



THE
Sisterhood
OF
Travel

One woman and a world of adventure: Here's why (and how!) more and more females are setting out on their own and finding solace—and themselves—far and away.

BY SARAH TRELEAVEN

IN HER EARLY 40s, MARIELLEN WARD TOOK A GIANT LEAP: SHE TOOK HER FIRST SOLO TRIP OUTSIDE CANADA AND BOARDED A PLANE TO DELHI, INDIA, FOR SIX MONTHS WITH ONLY A VAGUE IDEA OF WHAT LAY AHEAD.

Having broken up with her fiancé, and navigating the loss of both parents, Mariellen needed an escape from everything she knew, and India—with its rich culture, vibrant colours and enticing cuisine—provided exactly what she needed. “I felt I was jumping off the proverbial cliff when I left,” she says.

What Mariellen found overseas was a remarkable adventure. “Almost the entire trip felt like a magic carpet ride,” she says of her time spent crisscrossing the country. After a month practising yoga in Chennai, she volunteered for another working with Tibetan child refugees in Dharamsala. The rest of the trip she played by ear. When it got chillier in Delhi, for example, she took a flight down to tropical Kerala and spent two weeks at an ayurvedic resort on the beach. She then ventured north again, visiting the centuries-old Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur, the Taj Mahal in Agra and an ashram in the Himalayan foothills of Rishikesh. “I felt spiritually at home there,” says Mariellen. “I needed to do something big to shake up my life. To be away—and alone—was like an antidote to my depression at the time. It was life-changing. I got to know myself better, got to know the world better and I gained immeasurable confidence.”

In fact, the trip inspired her to switch careers from marketing to pursuing her newly discovered dream job as a travel writer. Since that first eye-opening journey, Mariellen, now 57, has returned to India eight times. She blogs about her adventures on breathdreamgo.com and, in 2010, she penned a book, *Song of India: Tales of Travel and Transformation*.

Mariellen is one of a growing number of women who heed the call to put on their walking shoes, grab their passports and embark on the adventure of a lifetime. A 2014 study by Booking.com found that 76 percent of Canadian women said they'd travelled solo in the past, and half of those polled were planning their next trip—unaccompanied by partners, family or friends—within the year.

Inspired by such blockbusters as Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat Pray Love* and Cheryl Strayed's

Wild, plus the myriad of blogs, articles and memoirs, women of all ages are packing their suitcases and seeking catharsis in the wake of bad breakups, lousy jobs and just about every other possible life dissatisfaction. Solo travel is becoming the gateway to a new form of therapy and reinvention.

Take Michele Sponagle, who booked a ticket to Bali, two weeks after the death of her mother a decade ago. The journalist based in Paris, Ont., craved a healing experience in an unfamiliar place far from home where she could be alone with her grief and thoughts. In Bali, Michele hiked through rice fields, visited ancient stone temples and learned to make satay at a Balinese cooking class, but one of the greatest aspects of her journey was that she could mourn on her own, her salty tears mingling with the island's humid air. “I remember being in a beautiful plunge pool surrounded by a verdant bamboo forest, and it finally felt safe to let go,” says Michele, now 55. “When my mom was going through ovarian cancer, I comforted others and handed over tissues to wipe their tears. I pushed my needs to the background. In Bali, I felt I could cry as I needed to without restraint.”

The solo-travel trend can also be attributed, in part, to more Canadian women living alone—the 2011 census revealed that more than 27 percent of Canadian households have just one occupant, the highest figure ever recorded—but there are other factors at play. Many women, especially at midlife, are focused on the needs of others, which can lead to serious burnout. “We have people depending on us, sometimes 24/7,” says Mariellen.

Travelling solo lets women shut out external voices and focus on their own desires and instincts, whether that's lingering over another cappuccino, spontaneously signing up for salsa lessons or perhaps freeing up enough space in their minds to finally tackle a weighty decision. Writing in *The Guardian*, Jill Filipovic notes that solo travel is a great way “to escape from the details of daily life that can distract us from our own big picture and to come back with a new sense of self-sufficiency and purpose.” ◻

WHERE TO GO & WHAT TO DO

Here are our top trip ideas—from wellness retreats to epic adventures—for women travelling alone.



Home & Away

Try a holistic retreat like the ones Grail Springs Retreat Centre for Wellbeing in Bancroft, Ont. (grailsprings.com), offers. There, you can participate in daily yoga and group meditation, relax in the mineral hot tub and go hiking and canoeing.



Surf's Up

Hang 10 in Hawaii and try a women-only surf camp with the Maui Surfer Girls (mauisurfergirls.com)—beginners welcome! You'll be in for a week of activity, including mornings on the water, choose-your-own-adventure afternoons and evenings filled with dance parties and bonfires.



Distant Lands

Geysers, waterfalls and a famous blue lagoon, anyone? Reykjavik, Iceland (visiticeland.com), not only offers all of the above but is also one of the safest places in the world. There's little crime, the people are friendly and it's an easy city (and country) to navigate.



Water Works

Be a jungle queen and take a female-only river cruise along the Amazon with Aqua Expeditions (aquaexpeditions.com).

The freedom to do exactly what you want, no compromises necessary, is also a huge draw for many women. Four years ago, Johanna Read, a travel and food writer in Vancouver, got downsized from her government job and found out her husband wanted a divorce all in about a week's time. After that, she decided to explore Southeast Asia for almost six months—and was delighted to discover how much she enjoyed the freedom to play things by ear and make her own plan. “I explored temples and ruins to my heart's content because, unlike my last trip with my then-husband, this time, I didn't have an impatient travelling companion who wanted frequent breaks to sit in the air-conditioning at Starbucks,” says the 47-year-old.

A 2014 American Association of Retired Persons study found that more than 50 percent of respondents who travel solo are married. Many just want to avoid the compromises that travelling with a partner requires, as Johanna did.

After all, steering one's own ship can come with a strong sense of accomplishment. Just ask Evelyn Hannon, who founded Journeywoman (an online network for women who travel) after her first solo trip in the early '80s. Recently divorced after a

23-year marriage, she issued herself a 35-day travel challenge, figuring what didn't kill her just might make her stronger. “I was bereft and frightened,” says Toronto-based Evelyn, now 77. “I thought that if I just stayed home and baked chocolate cakes, I would die.” So she set off for Belgium—which had the cheapest European airfare she could find—and though she spent most of her month away crying and feeling lonely, she also discovered in herself a self-sufficiency she didn't know she had. “It wasn't until I had to do everything on my own that I found out I actually could.”

Navigating a complicated itinerary, buying train tickets in a foreign language, eating out on your own and, OK, even battling the occasional bout of loneliness provides gratification with little parallel in day-to-day life—especially when it transpires against the backdrop of beautiful jungle flora or the well-worn alleys of an ancient city.

Of course, a total life transformation isn't in the cards for every woman who takes off on her own adventure. But for many—including Mariellen, Michele, Johanna and Evelyn—that first trip can reorient everything in one's orbit and heal in unexpected ways. “My trip to India didn't just change my life,” says Mariellen. “It saved my life.” ●

Safety First

Four ways to travel solo with confidence

1

Check out the plethora of resources on the Government of Canada travel website (travel.gc.ca), from “Her Own Way: A Women's Safe-Travel Guide” (which covers cultural issues, medical matters and overseas partnerships) to country-specific government-issued safety advisories.

2

Have a touchstone back home. Leave copies of your travel documents and your itinerary with a close friend or family member and preschedule regular check-ins.

3

Look to local women for advice. Ask the female staff at your hotel or a nearby café what's safe. It's also key to know the law in countries you might be visiting—especially in countries like Saudi Arabia, where there are prohibitions on women's movement. Do your research and ensure that you've got a good sense of the local landscape.

4

Know the available services. Some cities—including Mumbai, Tokyo and Mexico City—have female-only taxis, subway cars and buses, while many hotels also offer women-only floors. Female travel networks like Maiden Voyage regularly inspect hotels for safety features such as well-lit car parks and 24-hour reception.

Leaving on a JET PLANE

Here are the most common places women are confidently heading.

MONTREAL



SAN FRANCISCO



NORDIC COUNTRIES



SINGAPORE



AUSTRALIA



CELEBRATE CANADA'S 150TH: PATRIOTIC FAMILY GETAWAYS

Canadian Living

Easy Italian Dishes PERFECT FOR SUMMER!

**Dinner
in a
FLASH!**
Lemony Tomato
Basil Pasta
page 74

ON TREND:
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DRESSES**
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OCCASION

**AMAZING
APERITIVOS**
FOR A CASUAL
**OUTDOOR
PARTY**

**SUNSCREEN
101** HOW TO
FIND THE
**RIGHT ONE
FOR YOU**

DECOR TIPS
FROM "LOVE
IT OR LIST IT
VANCOUVER"

CAUGHT IN AN
**awkward
situation?**
OUR ETIQUETTE
GUIDE WILL HELP



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