

So why do it?

Why not?

Many people want to travel but, when they raise the topic among family and friends, they don't hear enthusiasm. Instead, there are excuses like, "Oh, yes, I would love to go to Borneo, Brisbane, Bali, but...we need a new garden fence, a new car, I don't like foreign food, don't want vaccinations, hate flying..."

There is always an excuse. Some people say they want to travel but, let's face it, they will never get around to it. This book is for those of you who want to get around to it, and who want to do it now. My question is why should you wait for others to join you when you could do it alone?

All you have to do is get out there – make the move to visit a new country, meet new people, see amazing sites, view another way of life. Do not let your friends' lack of enthusiasm or your fear of going alone hold you back. It is time to decide, "Would I rather make this trip, set off and explore, or stay at home and talk about it."

To me, the answer is easy – life is short, this day isn't coming back.

But setting out on a solo trip is not for the fearful. Recognise in advance that it is going to be lonely, you might get lost, something could go wrong and figure out how you might overcome these problems. Also be aware that you may face every single one of these occurrences just by staying home. I've taken train journeys near my home that have been laced with suspicious co-travellers, I've had missed connections and bad food and no one to commiserate with, share complaints or even laugh with – all in my own home territory.

Know that you can overcome these problems. If you feel lonely, watch people, call a friend for a chat or distract yourself by reading a book. If you get lost, ask directions, go to a café where you can discretely pull out a map. Something goes wrong, quickly figure out what is the worst thing that can happen and figure out how you will tackle it. I once lost my backpack – it was on a bus, the driver announced a ten minute break and I was in a queue

buying coffee when he drove off – early! I quickly figured out that it wasn't the worst case scenario, I had my purse and my passport on me. But I didn't tell the bus inspector that. I lied and told him that my passport was in my backpack on the bus (wrong, I know, but I knew it would make them act and take care of my backpack). The inspector radioed to the next bus station and someone was there to rescue my backpack and keep it in a locked office until I could arrive there on the next bus.

However let's start by being honest, solo travel can be lonely, especially when watching a group of people at dinner, laughing together, or a couple of women at a girly lunch. My advice, watch them, enjoy their laughter, and later you will value those times with your own friends. And you can always pick up your mobile phone – a few buttons pressed and you can be chatting away to those who know you, laughing at your adventures, speculating on what will happen to you tomorrow. The conversation is likely to end with your friends

wishing they were with you, and you feeling more than a little proud of your achievement.

Travelling solo will make you more independent. I no longer feel self-conscious about eating alone, although many people do and they take a book or journal to read over their meal. There is absolutely nothing wrong with doing this. Reading is a perfect distraction. However, through the years, I've learned to be quite brazen and I sit upright at my little table, enjoy wine with my meal, and watch those around me as though they were a show put on for my entertainment. I wonder about their stories, their backgrounds, relationships – and use my imagination to fill in the gaps. If the surroundings are not so interesting, then I pretend a companion has left briefly to visit the bathroom – I eat alone and carry on.

So, my advice is that no one should deny themselves the chance to travel because they fear doing it alone. Whether it is because your husband doesn't want to travel, your friends can't afford it or

haven't made it a priority; you should not sit at home saying, "I wish I could go to..."

If you need inspiration on travelling alone, try reading *Daisy, Daisy* by Christian Miller. She was a grandmother when she set off on her first solo trip. She says that for her entire adult life she had always needed to tell her family where she was and how she could be reached – whether it was her mother, her children, her husband. But when she reached a time in life when her parents were dead, her children wrapped up in the lives of their own children, and her husband fully occupied, she knew that this was time for her own trip and she cycled alone across America.

Dervla Murphy started out by cycling from London to India and has covered much of Asia and Africa in her almost fifty years of travel. She is honest and sometimes brutal in her travelogues – something I relish. She gives startling advice on where to hide bank notes when travelling through dangerous places. Robbers, she says, always want to check inside your shoes and socks. In really risky

areas she suggests putting the cash inside your vagina – and duly this paid off when she travelled through Russia and was robbed, even of the money she'd hidden in her socks and shoes. Dervla says she never tells her family her route or where they should expect her to be at any given time. They can't help her if she gets into trouble, she says, so she keeps to her own pace and her own rambling route. I love reading her journeys, a truly inspiring woman.

But even more inspiring perhaps are the women who took off across continents in previous centuries – without a guide book, a map and often with very little advice. These women ventured out with enthusiasm to see what was out there and, I have to confess, they are my role models. When I feel life is turning a little dull and a general discontent stirs within me, I reach for their stories and soon I am planning a trip far away, often a solo one.

You can read more of these inspiring women later in this book.

The Solo Travel Guide
Just Do It!

Dee Maldon

Bookline & Thinker

Before you go:

Travel planning

Where and when

For your first trip alone, you may want to try a weekend city break to somewhere that has always appealed to you. A weekend is not a long time alone, and a city provides the opportunity for the lone traveller to blend in. It will also provide a sense of how it feels to be alone in a strange place with only you to entertain and occupy. If a city break has no appeal, try somewhere that does appeal, but a weekend break is the perfect length for your first trip. Think hard about where you would like to go and imagine yourself there and try to envision how you will pass your time. This way you can research the activities available and plan in advance what you will see and do. By being busy you can avoid feeling alone for a whole weekend.

If it isn't a city you are visiting, then think about a small resort – somewhere without an overwhelming number of tourists but a place that is used to receiving visitors – large groups and small. Smaller resorts have more time for the traveller, and you are treated as a person rather than a small part of the horde.

However, if you want to blend in then a large bustling beach town might provide the perfect camouflage. Others among you might prefer a lonely village, somewhere unused to travellers, a place where you can be alone.

We have a rundown of attractive places for the solo traveller towards the end of this book. However, your first venture should perhaps be closer to home. The idea is to try it for a weekend; this is a relatively short time to grow used to your own company in a strange locale.

Once you have made the decision, research the town or country you are visiting, know something about its politics, a brief history, the key

places to visit, its social customs, and know of any dangers or civil strife that might flare up.

It's probably best to plan a solo visit during the shoulder season – between the peak and low period. The height of tourist season means crowds, the lone traveller can blend in at this time but it is hard to find places to sit in cafes, accommodation is expensive and tickets for events harder to come by. The low season often has 'closed' signs at main sites and the lack of other tourists means that the lone traveller stands out. Personally, I like to travel prior to peak season – it's the early part of the season, tourist staff at hotels, sites, transport often feel energised and are eager to greet visitors. In fact, they are happy to see you and often very hospitable.

Tips

Research, research, research

No matter where you are going, research the location – whether it is in your home country or

abroad. Buy a good guidebook and learn the specifics of where you are visiting. A good book will help you grow familiar with the location in advance – sometimes it might turn you off a visit; but usually it makes you even more keen to go. If the book is light, take it with you. If it is hefty and you are taking an e-reader or tablet on the trip then buy the ebook. Otherwise, simply tear out the pages you need, and take them in a plastic sleeve. There is no need for any of us to carry heavy books.

Know opening hours, public holidays

There is no point in planning a trip and arriving to find shops, museums and major tourist sites are closed. Find out in advance what the regular rest days are and whether your trip coincides with any public holidays.

Travel insurance

A necessity, whether you keep it to simply health coverage in case of accidents or illness or whether you choose to add possessions and

transport coverage. Know exactly how much you are covered for, what you need to do to make a claim (i.e. do you need to bring a police report from your trip?) how much is not covered in each claim (deductible) and report to the insurance company before your trip telling them all your health issues, medicines and tests. Hiding information will mean you forfeit health coverage if you make a claim.

Visas

Check whether you need a visa to enter the country you want to visit, you might be surprised at how many places require you to apply in advance to visit their country.

Money

Check your bank cards to ensure they do not expire while you are travelling. In addition, let the bank know which countries you are visiting and the dates. Also, through your bank, apply for some of the country's currency. Foreign exchange is expensive at airports, do this in advance. You may

want to have some money aside in travellers' cheques.

Accommodation

Choose accommodation in a safe area. Before making a booking, read the guide books on the local areas. Also spend time on the hotel review sites where other travellers give advice on where to stay, what they liked and disliked about specific hotels. Also check Google maps and Google street view. These can be a terrific help in letting you know how close you are to main sites and whether an area looks downbeat and unsafe. Some travellers feel this takes away the romance of arriving and exploring a new area. However, if you're new to solo travel, then safety creates comfort – use Google and its street view for all they are worth.

As a general rule, it is best to avoid hotels and hostels near train stations. These areas are often associated with drug use and ladies of the night. A German friend once helped me choose a hotel in Frankfurt. Within hours of arriving she called and

told me not to go out at night alone. "I just found out that this is a red light district," she said.

However, I was already out for dinner. Luckily, I had no problem until the morning when I was out walking and a man stopped me. I didn't understand what he was saying and pulled out a map to help him with directions. It was then I realised that this was not that kind of help he wanted.

Also avoid isolated accommodation that is fairly remote. This can make transport long, slow, not good at night and you may end up having to use taxis as a necessity.

Hostels are a good option for the solo traveller. Accommodation is cheap and often basic, you may be sharing a room with someone you've never met. But it is a good way to meet other travellers, hear their adventures and receive tips on places you plan to visit. Many travellers to hostels are solo, so you won't stand out – in fact, you'll be considered quite normal. However, don't leave valuables there. Most hostels offer lockers so take a padlock. Outdoor clothing shops often sell wire

netting that fits over baggage. This can be padlocked in place for added security. I do not mean to scare you off hostels. I have never been robbed in one, but there are some things you simply need to be aware of.

Large hotels can feel anonymous and it's easy to feel alone and vulnerable in such places. I prefer smaller inns where the staff get to know you, recognise your face, remember your questions and have the time and knowledge to tell you about the area. Take care in hotels, never open the door to anyone – unless you have ordered room service of course. Even then, check through the peephole and keep the door on the chain until you have truly checked that they are bringing your meal.

When checking in, don't let the receptionist announce your room number out loud, they should simply talk moderately or pass the key to you with the room number on it. If they announce it in a loud voice ask for another room.

If you are a little nervous about staying alone in a strange place, take a rubber doorstep with you

and wedge it under your door each night – no one will get in.

Medicines

Have enough of your prescription with you in your hand luggage. Keep the medicine in the normal packaging – otherwise it might be interpreted as illegal drugs. Carry a spare prescription or a letter from your doctor to say this is something you need.

Know the electrical currency

Whether it is to charge your phone or tablet or style your hair, you will probably need an electrical adapter.

Online guides will tell you which currency your destination uses, and you can buy an electrical adapter to plug your device into that will, in turn, be plugged into the wall. If you plan to travel a lot, purchase a multi-country adapter. They save money and anguish in the long run.

Communication

Look at your mobile tariff and consider taking out data roaming or add cover that includes your destination so that you can call home at any time.

Put your destination's emergency number for police and ambulance in your mobile – if there is an emergency then you won't have to look too far.

Laundry

Cut down on how much luggage you carry by bringing along a small container of detergent so that you can wash underwear, t-shirts, socks, etc. I use a small plastic bottle and decant detergent into this before travelling. Of course, put it in a sealed plastic bag in your luggage, you don't want any leaks.

What to take and wear

A wide topic this, especially for women, and it is, I believe, ruled by shoes. For instance, shoes you wear with jeans or trousers are often not suitable to wear with a skirt and vice versa. If you take both trousers and skirts then you are obliged to take

several separate pairs of shoes or boots for each. However, if you choose to stick to trousers and jeans or dresses and skirts, your footwear is limited too.

Keep clothing simple. Your aim is not to dress to impress, but to get around without hassle or stares.

Comfortable walking shoes for sight-seeing are essential – whether you are in jeans or a dress. Try to avoid taking heels with you. They will hamper your movement, especially if out alone and can send the wrong message in some countries.

Take no expensive jewellery.

Finally, discern the clothes that will be acceptable at your destination. Cleavage and short skirts are fine for home, but they can offend when you are overseas. Know whether you need to keep your shoulders covered, whether skirts need to be below the knee, whether trousers might be frowned upon. Yes, it might seem like dictates from the dark ages to you, but you are in a foreign land and you wanted to travel, see new lands – well that's exactly

what you're doing and they might do things differently there. Respect the local culture and its rules.

Plan your arrival

If you are flying to your destination, consider how you will travel from the airport to your accommodation. To me, arriving in a new country and stepping out of customs and immigration and into an airport arrivals hall is one of the most overwhelming experiences of any journey. You are in a new land and quite suddenly step through a door to be exposed to a gamut of signs pointing towards trains, buses, taxis, metro, often in differing languages, all while crowds of expectant hordes gaze at you, checking that you are not their long lost relative. At this point you are also vulnerable to drivers, legitimate taxi drivers and non-legitimate drivers, all keen to take your bags and drive you to wherever they think you want to go.

Most airports have a website giving information on connections to towns, local and not

so local. These sites have links to train or bus schedules. They often give you other practical advice such as how much taxis cost to local towns. Plan your arrival so that you know exactly where you need to go and what mode of transport you need to get there. If you think you might need a taxi, refuse any offer of help as you step out of the arrivals hall and follow the directions to the airport's legitimate taxi stand.

Try not to arrive at your new destination after dark. This may mean you leave home before the cock has crowed or any cow has been milked, but it is worth it. Arriving late and finding your way around a new place after dark can feel a little threatening, especially if you're taking public transport. Daytime offers the ability to see your local streets, scout out a place for a decent meal, and look at the people around you. Night time drapes most streets in a threatening veil, and a late night arrival may mean no first day exploring or even an evening meal.

Luggage and bags

I do not believe the solo traveller is more vulnerable to thieves, but we do have to protect ourselves from any vulnerability. Therefore, I would recommend you choose cheap luggage and hand baggage. Thieves rate us on our bags, and my advice is to look like you have nothing to lose. No branded LVMH, Gucci – not even fake stuff as thieves don't know the difference from a distance. Buy a cheap handbag or bag before you leave home. I have a friend who walks through city streets with her things in a plastic supermarket bag – she's clearly sending out the message that she has nothing worth stealing.

Carry passport, credit cards, all valuables in a body wallet that is worn under your shirt – these can be found in most travel, hiking or book shops. Never dig this out in the street – go into a bathroom.

Keep coins and small denominations of money in your pocket. No mobiles or wallets in your back pockets, these are easy places for thieves to access

– you might think you would feel someone pry in your nether regions, trust me, these people are good at what they do, you won't.