



# TRAVEL CLINIC



with Doctor Jane

## Up in the air

Global air pollution is on the rise, and with it comes the increased risk of respiratory illness. **Dr Jane Wilson-Howarth** explains how travellers might be affected – and how to cope

**A**s my overnight flight zeroed in on Yangon, I sat transfixed, watching the rising sun paint the clouds a rich, deep orange. But this wasn't just a trick of the light: what I saw was a huge slick of air pollution in the sky, looking for all the world like brick dust.

Most cities have such plumes now. A new report by the World Health Organisation (WHO) underlines the extent of the problem, reporting that more than 80% of people living in urban areas – where pollution is monitored – are breathing air containing unhealthy quantities of disease-causing particles.

The problem is at its worst in low- and middle-income countries, where 98% of towns and cities of more than 100,000 inhabitants do not meet the WHO's air quality guidelines on risk-posing air pollutants. In high-income countries it's also a problem, but in fewer – 56% – environments. So, whether visiting big towns and cities in the East or the West, travellers need to be aware of the risks.

### Bad breath

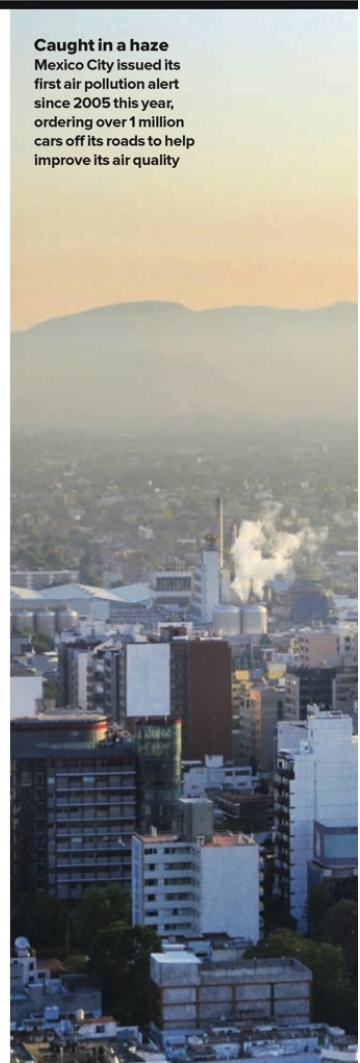
So what's getting in travellers' lungs? The air pollution that the WHO has been monitoring looks at particulate matter of two different sizes (PM10 and PM2.5) – specks or grit small enough to float in the air and be inhaled. Individuals living in polluted environments are at significantly increased risk of stroke, lung cancer and heart and respiratory diseases.

Even short-term exposure can have an effect. Otherwise healthy visitors to polluted areas are more likely to suffer from chest infections. But the good news for travellers is this is increasingly recognised as a problem. Monitoring (the

WHO currently collects data from 103 countries) allows people to assess the risk, while local pollution levels are often reported in newspapers, weather bulletins and other media. So visitors who are more susceptible to air pollution can now check levels prior to travel.

### The worst places

Pollution levels can often vary according to climate and season. The Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, for example, is shaped so that pollution is easily trapped, but this is significantly dispersed when the monsoons arrive. The worst time is between April and mid-June, in the build-up to rainy season when the air can



**Caught in a haze**  
Mexico City issued its first air pollution alert since 2005 this year, ordering over 1 million cars off its roads to help improve its air quality

feel positively sulphurous and yours eyes can really sting.

Many megacities face similar issues. In Lagos, Nigeria, their first incident of major smog was in 2005, but things have since deteriorated. Emissions from traffic congestion are compounded by longstanding industrial pollution.

Mexico City is another metropolis famous for its poor air, made worse by the estimated 5.5 million vehicles pouring ozone into an already polluted environment. Again, rains help settle the problem, but in an attempt to curb rising levels, recent government restrictions



**Too much to mask?**  
Pollution masks are a common sight when travelling – particularly in cities across Asia