

# **Brenda Wall was an ordinary housewife from Birmingham and a Gastroenterology Nurse**

**However, in 1994, everything changed and Consumer Activism found a new name!**

These descriptive words of Brenda Wall are again reproduced with the kind permission of the Wall Family.

"Brenda devoted much, if not all of her life and time to 'Putting Holidaymakers First' in her campaign to secure safer holidays for us all.

She was instrumental in improving standards, facilities and services in many foreign destinations, especially the Dominican Republic and the Balaeric Islands, and continually strove to meet the goals of HolidayTravelWatch by always 'Putting Holidaymakers First'.

Brenda was described by Consumer Commentators as being, 'Passionate, Dedicated and Committed' to the problems and plight of all British consumers/holidaymakers.

In a world where people like this are in short supply, Brenda was an inspirational reminder of the power of the human spirit.

Brenda's passion, tenacity and steadfast desire to fight for the rights of consumers, holidaymakers and the underdogs, defied the odds. Where there was injustice, she took on some of the biggest travel companies in the world. Her own victory was made sweet by the fact that she now helped others in their fight for justice. The fact that one woman's passion and commitment could have such a positive effect on so many people and their lives, never failed to amaze her.

When asked what effect it had on her as a person, she said *"the whole experience has changed and transformed my life completely and made me a much better person for it. I firmly believe that what happened to me and others in San Andres, was meant to happen, in order that I can pass on my knowledge and experience to others and hopefully make travelling abroad a more enjoyable and safer experience for all concerned"*.

Until 1994, she was someone who was unaware of the many problems and pitfalls that affected holidaymakers abroad.

Brenda was well known for being very outspoken both to the press, the television and tour operators when she represented the views of many British holidaymakers.

Many of the British press and media described her as 'The woman the tour operators hate', 'Every tour operators nightmare', 'The scourge of the travel industry', 'Consumers/holidaymakers champion' and 'The woman who makes Anne Robinson look as ferocious as your dotty old aunt'.

Brenda spent most of her life working in the nursing profession and in the National Health Service.

In the Summer of 1994, Brenda and her husband decided to take a holiday to a Caribbean destination - San Andres. The holiday was a disaster for Brenda and her husband and for many other British holidaymakers, who very quickly became seriously ill as a direct result of the 'all inclusive' holiday and bad hygiene and sanitation standards. Many of the holidaymakers, including Brenda and her husband returned home very ill suffering with diseases such as:

- Cholera
- Salmonella
- Amoebic Dysentery
- Bacillary Dysentery
- Giardia Lamblia
- Aeromonas Sobria
- Aeromonas Hydrophilia
- Endolimax Nana
- Vibrio Parahaemolyticus

After trying to resolve the holiday complaint direct with the tour operator and getting nowhere, Brenda contacted the other holidaymakers, formed a Class/Group Action involving 115 people, took expert legal advice and took the claim all the way to the High Court in London. As a direct result of her efforts, she and other group members secured an out of Court settlement for

undisclosed damages. The case has often been referred to as 'David and Goliath'.

It was after this landmark case that she realised she had gained a vast amount of knowledge and experience during the three years she was bringing her group action to the High Court. She became committed to the plight and injustices of British holidaymakers. It was at the end of 1995 that she created the organisation HolidayTravelWatch to give assistance, advice, information and support to other holidaymakers, who had suffered distress and appalling holidays with British tour operators.

Brenda had regular meetings with some of the major tour operators, Thomson, Airtours, First Choice, JMC, and some of the independent operators to put the consumers point of view in an attempt to raise health and safety awareness and improve the travel industry's standards.

Brenda worked closely with the Consumers Association Holiday Which? and Consumer Safety International.

Brenda regularly featured on National TV and Radio and contributed and featured in:

- ITV 'Holidays From Hell'
- ITV 'Package Holidays Uncovered'
- BBC 'Watchdog'
- BBC 'Destination Nightmares'
- ITV 'Wish You Were Here'
- ITV 'We Can Work It Out'
- ITV 'GMTV'
- ITV 'This Morning' with Richard and Judy
- Granada 'Livetime'
- Carlton TV 'Know Your Rights'
- BBC Breakfast
- BBC 'Working Lunch'
- HTV 'Out of Order'
- 'The Vanessa Show'
- BBC 'Kilroy'

- BBC Midlands News
- BBC Northwest News
- Granada 'Tonight'
- ITV '3D`
- ITV 'I Spy'
- 'The Big Breakfast'
- BBC 'The Great Escape'
- 'Carlton Woman'
- BBC Radio 4 'You and Yours'
- BBC Radio WM 'Ed Doolan Show'
- BBC Radio WM 'Tony & Julie Late Show'
- BBC Radio5 '5 Live'
- BBC Radio 'Late Show'
- 'Getaway'
- Talk TV
- ITV 'World In Action'
- 'Panorama'
- 'The Pulse'
- HTV 'Fairs Fair'
- BBC Radio 'The Andy Peebles Show'
- 'Simply Money'
- ITV 'Norton's Outakes'
- Granada 'Extreme Nightmare Disasters'

Many news programs plus, virtually all National and Major Local Newspapers, Magazines, Environmental Health News and Journals and the Travel Press. Brenda attended and spoke at many national Conference's and Seminar's on consumer issues and legal developments.

She addressed the 1998 1st International Travel and Tourism Conference and attended the 3rd International Travel and Tourism Conference, held in Newcastle, England in May 2000.

Brenda was one of the key speakers at the 1st International Conference on Food Safety in Travel and Tourism, sponsored by the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health and the NSF in Barcelona, Spain.

Brenda regularly presented seminars at ABTA, where she graphically demonstrated to tour operators, travel agents, customer services staff, legal staff and representatives of the travel industry, some of the appalling conditions and situations that holidaymakers experience abroad.

Brenda addressed the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers.

Presentations have been shown to the Federation of Tour Operators Steering Group, the Consumers Association, Holiday Which? and the Travel and Tourism Department of the University of Northumbria.

Brenda had been asked to do several training sessions and presentations for tour operators, their representatives and resort staff overseas.

A unique meeting took place between Brenda Wall of HolidayTravelWatch and Molly Maher of Consumer Safety International when they joined forces with the Heads of Health and Safety of two of the countries biggest tour operators, Thomson and Airtours. The delegation from the UK flew to Madrid for a meeting with the Spanish Minister of Tourism, Mr Eduardo Gamero, together with a representative from the Spanish National Tourist Board. The aim of the delegation was to seek further mutual co-operation for improvements in holiday accommodation and to discuss ways of improving general health and safety for the benefit of British holidaymakers.

In September 2001, at The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health in London, Brenda showed a presentation and addressed Environmental Health Officers of the London Food Study Group who have a particular interest in food safety.

In March 2002, Brenda addressed the Northern Forum Trainers Exchange in Gateshead and later that same month she addressed the Environmental Health Officers in Merseyside and Greater Manchester.

Her work continued through into 2003/4 when she helped advise many thousands of holidaymakers including 1600 people who had become ill during the Cryptosporidium outbreak in Majorca during 2003".

Frank observes that despite her illness, she continued with her direct contact with holidaymakers until 3 days before she passed away in 2005.

Brenda's motto was always 'putting holidaymakers first'. In this fractious world, never was there a time when now more than ever, her vision, ethic and ethos is sorely needed!

## **Brenda's Wall's story; her transformation from housewife to Consumer Campaigner began through a Legal Case**

Wall & Others v First Choice - A David & Goliath Story

Brenda was The Founder and former Managing Director of HolidayTravelWatch and created the Organisation in 1995, following her own Holiday from Hell. Brenda worked tirelessly for the benefit of the travel consumer and to highlight the failings of the travel industry. Brenda sadly passed away in early 2005 following a long illness. She would want her story visible so that others can read and relate to her own experiences.

It is stressed that this story reflects the position with her holiday and the destination at the time of her writing this article and does not reflect the current situation with the destination or travel company - this is a time-relative Consumer experience in her own words which may hold some resonance with other Consumer experiences today.

Her words are reproduced by me out of deep respect for her Activism and the changes it delivered:

"I make no apologies for the length of this topic. I feel it is important that if you are interested you will then understand the reasons behind me setting up the National Consumer Organisation. Only then will you realise why I am so committed, passionate and dedicated to the work and why I will always endeavour to meet the Aims and Objectives by 'Putting Holidaymakers First'.

It all began in 1994, when my husband and I decided to take a holiday of a lifetime to a small island in the Caribbean called San Andres to celebrate my

30th Wedding Anniversary. The holiday had been shown on the ITV program 'Wish You Were Here' only a few weeks earlier.

I will not be going into detail about all the horrors (these are listed below) of this holiday except to say that myself and my husband and [many other] holidaymakers experienced appalling conditions of hygiene and sanitation problems. Many holidaymakers returned home very ill with serious gastric illnesses. Nine highly Infectious Notifiable Diseases were diagnosed from many of the holidaymakers who went to the Caribbean island of San Andres. There was a long list of very serious complaints and perhaps the best way to illustrate the problems, would be for me to list them and then you can decide whether you think I and others were justified in bringing our claim against First Choice in the High Court in London.

The brochure said:

*'a magical place that time has forgotten', 'there can't be many places left in the world quite like San Andres', 'if your dream is of a sophisticated island where you can relax, leave the cares of the world behind and enjoy the simple things of life, we have a holiday to make it come true' and 'it will give you a taste of something completely different and make your holiday truly memorable'*

– it certainly did that!

Complaints:

- Inferior, substandard accommodation.
- No hot water for 14 days.
- Faulty air conditioning.
- Rooms flooded with water.
- Mould and mildew on walls and ceilings of our bedroom.
- Bedroom damp
- Toilets in filthy state, not cleaned and overflowing with raw sewage.
- Fleas and mites in the bedding.
- Urine stained mattresses.
- Smelly, dirty pillows.
- Rats, cockroaches, ants, scorpions and crabs in bedrooms.

- Exposed live electric wiring.
- Electric sockets hanging from walls.
- No wardrobes, clothes had to be hung from the curtain rails, other clothes were kept in suitcases.
- Hotel discharging raw sewage just six feet from open plan restaurants and kitchens.
- Uncovered dustbins filled with used toilet paper sitting next to the restaurant and kitchens.
- A large wooden shed at the rear of the open plan kitchens which smelled to 'high heaven' which contained a large number of black bags which were filled with the toilet waste and human excrement which were taken from guests bedroom toilets. Guests were not allowed to flush excrement or toilet paper down the toilet, you had to place used toilet paper into a rusty old bin.
- Maids who cleaned the toilet bowl with a cloth and then proceeded to wipe other surfaces including our drinking glasses with the same cloth she had just wiped around the toilet bowl.
- Food covered in flies, reheated, rehashed, uncooked and quite often luke warm with no temperature control.
- Vast majority of food which was in large containers was being kept warm because it was heated by one tiny night candle.
- Food such as pork, chicken, beefburgers and sausages were undercooked and often served cold and raw.
- Cats, dogs, birds, insects and flies in the restaurants.
- Filthy, dirty, unhygienic kitchens.
- Hotel beach littered in dog excrement and hypodermic needles. The hotel staff would rake the needles into a pile and then proceed to bury them along with the dog excrement into the sand.
- Everyone in the hotel was very ill. There was a nursing station open each day where a nurse would be treating guests for diarrhoea and stomach cramps and had been doing long before we arrived on San Andreas. Which means First Choice were aware of the problem long before we arrived.
- People were on drips in their rooms. Some were admitted to the local clinic which I have on good authority was not the cleanest of places. One man had to stay there for several weeks as he couldn't be moved and flown back to the UK.
- People were being treated daily by a resident nurse at the nursing station on the complex.

- Informed by First Choice rep that all the staff in the hotel had DYSENTERY - INCLUDING THOSE PREPARING, COOKING AND SERVING OUR FOOD.
- Dangerous excursions were undertaken by inexperienced staff.
- Aircraft bringing very ill passengers back to the UK every week and no investigations being carried out as to where these passengers were coming from or why they were so ill.
- The pilot did not notify the UK that he was bringing ill passengers back to the UK.
- Myself and my husband were extremely ill and at one point thought we would never return home. I remember thinking to myself that I was going to die. There is nothing more frightening than being ill in a foreign country, especially when no-one speaks the language, there is no basic understanding of hygiene, there is no hospital and the only clinic on the island is filthy, dirty and a danger to anyone who decided to accept any treatment there. I lost a stone and a half in the two weeks spent on San Andres and another stone after my return to the UK. On returning home to the UK, it was discovered many months later that there were thousands of people affected with illness, not just at the hotel I had stayed at, but at another five hotels that First Choice had on the island.

These are the 9 diseases we brought home with us to the UK from San Andres:

1. Cholera
2. Salmonella
3. Amoebic Dysentery
4. Bacillary Dysentery
5. Giardia
6. Aeromonas Sobria
7. Aeromonas Hydrophilia
8. Endolimax Nana
9. Vibrio Parahaemolyticus

Everyone wrote and complained and received the standard reply letter - 'we have had no other complaints'!!

At this point, I had contacted 400 other people who I had contact with and they were being told the same information, 'no other complaints'.

I paid £875 per person for this holiday. After many, many months of trying to resolve the complaint direct with First Choice, all they were prepared to offer was a derisory amount of £200 per person. I thought I was being very fair by not asking for a full refund. I even took off my airfare. I asked for £600!

Unaware of my rights as a holidaymaker, unaware of the kind of claim I had against First Choice and unaware of the kind of compensation I could recover for this kind of experience, I began to make further enquiries. These enquiries led to the first major Group Action 'WALL V FIRST CHOICE' in the High Court in London. The first action of multi party claimants against the Travel Industry. The much publicised claim was successful and was settled in an out of court settlement for undisclosed damages. First Choice's lawyers also made sure that we signed confidentiality agreements. They didn't want the general public to know how much compensation we had been awarded. San Andres was an example of a tour operator's failure on a scale and magnitude never seen before in the UK. 5,500 people were subjected to the horrors of San Andres.

I am glad to say that no tour operator has ever returned to San Andres and first choice pulled out of the destination 2 months after I and my husband returned home. First choice should have made sure that the infrastructure was in place before they decided to send unsuspecting holidaymakers to San Andres. I hope that those of you, who read about my experience, will understand why I and others felt they had to be made accountable and accept their failures.....we achieved this in the high court in 1997".