

Bed bug infestations are increased travel nuisance

By Holly Peek

3/2/2011

Tulane student Jennifer Farrell has traveled the world. She has visited every continent, slept in trains, traveled all of South Africa, and stayed in a Bosnian hostel. Despite her adventurous world travels, her undeniable worst travel experience happened here in the United States. While resting comfortably in her upper-scale hotel room in Texas, she felt something crawling on her. "I turned on the lights and I saw them scattering around the bed, I look on the wall and I saw them crawling on the wall," Jennifer said. To her dismay, her room was infested with bed bugs. Hotel nightmares like Jennifer's have become increasingly more common for travelers across the United States, bringing a spotlight onto the issue of bed bugs for spring breakers.

Bed bugs were common in the United States before World War II, but were essentially eradicated in the U.S. with the use of DDT in the 1940's and 1950's. Although infestations have remained common internationally, bed bugs have begun to make their come back in the U.S. within the past five years. Zack Lemann, entomologist at the Audubon Insectarium, believes this is due to the banning of DDT in the 1970's and the natural repopulation of bed bug pockets that survived the DDT era. Along with an increase in international travel, this has spurred a comeback of the pest which has become especially problematic for hotels. "New York has a lot of bed bug problems and a lot of it is hotel based, which has to do with bed bug biology," Lemann said. "They walk well and move quickly. When a building has shared walls, the bugs can move from point A to point B with relative ease."

Because of their mobility, if a single hotel room is found to have bed bugs it is not safe to say the bugs are isolated to that one room. "I would want to inspect two rooms away in every direction from the infested room before I could say other rooms aren't infested" Lemann said. "Hotels will have different attitudes about bed bugs. Some will be willing to spend the money to make sure they are bed bug free, others won't." Several New Orleans hotels were contacted regarding their bed bug policies but declined to comment. Lemann said since bed bugs are a relatively new problem, policies are just now beginning to emerge in hotels across the nation. Bed bugs feed on blood but do not transmit any diseases to humans. Because they are blood feeders and don't feed on filth like other pests, bed bugs are just as likely to be found in a five star hotel as they are in a budget inn.

Although bed bugs are something to think about when traveling, Lemann advises travelers not to be paranoid and not to let the thought of bed bugs deter you from your normal travel plans. Several steps can be taken to protect yourself. First, ask the hotel front desk if they have had any bed bug infestations. Next, complete your own bed bug inspection before moving into the room. It's important to look in the mattress seams, under the mattress, near the headboard, and around the bed frame. If the bugs themselves can't be seen, remnants can be recognized by dark spotting or staining on the mattress. Finally, it is important to always use the luggage rack that is provided in the hotel room and to not put your luggage on the ground or bed.

If you think you may have stayed somewhere with bed bugs, it is important to make sure you don't bring the bugs home with you. All clothes, whether worn or not, should be washed in at least 120 degree water for 20 minutes. Luggage should be steamed on high heat and vacuumed before brought into the house. If all fails and there is an infestation in your house, professional help is definitely needed.