ONE WOMAN WOLF PACK: SOLO TRAVEL HAS ITS UPS AND DOWNS

About a year-and-a-half ago, I set off on my first solo travel adventure. Now I'd traveled extensively before, I even studied abroad in Morocco during my junior year of college. Although I was the only student from my university, I was surrounded by other students from different American universities. So, it wasn't exactly a "solo" travel adventure.

This adventure was different. I decided I was going to travel anywhere I wanted – wherever, whenever, for however long, and do anything I wanted while there. And I was going to do this all by myself. There weren't going to be any other students, family, friends, or even tour directors. I was traveling completely S-O-L-O. Let me tell you, I was both extremely nervous and incredibly excited! Prior to leaving I read heaps of blog posts, articles, and books from solo-travelers specifically solo female travelers, and from the way they spoke about their experiences and how life-altering they were, I felt truly inspired and emboldened to jet off on my own magical journey.

"When I travel alone, I'll discover so much about myself and about the world. I'll have more direction. It'll be great."

Those were the thoughts swirling my head before I left on my journey, and while they did come true, things did not always happen the way I thought they would. I didn't discover myself in the ways I set out to. AND THAT IS PERFECT. Looking back on my experiences, I wouldn't have it any other way.

Traveling alone was great. But it was also a bit nerve-wracking, whether I wanted to admit it or not. There's the safety element: I am by myself, I have to be on guard and aware all the time. There's also the social element: Who will I talk to? Who will I share with? Will I make friends? Will I be alone forever? (That last one may apply to more than just traveling…)

It is incredibly daunting to travel alone. To know that at some points you will be your only companion. To know that you're willing to put yourself in potentially dangerous situations simply by being a lone female traveler. But once you get past all of that, or at least put it into perspective, you'll discover all of the wonderful and amazing things solo traveling brings you.

Plans change. You change. It's all good.

When I set out on my journey I had a plan. I like plans. My plans fell apart.

Quickly all of my plans went by the wayside and I began to freak out. I was an Au Pair in Italy, and I planned on being there for three months. I was only there for half that time. What would I do for money? I was counting on this position. Was I just going to hop around? WHAT WAS I GOING TO DO?

I figured it out. I figured it out all by myself, without the aid of family or friends. I figured it out and in the end, it all worked out the way it was supposed to and I was right where I was supposed to be. I was fine. Arguably better than if I'd stayed in my Au Pair position. I rearranged my finances, I looked for work exchanges, I searched for cheap (but recommended) hostels and things to do and see. I made my new circumstances fit my finances and desires, and vice versa.

Before this happened I didn't know if I could be so easygoing and adaptable. I'd "prided" myself on it before but hadn't truly had a chance to explore that side of myself or put it into practice.

From there I hopped around from place to place, without any rhyme or reason. I went here and there. I made plans and then scrapped them when something else came along that was more enticing. It was an exciting time to know I had the opportunity to do anything I wanted or go anywhere I wanted to go. Life was truly being lived by and for me, myself, and I. To give into that sort of lifestyle was truly the life-altering aspect of traveling solo.

I made plans to go to Tel Aviv for a month but then met someone in Berlin and decided to go to Greece instead! Post-Au Pairing I hopped around Italy with no rhyme or reason, just whatever and wherever I felt like going and for however long. I was supposed to go to Australia to Au Pair again, decided I wasn't feeling the whole "look-after-children" thing anymore and went to Los Angeles for three months.

I had amazing experiences everywhere I went, and I know I'll have amazing experiences everywhere I go in the future. I wouldn't trade leaving Italy early or going to Athens instead of Tel Aviv for anything because it led me to every place I went and to where I am now. This moment will lead to the next and so on and so on.

The beautiful thing about solo travel is how open you become to these experiences. How open and trusting you become towards other people AND how much better your ability to assess people and situations become. I couldn't have been so open with my travel plans had I not been traveling alone. My experiences wouldn't have looked the same. I might not have had any of those experiences or met the people I met if I'd been with another person. Just as I was then, I've continued to live my life by thinking "What's next?" not "What if…"

Thank you for being a friend.

I made so many amazing connections and friendships when I was traveling alone. I made quick friendships that began and ended in the hostel common room, and I forged deep connections with others that continue to this day.

When you travel you have to be open to new experiences and new people. It's an understood rule of the game. When you travel alone, you have to be extra open to everything coming your way. You have to let go of your insecurities, anxiety, and shyness in order to connect with people. To strike up a conversation with your bunk-mate or that quiet kid in the hostel common area or that one bloke taking a beer into the bathroom.

If I'd been traveling with someone else, let alone a group of people, I know I wouldn't have spoken to or hung out with half the people I did. Honestly, that thought makes me kind of sad – if I didn't know these incredible people I feel my life would be lacking.

Being alone

Yeah, this seems pretty redundant, we are discussing SOLO travel. And as much as it's great meeting people and navigating new friendships, there are times when you feel really alone, which don't feel amazing, and then there are glorious moments when you choose to be alone wherever you are. That, my friend, is an amazing feeling.

When you get to a place in your travels, and in your own self, where you can decide to be alone and you welcome it, it's empowering and soul-satisfying.

The first time I truly felt this was in Paris. It was a rainy day in March. I hadn't found my people at the hostel quite yet. I decided to grab my journal, a book, and head out to explore the city. I walked around, sat on bridges and wrote in my journal, grabbed midday coffees and wines and pain au chocolats and read. I took pictures and ran into local shops. I wandered in outward silence, but inward contemplation. It was enriching and exciting and calming. It was the first of many similar days.

Traveling solo allows you that time. That time to be by yourself, to be alone without guilt or hurry.

I can do anything

I traveled alone. Navigated unknown terrain, by myself. Like a boss. AND I only cried once or twice on public transport/in the middle of the street.

When you travel solo you don't have anyone else to rely on but you and you and alone. You will find nice strangers who will extend a helping hand. You will befriend loads of people with various skills sets better and different than your own, like how to properly and quickly read maps. But there will be many times when this is all on you, babe, and you just have to suck it up and trudge through the mud.

Like I said, I only cried a few times on my solo journey, and I am a major weeper.

I cried in Paris during my day of blissful self-discovery, when the umbrella I bought for six Euros broke and one of my many croissants got wet. I was soaked and pissed and hungry. But I got over it and moved forward and had a magnificent day.

I cried in Thessaloniki, Greece when I didn't know where I was going next, and couldn't find any direction. I was aimless and anxious and feeling a bit sorry for myself.

When you're alone you have NO ONE to commiserate with and thus you have to figure it all out. You can't sit around and cry and do nothing. If you do nothing you end up getting lost, or you sleep on the streets for the night, or worse. It's as empowering and freeing as it is frustrating and anxiety-inducing. But…mostly good. These struggles, and the fact that I worked through them or overcame them, gave me the confidence and knowledge that I could tackle anything. I had the capacity to solve any problem.

I highly recommend it

I learned so much about myself from all of my travels, but especially my travels alone. It caused me to "change" in the sense that I became more of my true self. I discovered things about myself that lay dormant or that I myself had pushed down. I wouldn't have had this knowledge or these revelations had I not traveled, and I truly feel I wouldn't have fully embraced these discoveries or given myself room to discover them had I traveled with others.

Traveling affects you deeply. Affects your worldview, your perceptions, opens your heart and mind, and gives you a new sense of self. Solo travel does all of that, just on another level. It draws yourself out of you and gives you the tools, the experiences, and the confidence to truly be you; to live boldly and fearlessly – or at least with the wherewithal to conquer those fears.

I highly implore everyone to travel, any capacity, but especially alone. At least once. At least for more than a weekend. I encourage everyone to go somewhere and try something that pushes the boundaries of self, that challenges your own perceptions of the world and your place in it. It is deeply enriching and soul-satisfying, and you come away with newfound knowledge and friends. It's been said that "Travel is the only thing that makes you richer" and I couldn't agree more.