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Handy list for foreign travel survival

Ahmad A. Talib

THE art of survival when travelling abroad has been made somewhat easier these days, foodwise at least. Not so long ago, some people used to lose weight when they travelled abroad. They may lose a couple of kilogrammes, depending on how long they're abroad and where they go.

Of course, some people gain a few kilogrammes, again, depending on where they go and the duration of their stay overseas. More importantly, some may even fall ill mainly because they eat the wrong food, or eat food which are not agreeable to their palates.

But I met a group of friends recently who had no problems at all with their diet when travelling abroad. They don't eat at the hotel restaurants, except when necessary. Not only did they manage to save some money, they also have no complaints about the food being bland, tasteless or cold.

These friends are regular travellers actually. They're not exactly the jet-set crowd enjoying life at the world's playground. But their work has taken them to all corners of the world, including to places not on the route of the common traveller.

I met them in the course of my work when covering Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's trip to South Africa, Namibia and Mozambique. Apart from one Indian restaurant and at the breakfast table of a hotel owned by a Malaysian in Johannesburg, my friends did their own cooking and enjoy home-cooked dishes all the way.

I did some cooking of my own too, but it was nothing compared to my friends. My cooking was very basic - instant-noodles with some eggs and mushrooms; and the heating up of the pre-cooked beef rendang or chicken kurma. Preparing them doesn't require much skill, and takes little time.

One morning in Walvis Bay, the port and resort city in Namibia, I was invited to Ismail's room for breakfast. He said it was nothing special, and so I joined him. I was treated to fried rice with ikan bilis and coffee. It was good and filling - it kept me going throughout the day.

On another occasion, in Maputo, Mozambique, I was asked to join a different group of friends. They had a slightly more elaborate arrangement. We had rice, eggs in special gravy, sambal ikan bilis goreng pedas, some cucumber and fruits. My share, shamefully, was a pot of hot tea.

A few implements are necessary for foreign travel survival. One of the most important is a dual-voltage electric cooker. There are a few brands in the market and they cost quite a bit. But for those of you who travel abroad often, buying one is a good investment.

The dual-voltage is important because some countries have a voltage of 110v while some have 220v to 240v. One only needs to turn a small knob to the right or left to select the right voltage.

The cooker also comes with a small squarish bowl which is packaged for easy carrying.

Frequent travellers also equip themselves with packets of instant noodles (three-minute mee as they are called), pre-cooked dishes packed in plastic containers which you only need to warm up to eat, some canned food like sardine and canned vegetables. A multi-function penknife is also a must.

Once you arrive at your destination, one of the first places to visit is a mini-market where you can get some dishwashing detergent, bread, butter

and jam, three-in-one coffee or whatever drink you prefer and some eggs.

Eggs are very versatile. They can be boiled, fried sunny side up or be made into an omelette or scrambled.

These days, with the ringgit as it is, I see more of my travelling friends doing their own cooking in their hotel rooms. Except for some hotels, simple cooking is allowed.

Hotels won't allow you to do any serious cooking but they generally don't mind if you just cook some rice and a can of sardine.

Ikan masin is a no-no, of course. This is because the smell of the fish when it's being fried is not a welcome odour. But some friends overcome this by bringing some salted eggs instead. Having rice, salted eggs, a can of sardine and some salad when overseas can be very satisfying when the local food doesn't agree with you.

It's not always possible to cook these simple dishes when you're overseas of course. Your assignment schedule may be so tight that you hardly have time to do sight-seeing, shopping or any form of recreation. But it's important that you eat well for that added strength to rush from one meeting point to another.

I have suggested to these cooking friends to come up with a more comprehensive checklist which may be helpful for other frequent travellers. And if you have some ideas which can make this more interesting and helpful, please pass them to me.

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