

Public Health: Switzerland's stinky city

Maybe there's just too much clean, mountain air around Zurich. There has to be some reason why it's impossible to find anywhere to dine, drink or even enjoy a concert without going home stinking of cigarette or cigar smoke.

Coming out of Zurich airport to the hotel shuttle buses, the first thing that hits you is cigarette smoke. And throughout an entire trip, it keeps on hitting you. And the last thing that hits you before walking down the ramp is - yes, you've guessed it - cigarette smoke.

For Zurich is almost like last man standing when it comes to banning smoking.

Restaurants, bars, taxis, hotel lobbies are all muggy. We were unable to find a restaurant that even had a no-smoking area. Sitting eating dinner in one of Zurich's smartest and most popular restaurants where diners and drinkers mix, people put ashtrays on our table and held lit cigarettes right next to us, tapping them off and stubbing them out next to our food.

Others lit cigars and puffed the smoke in the direction of other tables.

In more than three hours of walking around the city, we did not find a single bar that was smoke free. Even a smart tea-shop had a smoke free ground floor - and a smoke-laden ground floor which was where most of the seats were.

At the airport, there is a no-smoking policy for much of the departure lounge - and there is a glass-box for smokers. But smokers prop open the door with the result that the whole concourse stinks.

Zurich has a smoking ban - imposed in July last year. That already late measure is weak: only municipal buildings are covered. A further vote in September 2008 failed to increase the scope of the ban to bars and restaurants.

Switzerland has a number of divisions called "cantons" and each operates many

policies independently. Although there are some efforts to develop a federal policy, the cantons remain individual and proud of it. But the federal policy is weak - a vote in June 2008 failed to pass a ban in restaurants and bars - in many cases there are, effectively the same thing and some of Zurich's best restaurants are actually what the English would call "pubs." The House of Representatives did, however, manage to pass a measure that said that cantons could impose laws that exceeded the federal power.

Geneva promptly did - and has banned smoking in restaurants and bars in addition to publicly owned buildings.

There is a small movement, though: Zurich hotels are bending to pressure from international travellers: there are increasing numbers of no-smoking rooms and floors available, although in some hotels, these are only available in higher-grade rooms.

For companies, the failure of Zurich - and other cities that are out of line with the increasingly global approach to smoking - there is a compliance hazard. How long is it before an employee claims that he cannot go to a city where he is forced to sit in smoke to eat or socialise with clients because it is a health hazard and covered by health and safety at work provisions?