

A woman traveling alone? The world can be your oyster, too

Don't forget the essentials: eyes, ears, cultural sensitivity, common sense



PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

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Two decades ago I embarked on my first trip alone, a 52-hour, overland journey from Athens to London. My solo trips grew longer and more adventurous over the years until one December I quit my job, packed everything I owned into an 8-by-8-foot storage bin, and set off around the world.

I had a loose plan, more moxie than money, and a series of one-way tickets from Boston to Bali. Completely unfettered, I let whim and serendipity determine my path for 18 months as I wended my way through Asia and the South Pacific.

More than half of US leisure travelers today are women and 22 percent of them took at least one solo trip in the past year, according to a 2008 study published by Ypartnership, an Orlando, Fla.-based public relations and marketing company.

If you are a single woman or someone whose companion doesn't like to travel, consider taking off on your own. As a solo traveler, you are more likely to tune into your surroundings and connect with the people around you. And as a woman traveling alone, you will find that people, particularly women

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For safety, one woman hired a guide to accompany her on a hike in the Alps near Samnaun, Switzerland; Predeeb and Amma Sherida, with their daughter Shani, invited the author to stay with them in Palakkad, India; Teri Carter of Ferndale, Wash., explores the rugged Olympia Peninsula.

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Follow your heart, use your brains

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and children, reach out to you more. What surprised me once I hit the road was that I was rarely alone. Locals took me in and I met other travelers en route.

"People in places like Asia and Africa really take care of you, especially older women because you're in a culture where they respect older people," says Jean Gould, 69, a lifelong traveler from Natick and editor of the travel anthology "Hot Flashes From Abroad" (Seal Press, 1996, 2001). "I was in Delhi at midnight one time with a taxi driver who got lost and this young kid leapt into the cab and took us to where I was staying — and he wouldn't take any money."

Safety is the top concern for female travelers. As Marybeth Bond, author of "Gutsy Women: Travel Tips and Wisdom for the Road" (Travelers' Tales, 2007), says, "The moment we step out of the door, we are aware of the footsteps behind us." Many of the decisions you make before you leave affect your overall safety, from the luggage you choose to the clothes you pack.

Research your destination to learn about cultural nuances and rules, such as how women are expected to dress and whether it is safe for women to travel alone. Contact women who have been to the country or region you are planning to visit. You can also contact your alma mater to find out if there are any alumnae at your destination.

"I read a lot before I go and I try very hard not to offend people," says Gould. "There are different customs, like you shouldn't pat a child on the head in some cultures. It's a good idea to learn about these things unless you're going to sit on a bus all day."

If you have never traveled on your own, do some test runs closer to home to help you gain confidence: Go out to dinner or the movies by yourself, take a day trip outside your ZIP code — anything that takes you out of your comfort zone.

Consider taking a women's self-defense course such as the one at Impact Boston, based in Malden. You learn how to decrease your chances of being a victim and pick up self-defense techniques.

I took a one-night Impact course before embarking on my big trip, and the skills I learned helped me fend off an attacker in Indonesia. The assailant grabbed and threatened me, but I stood my ground, screamed at him, and made it clear I wouldn't back down. I walked away shaken but unscathed and continued traveling solo for another 10 months. What almost compromised my getaway was my luggage: a 50-pound backpack strapped to my body.

"Packing light when traveling alone is a survival technique," says Sheila Swan, 58, co-author



K. BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Schoolchildren in Phetburi, Thailand, react to a visitor's efforts to talk with them in their native language.

If you go . . .

Resources

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www.journeywoman.com

An online magazine with tips and tales about women's travel.

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www.transitionsabroad

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CultureGrams

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www.mariahwe.com

Women Traveling Together

800-795-7135

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of "Safety and Security for Women Who Travel" (Travelers' Tales,

2004). "Have a small bag for absolute essential things and another bag for clothes. If there's a dangerous situation, you can always drop the heavier bag and run; clothes are replaceable."

Leave your "bling" at home, too, whether it's valuable or just expensive-looking. You don't want to draw unnecessary attention to yourself. And before heading to the airport, walk around the block several times with your luggage to make sure you can comfortably carry it, remembering that you want to keep one hand free at all times.

When you reach your destination, observe local women to determine dress codes and behavior. Do they cover their shoulders when they enter a temple? Do they drink beer in public? Do they go out alone at night?

"Buy some local clothes so you don't stand out as much," Swan suggests. "On my first trip to Mexico years ago, an old woman slapped my thigh and called me a whore for wearing a short skirt, and really it was a blessing. I bought some fabric that day and had a seamstress make dresses for me so I would blend in more."

Even if you follow the rules, you are going to draw attention when traveling in some parts of the world, especially in countries where women do not travel on their own. Adopt tactics for dealing with unwanted attention. Tell people you are married, even if you're not, and consider wearing a fake wedding ring and carrying a picture of your "husband."

In some cultures, making eye contact with a man is considered provocative. On a solo trip in Portugal, I wore sunglasses and earphones so I could avoid catching eyes with the overly friendly local men and pretend I did not hear their catcalls and advances. With my headphones unplugged, I could still remain aware of what was happening around me.

"There are beggars and people selling stuff, like in India and even Bhutan, but I never make eye contact," says Gould. "And I take my hand and gesture like I'm a film director and do a 'cut.' The words I learn in every language before I go are 'Go away.'"

"I love to take advantage of long train and bus rides by asking people seated around me to tutor me in the local language," says Thalia Zepatos, author of "A Journey of One's Own: Uncommon Advice for the Independent Woman Traveler" (Eighth Mountain Press, 2003). "I made friends on a bus in Indonesia and on trains in China and Italy, and ended up getting invited to some people's homes."

Before you leave home, consider joining a home-stay program like Servas or Women Welcome Women. As a member, you can stay with local families or individuals in more than 130 countries. On my trip, I stayed with 37 families from New Zealand to Nepal, people who welcomed me for the mutual benefit of cross-

cultural exchange.

If you aren't ready to take the solo plunge, many travel companies lead trips for women — to hike the Grand Canyon, museum hop in Paris, or surf in Bali. They also emphasize cultural interaction, often scheduling time to meet local mothers, entrepreneurs, and craftswomen.

Says Karen Hansen, director of communications at Boston-based Overseas Adventure Travel, which runs women's trips to Asia and Africa: "Our thinking . . . is that women don't travel to see the sites, they go to make connections with people."

And that, after all, is what makes travel meaningful. By the time I arrived home I had forgotten the names of the mountains I had climbed and the museums and temples I had visited, but I remembered clearly each friend I had made along the way.

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