Solo travel: New behavior or preferred approach?

As your travel plans begin to solidify for later this summer or into the fall you might think beyond destinations and logistical needs. Consider your personality preferences. If you’ve ever wondered how it would feel to travel alone or in a large group, here are some ideas to explore.

Just because you have a partner doesn’t mean your trip will be improved by taking him or her along. Why? Traveling alone allows you to have access to many more thoughts and sensations that may be blocked when distracted by a second person or group. It also allows you to focus your energy. The advantages of going with a travel companion are obvious: you’re seldom alone and you don’t need to make all of the decisions by yourself. These may also become some of the downsides.

Understanding the local culture, or the way people relate to each other requires the kind of attention that’s difficult to arrange in a duo or crowd. Alone, you can immerse yourself in your surroundings, find a niche and maybe blend into the environment. And people watching at its best tends to be primarily a solo sport. Sitting at an outdoor café for hours and alternating reading and writing with intermittent watching is best done unaccompanied. Why? Chances are that any companion would not have that exact scenario in mind at precisely the same time, and it might be perceived as rude.

Seeing a place, hearing its sounds, noticing its smells, its textures, or the feelings evoked requires sensitivity to your own internal processes. Impressions form as you observe and then percolate as your experience unfolds. Your ongoing internal dialogue, known as your stream of consciousness, takes your observations and sensations and assembles them into stories. Alone, there’s no one else to affect or taint your creation—whether a visual image, a series of sounds, or an emotion. It’s all yours!

Many years ago I spent two months alone traveling through Western Europe, which included a summer session teaching job at a university in Switzerland. The following year I taught in the same Swiss city, Lugano, a dreamy, sun kissed, mountainside, in the Italian sector’s southern region. For the repeat journey the following year, I was joined

by my husband. Beyond teaching my morning classes, we spend most of our time together. I was amazed at the difference between the two experiences.

**The Benefits of Solo Travel**

On my solo excursion, I was much more sensitive to everything I saw, and interpreted it through my own lens in a kind of ongoing reverie or dream-like state. I didn’t interact with others too much while traveling, but enjoyed being an observer. Though I was an outsider looking into others’ lives, you might even say a voyeur, it was pleasant for me to imagine myself in their experiences, playing with possible antecedents and outcomes of each scenario—with no unwanted consequences. Trying to read their body language and tone of voice, I felt that I could share their moment even when I couldn’t understand a word in their language. And then it was over. Move on to the next individual, couple, family, group or physical setting!

If I felt social, I was able to stretch my comfort zone by talking to others, as well as language gaps permitted. But if loneliness crept in, I’d notice a heightened motivation to talk to strangers, which I would ordinarily not do—reaching a bit into my uneasiness.

Even if it’s painfully uncomfortable to start a conversation, you may find that your need for contact at that moment will likely override any discomfort. And remember, contact is generally going to be limited in an accidental meeting, like two ships going in different directions. Knowing that you’ll never encounter this person again may give you the courage to interact even more candidly. Nothing to lose!

I learned through traveling solo that I really could try out new behaviors uncharacteristic of me and wouldn’t be judged by those I met. Everyone you meet is a stranger and because of this, social mistakes in one-time meetings carry fewer consequences. No one I ever encountered along the way knew about my anxieties or self-perceived social limitations. I could be anyone I pleased, which gave me permission to try on new ways of being including greater assertiveness. As I became more comfortable my comfort in social situations increased.

But mostly I watched—people interacting, landscapes, architectural scenes, and weather patterns, all of which I enjoyed immensely. Of course this is most pleasurable if you’re an introverted type, which I am.

**Sharing the Journey**

The subsequent journey with my husband, a shared experience, colored all that I encountered entirely differently, though not better or worse. I sometimes wished I were alone to fully immerse my attention as I had done the year before. His presence kept me from being fully immersed in whatever I encountered. But at other times I was grateful for the company and the opportunity to communicate about something noticed and shared, which did enrich the takeaway. It’s a mixed bag.

Or arrange a trip so that your days are spent alone but dinner is spent with others. Cruises, spas, language schools, dude ranches, tennis camp, adult music, writing or art camp, as well as spiritual retreats are some venues that allow for solo travel but shared moments for parts of the day or when you’re in the mood.

**Getting Started: Solo**

Experiment with solo travel by starting small. Plan a day trip when your usual companions aren’t available. Try a museum, art exhibit opening in a gallery, daytime movie, solo lunch, or dinner. Notice your feelings and observations. Going solo in a paired up culture may lead to some self-critical judgments that feel painful. Like the time I presented myself solo for dinner in a Paris restaurant many years ago. The maître d would not seat me because I lacked a companion. He finally placed me at a table with a single Frenchman, which drew curious attention from surrounding diners. And while we failed to find a common language in which to communicate, it was an interesting, humorous, if awkward, experience.

Give solo a chance. It offers great potential for self growth, problem solving and deepened experience. You may find that you actually like going it alone!

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