect nibbles available grilled to perfection by roadside vendors around the globe. Munching on one of Cambodia's famous deep fried spiders—hairy legs and all—can earn you major points in the bragging stakes. Equally popular with fearless gourmands are brochettes of grilled insects in China, black and white mopane worms from southern Africa, guinea pigs from Peru, or a fat, juicy rat-on-a-stick in Laos.

The bravest of all? Balut, the near bite-sized snack of the Philippines and Vietnam that is a boiled embryonic duck egg. Consider yourself warned.

NATIONAL TREASURES

Some countries are inevitably associated with an unofficial national dish. Think of France and images are instantly conjured of chic women dripping Nutella over their hands as they dig into a freshly cooked crêpe. Talk of Hong Kong and you can almost smell the pungent aroma of stinky tofu wafting from the street corner stands in the markets of Wan Chai. Even Iceland gets in on the act with their hot dogs, made with mostly lamb meat and stuffed with precisely ordered condiments, including fried onions and remoulade.

In Russia and other former Soviet countries like Belarus, the unofficial street food of choice is not blinis or borscht. It's ice cream, sold in cardboard-like bread cones from kiosks year-round, even during the frigid winter months. "The ice cream will be frozen solid and the air temperature minus 30 Celsius" recalls author Andrew Evans, "but the people still buy cones on the street and chew the ice cream in fierce bites."


AND TO DRINK...?

The American dream starts early. Most youngsters who grew up in the United States recall their first foray into capitalism as the ubiquitous lemonade stand. An old table is dragged out to the roadside, a hastily painted sign with "lemonade: 25 cents" scrawled in irresistible childlike text is fixed to a nearby tree, and waxy paper cups are stacked up. Patrons, inevitably in vehicles rather than on foot, roll up to the curbside, slap down their quarter, and bravely smile through the tears as they realize that, yet again, the pint-sized entrepreneurs forgot to add the sugar to their freshly squeezed lemon juice.

On the other side of the world, locals in Zimbabwe and Botswana quench thirst with "the beer of good cheer". Chibuku is sold in huge plastic jugs or two-liter milk cartons which, since it's unfiltered, is full of chunky extras like hops and barley. Much more potent than the sour milk whose aroma it shares, Chibuku not only gives a buzz, but fills you up.

LATE NIGHT MUNCHIES

Stumbling around the streets after last call requires sustenance. Those seeking street food in the wee hours want high-fat, low-cost dishes that will help absorb all the excess alcohol sloshing in their stomachs. In the UK, that role is filled by the offerings of the kebab van, parked on street corners from Cambridge to Cardiff, and operated cheerfully through the night. Choose more "traditional" doner kebabs or load a crispy jacket potato with greasy fillings. It doesn't really matter; it will all feel heavy in the morning.

If your Bacchanalian activities took place on the continent, head to any of the former Yugoslavian nations for a burek, so revered among locals that Slovenian musician Ali En had a major hit with his ditty of the same name. The food itself is a long pastry stuffed with meat, cheese, or both. More exotic versions include the pizza burek, but beware of scalding yourself with tomato sauce. 

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