

The Travelling Vegetarian

VSS President, Dr George Jacobs, was interviewed by Maida Pineda who writes for *Business Traveller* magazine - <http://www.businesstraveller.com>

Here's the interview. Who knows whether or when any of it will appear in the magazine?

1. There seems to be an increased interest in becoming vegetarian? Is this true? Do you have statistics to back this up?

People seem to be more aware of vegetarianism, more accepting of it, and more inviting, in terms of providing more vegetarian options. I haven't seen stats in Asia, but surveys in the UK and US show numbers rising, not just of vegetarians but also of meat reducers, i.e., people who are trying to cut down on meat:
<http://www.vrg.org/nutshell/faq.htm#poll> <http://www.vegsoc.org/info/statveg.html>

The bit about meat reducers is a point that I'd like to clarify. We can pursue many goals in our lives, such as being an environmentalist and donating to help needy people without doing them 100%. For example, just because someone claims to be an environmentalist doesn't mean that they walk everywhere they go or never use hot water or air-conditioning. Therefore, why must the label 'vegetarian' belong only to those who never eat meat; why can't those who eat less meat also be included?

2. Would the increase be attributed more to the environmental concerns or other reasons?

There seem to be three main secular reasons for eating less or no meat: (1) health, including diseases linked to diet, such as heart disease, diabetes, obesity and certain cancers, as well as diseases linked to factory farming, such as swine flu and bird flu; (2) kindness towards our fellow animals who not only die far in advance of their normal lifespan but also live miserable, unnatural lives; and (3) environment, as meat production is hugely wasteful of natural resources given that many kgs of plant food must be fed to the non-human animals to produce just 1 kg of meat, and these animals (we eat in excess of 60 billion land animals annually) produce huge amounts of waste, including methane and nitrous oxide, which are powerful greenhouse gases. Perhaps, with the recent attention to global warming, the environment argument for vegetarianism may be newly on people's minds. At the same time, the scientific evidence for the other two reasons continues to grow.

3. What is the situation in Asia? Is there a noted increase in becoming vegetarian? Which countries would be at the forefront of the vegetarian lifestyle?

What strikes me is that in the 1990s, when people in Asia learned I was vegetarian, their usual question was, "Are you a Buddhist or are you a Hindu?" I'm neither. In the 2000s, the question expanded to, "Is it for religion or for health?" In the current decade, thanks to greater awareness of the environment and kindness rationales for meat reduction, public awareness has expanded even further. I don't get blank stares when I talk about the environment, and fewer people roll their eyes when I talk about reducing the suffering of our fellow animals.

4. Singapore has been cited as one of the countries suited for vegetarian travelers for the many options in veg eateries. Do you agree? What other countries are veg friendly?

Absolutely, Singapore is one of the world's most veg-friendly countries. The Food Outlets page on the Vegetarian Society (Singapore) website – <http://www.vegetarian-society.org/?q=fdl> lists more than 550 veg eateries around the island.

We also publish a Singapore Vegetarian Food Guide listing more than 80 vegetarian restaurants. The guide is on sale at book stores. Plus, more and more restaurants have specially designated vegetarian options on their menu or even a vegetarian page.

The trick I use when travelling is to ask someone to write on a card in the local language what my food preferences are. Then, I show that card at eateries. For example, I do that in Japan with a high degree of success. I also carry some dried fruit, sunflower seeds, etc. in case of emergencies. Plus, if I eat less every now and then, that's probably good for me.

5. As this is geared towards Business Travellers, is there a noted improvement in hotel offerings for vegetarians? Airlines?

I find that most high end places, such as restaurants in hotels, are especially good for vegetarians. For instance, I was looking at the Singapore Tatler restaurant guide a few years back, and almost every restaurant had veg options. As to airlines, they've always had veg options. Where I've seen improvement in just the past year or two is in the vegan options. It used to be that people didn't even know what vegan meant, and I'd order a vegan meal and there would be cheese included on the side. Now, when I request vegan meals, the majority of reservation agents know what I'm talking about. Also, flight attendants tend to be quite savvy about health and trends generally; so, they know about vegan and why it's a smart and kind choice.

6. What improvements do you think hotels and airlines can do to better the veg experience?

As to hotels, this may be asking too much, but what Shibaken, a Japanese/French restaurant in Gallery Hotel in Singapore does is to have two days a week, Monday and Tuesday, which are meat free days. No meat is served on those two days!

As to airlines, I'd like to see more fresh fruit. For example, instead of walking through the plane giving out ice cream, what about apples, peaches, etc.?

7. There are different types of vegetarian cuisine. Most evident in Singapore is the Chinese, Indian and Western? Are there pronounced differences in use of ingredients. I noticed Chinese cuisine tends to use more of the mock meats.

Yes, there is tremendous variety among types of veg cuisine and also within each type. For instance, at a Chinese vegetarian restaurant, I usually have no trouble staying away from mock meat, although I do enjoy it now and then.

8. Where did mock meats originate and where are they most popular? Are they a transitional food that help vegetarians who miss meat?

Yes, many people find mock meats to be very useful when they are reducing their meat consumption. With most dishes, whether they be meat or veg dishes, the spices and flavourings are often the key, and most spices and flavourings are veg. That's why we can enjoy the flavours of many traditional meat dishes, such as tom yam or laksa, in their veg versions.

9. Is there a growing trend for vegetarian cookery schools?

There's one in the U.K. - <http://www.seedlingshowcase.com/cv08/cv.aspx> - and we just had an email from someone who is planning to open such a school in Singapore. There are many cooking classes that teach veg dishes. For example, this Saturday, Vegetarian Society (Singapore) is doing a class on how to make your own soy yogurt. It's so easy that even I can do it.

10. Any other information you would like to share would be greatly appreciated.

There are two websites - www.happycow.com and www.veg dining.com - that list veg eateries world-wide. And VegOut - <http://vegoutapp.com> - is a phone app that provides a worldwide directory of vegan, vegetarian and veg-friendly dining places which can be found nearest to your present or programmed location.

Also, vegetarian phrases in many, many languages can be found at <http://ivu.org/phrases/index.html>