

COVER STORY

On her own

Meet the new confidant Indian woman who is venturing out on her own on holidays. Though she might be alone during this journey, she certainly is not a lonely soul. And she isn't doing it by compulsion but by choice

Nilakshi.Bhattacharyya@timesgroup.com



Rani, the protagonist of Kangana Ranaut-starrer movie *Queen*, discovers herself during her solo journey to Europe. For travel enthusiast Ankita Dasgupta, her first solo trip to Mysore might not be so dramatic, but nonetheless it was an exciting experience which she feels every woman should go for.

"Anybody who loves to travel

should go solo at least for once. It is not something that you do to prove anything to anyone; rather one should do it as part of the process of forming an opinion about an experience. Most of the travellers, who are finally brave enough to book a solo trip, often claim to find themselves. Personally, I believe it will take me a few more solo trips to 'find myself'," states this 26-year-old, tongue firmly in cheek. Now in a sabbatical, Ankita wants to take up teaching eventually; but till then, she has been wandering around the globe.

In the past few years, there has been an increase in the number of

women holidaying alone or in women-only groups. According to a survey done by Stayzilla, one of India's fastest growing companies in the online travel ecosystem, there has been a whopping 170 per cent increase in woman travellers over the last year.

"Earlier, because of social taboos, women were not allowed to venture out without a male companion. But not anymore, as today's women are more independent as far as taking decisions are concerned, both for herself and her family. The latest fad is that they are going on vacations independently and unwinding all by themselves in some exotic locations. We have noticed that woman travellers prefer either boutique hotels or homestays, which is relatively inexpensive and yet provides them the security they need," informs Yogendra Vasupal, founder of Stayzilla.

Anjali Kumria works in a media house. While throughout the year she is working hard to meet the marketing targets, she goes on adventurous trips on regular intervals to rejuvenate herself. This mother of a 16-year-old son and an 11-year-old daughter often heads for the hills alone and she has been doing this since the last 15 years. Her last trip was a solo winter expedition to Stok Kangri in the Ladakh region early this year.

"In fact, I started taking these solo trips only

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Did you Know?

Women-only travel is one of the fastest growing segments in India with a whopping 170 per cent increase

after I got married because somehow my parents would never have understood my innate desire to take these lone trips. But with my husband, it was totally a different matter as he understands completely how important these trips are for me. Family support is very significant for these vacations because how can you seek peace outside if you are at unrest with your immediate family? I always say that my husband is not just the wind beneath my wings but is actually my wings, without whom these treks would have never been possible," states Anjali.

Atul, her husband, however, insists that it is she who has inculcated in them a profound liking towards nature trips. "In fact, now we as a family also go for these treks. And our children look forward to these trips," he adds.



It has been observed that bookings rise significantly during special occasions such as Dubai Shopping Festival, which is a perfect getaway for women to travel with their girlfriends and indulge in a bit of retail therapy

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'Travel alone at least once in life'

The best part of holidaying alone is that you don't have to consider another person's mood before making any programme as impromptu plan is as good as well-planned trip in this case. Sometimes I also love to travel with my girlfriends as most of the times our interests are similar. I have visited Australia, Maldives, Greece, Pattaya and Switzerland with my friends. While travelling alone, the only problem I face is when I visit a place where they don't speak English or any language that I know. It can become a little daunting. But having said that, travelling alone can be life changing. When you know you are all alone in a land which you have no idea about or haven't visited before, life becomes adventurous all of a sudden. It can leave you with a strange sense of maturity and confidence in yourself. A must for everyone to try at least once in life, I suggest.

TAAPSEE PANNU, Actress

The other side of the coin

Before I got married two years ago, I had done quite a bit of solo travelling. However, I have to say that it's not my cup of tea as I don't find it fun. I like travelling with friends as it makes the whole experience much more enjoyable. I had gone to Turkey for work a few years ago and decided to stay on for a few days to see Istanbul. While it was amazing seeing all the monuments and palaces during the day, in the evenings you can get really lonely. For me, it was not the best experience to have to dine on my own. Though I had also decided to travel to Italy via London on my own, I backed out last minute because I just didn't want to travel alone and decided to stay in London. In India, I find that women travelling alone has become a trend but most of them still seem to travel with other single women who they don't know and make friends during that trip.

SWATI KATAKAM



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Smriti Shankar

According to industry experts, women-only travel is one of the fastest growing segments in India at this point. "The organised market for solo women travel (both domestic and out-bound) serves 3000-5000 travellers. In the last couple of years, we have seen queries and bookings from woman travellers increase significantly as they have grown savvy in planning and taking trips on their own or in groups. They are now making independent trips with friends, colleagues and groups with shared-interests. This can be attributed to a variety of factors, including increasing incomes, greater number of women-only travel groups, travel blogs acting as inspiration and a growing number of women travelling for work and getting hit by the travel bug, leading to travel for leisure as well," points out Ranjeet Oak, Chief Business Officer, Holidays, MakeMyTrip.

For communications consultant Deepika Gumaste, the best part of holidaying alone is that you can have a talk with yourself to reflect on so many things. "More impor-



MOST-PREFERRED DESTINATIONS AMONG INDIAN WOMAN TRAVELLERS

Domestic destinations

Goa 72% Ladakh 12%

HP, Rajasthan 5%
Kashmir 9%
UAE

International destinations

Thailand 25% Dubai and Europe 21%

Singapore 9% Andamans 4%

Greece 6%

(Source: Travel survey by MakeMyTrip.com)

Photo: Images Bazaar

Solo & steady

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a-mile to show me the way to a castle. That one month was full of pleasant surprises.

Your family's take on your solo expeditions...

In India, we are not used to seeing our daughters travel alone. The concern is mostly of safety with crimes against women rising every day. After my marriage, my first trip alone to the USA was vehemently opposed by both sets of parents since it was for more than six months and leaving my newly-wedded husband behind was something they could not come to terms with. But my husband was, and

still is, very supportive of my solo travelling, though my mother, even now, tries to dissuade me from doing so (smiles).

The advice that you would like to give to a young woman who wants to follow your footsteps...

My one-line suggestion would be: Be confident and alert; keep your family informed of your whereabouts; and enjoy your trip! Besides this, avoid reaching your destination at night; take an early morning flight or overnight train. Even if it takes a little longer, it reduces the risk of being stranded in the dark. Personally, I prefer public transports for more reasons than one. Do NOT tweet or write in a public forum about your present location. There are more stalkers than friends looking for a prey. But I must say that travelling alone in India is more challenging than travelling alone abroad. In India, people somehow still do not fathom the sight of an 'Indian woman' travelling alone to

lesser-known places where nobody accompanies her to find a decent place to stay.

Most satisfying moments...

There are many: when I helped an old woman in Krabi, Thailand, set up her food cart in a market and became her translator for a week till the time she picked up a few English words; when I decided to camp on a quiet island in Bamboo Island, Thailand, and learn snorkeling; when I taught computers to village women and children in Silk Island, Cambodia, without any pressure from my co-traveller to move on, just to cite a few experiences!

NISHA JHA loves to visit new places and she has been travelling alone for about 20 years, both in India and abroad. The first time she did so was when she was in

school. Though her overnight train journey to another city did not turn out to be as smooth as her parents had expected it to be, Nisha enjoyed it thoroughly, not once panicking when she had to fend for herself. Over the last two decades, she has been to more than 35 countries in five continents. And she is the only Indian travel blogger on whom yahoo has made an exclusive video. Here she shares with TWT about her experiences, which sometimes stretch into months...

What is the best thing about holidaying alone?

Solo travelling is about the new challenges being thrown at you on everyday basis. But it gives you a sense of achievement. For me, travelling alone gives me the freedom to decide on everything, including food, places, activities, itinerary, mode of transportation, hotels, etc. It also means that I am responsible for those decisions, good or bad. It also tests my endurance level. In a way, it helps enhance my character. I can say, I am a much more confident person after each solo trip.

The best trip ever...

There are so many! But if I have to name one place, it has to be the one when I was backpacking in Catalan, northern part of Spain. They don't even speak Spanish, let alone English. Nobody understood me; but the people were so warm-hearted! I still remember how an old man took half-an-hour to understand when I asked him the way to the bus stop. He apologised profusely for wasting my time and took out his car to drop me to the nearest bus stop. On another occasion, a limping old man walked with me half-



Nisha Jha

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tantly, you can plan for yourself; take decisions on your own without thinking about preferences of other co-travellers, like a spouse, family or kids. Interestingly, when we travel alone, we are also more free-spirited, ready to experiment and are willing to explore new places, meet new people and go beyond the familiar," reveals Deepika.

Smriti Shankar, a 34-year-old solo traveller, though used to travel on her own in India earlier also, she started travelling abroad alone only after she got married.

"My husband is in the merchant navy. When we docked at ports, he would encourage me to go explore on my own, as he would be busy with his work. So every port became a project. Each day was such fun that I would come back with a bag full of amazing stories," gushes this blogger, who says that even the bad experiences, though traumatic for a couple of days, turn into funny stories after a few weeks.

"Once while in Basingstoke, UK, I decided to watch a movie alone and chose a random film called Dream House starring Daniel Craig and Rachel Weisz. Once the movie started, I was too excited to notice for the first 10 minutes or so that I was the only person in the cinema. Then suddenly I realised that I was watching a horror movie all alone in a theatre in a place where no one knew me! Though I was really scared, I made a decision to stay back and watch the movie. Only I know how I walked back alone from that theatre to my room that night and how I slept with all the lights on and the TV on full volume. But today when I look back, I consider it one of my most interesting travel stories," recalls Smriti.

According to travel experts, the choice of destinations for woman trav-

ellers depends on their frame of mind as well as the reason of the trip. "Women looking for just a break have their favourites such as Goa within India or on the international front Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam and Hong Kong which cater to a perfect mixture of relaxation and shopping. There are certain groups of women that travel especially for relaxation therapies and go to

specific spa retreats and destinations. We have also observed that our bookings rise significantly during special occasions such as Dubai Shopping Festival which is a perfect getaway for women to travel with their girlfriends and indulge in a bit of retail therapy," says Sharat Dhall, President, Yatra.com.

So is there any precaution that women should take before embarking on that solo journey?

"One thing that I learnt from my trip to Mysore is that people are not as bad as I believed them to be. But solo travellers need to be just a tad extra careful," points out Ankita.

Smriti feels that before travelling alone, women

should carefully research the place they will stay at. "For example, Airbnb, a website for people to rent out lodging, gives every detail about the location and the house members, including pets. You can interact with them and build a rapport before you actually land there. Secondly, they must study the area they will be living in. Just like our own country, even the safest cities can have their notorious places. For example, once when I managed to book myself in a loft at the Hollywood Boulevard in LA, I was ecstatic. But when I actually got there, I was told how unsafe that street really was. I was harassed by not one but many homeless on that street.

Of course, most countries that I have travelled to are safe; but irrespective of whether you are a man or a woman travelling alone, you should not be overconfident when it comes to visiting a new place," concludes Smriti.

