

## Texte 1

**Solo travel for women is about freedom, in every sense of the word**

Solo travel is on the rise, especially among women, but Rosita Boland has always found it the most adventurous and rewarding way to see the world

By Rosita Boland – *Rosita Boland is senior features writer at The Irish Times. Her book Elsewhere: One Woman, One Rucksack, One Lifetime of Travel (Doubleday Ireland, £14.99) is published on 30 May 2019 – The Guardian, Fri 8 Mar 2019.*

For years, decades in fact, I've puzzled over the knee-jerk response most people have when I tell them I (mostly) travel alone.

"You're so brave."

Why is it that a woman travelling alone, as I have often done for months at a time, is perceived to be "brave", whereas men who travel alone are entirely unremarkable? Besides, in my case at least, it's not true. You are only brave or courageous when you are afraid of something but still do it anyway. I have never been afraid of travelling alone. It doesn't mean that there aren't things along the way that cause me deep fear, such as overloaded buses with bald tyres on mountain roads with sheer drops, but being by myself out in the world has never scared me.

The chief joy of travelling alone is the simple act of just doing it: crossing that invisible border in your head before you ever leave home, by deciding you want to see the world anyway, even if it means doing it by yourself. What's the alternative if you don't happen to have a partner at certain times in your life but still long to travel, as I do? Stay at home and never go anywhere? Deny yourself all those incredible experiences you will definitely have, in addition to the more difficult ones, which you will also definitely have? It's that prospect, the one of self-imposed stasis, that has always incited true fear. Travel has always been far too important to me to sit around waiting for a partner in crime to come along and join me.

The first time I travelled alone was by default, when I was 19. I was due to go Interrailing with a friend at the end of the summer. She was an au pair in Germany at the time, and announced by letter two days before my departure that she would be ditching me halfway through the month, at Vienna. She had made a more-exotic new friend, Freya, a fellow au pair, who had invited her to Finland. It was too late by then to rope in another friend, so it was either go home after Vienna, or keep going by myself. I kept going. I got on trains by myself, checked into hostels by myself, found my way around by myself. It was weird, initially, and then I got so subsumed by the atmospheric glory of Venice and the exhilaration of the overnight trains that I stopped fretting about travelling alone without even noticing.

When I got back to Ireland after that trip, I felt proud of myself. I had done something I had assumed would be hard and not much fun, and it had turned out to be not hard at all and mostly astounding. My one souvenir was a necklace of colourful gold-infused glass beads I bought at a tiny shop in Murano, from an Italian woman I somehow communicated with in my dire French. She explained her son sourced the beads, and she strung them. I survived on bread and bananas for two days after buying them, so tight was my budget.

Years later, while browsing at a London market, I came upon a stall run by an Italian couple selling Venetian-sourced items. The man spotted the beads, which I wore coiled around my wrist as a bracelet. He asked to examine them and, thrillingly, pointed out six

beads that were more than 100 years old. I still have those precious, storied beads; evidence of my first solo adventures.

That was three decades ago, and since then I have travelled all over the world, usually alone. I've carried the same rucksack I have had since the age of 25: a modest 45-litre-capacity one, that is now more or less knackered, but I cannot bear to replace it. It has become as familiar to me as a carapace. It's small and light enough, even when full, to walk for miles with but large enough for all the essentials.

Travel to me is about freedom, in every sense that the horizons of that immense and beautiful word suggests. Hence the small rucksack that I don't have to depend on anyone else to carry. I don't like carrying anything valuable and until I had an iPad, never did.

I got an iPad in 2015 and so now I also have a camera by default, though I still don't take many pictures. In 2007, I went travelling overland through Argentina to Ushuaia, at the tip of South America, so that I could buy a (relatively) cheap last-minute ticket to Antarctica. Although Antarctica was in fact the seventh continent I would visit, I did not have a single photograph of anywhere I had been before that.

On that journey out to the fantastical ice I was the only tourist on our ship not to have a camera and, 12 years on, I still don't regret my lack of pictures from the White Continent. Everyone wants different things from their travels; I have never wanted to be distracted from living in the moment. Not taking photographs didn't begin as a conscious decision when I went away for the first time on an extended trip – a year in Australia, in 1987 – but it has become one over the ensuing decades.

Mobile phones, the internet and social media did not exist when I first went travelling. I still do what I did then, which is to keep a diary. I never post anything on social media when I'm travelling; I want to feel far away, not to know my thoughts are popping up in real time on screens at the other side of the world.

The greatest gift of solo travel has been those I've met along the way. I may have set off alone each time but I've encountered many people who became important to me: other travellers, whom I would never have met had I stayed at home; people who changed the course of my life. I met my ex-fiancee in Kathmandu and a long-term partner in Palenque, Mexico. I met lifelong friends in Australia, Poland, Hungary, Turkey, India, Indonesia and many other places.

When you're travelling alone, you have to make an effort to talk to other people. I have always loved this part of travel. (Or rather, loved it until everyone started looking at their screens instead.) You might know from guidebooks what you can expect to see but you can never know who you will meet. In Bali, halfway through my last extended period of travel (six months), I saw a sign outside a cafe that read, "We have wifi so you don't have to talk to each other". It was one of the most depressing things I'd ever seen. But I kept on talking to people anyway.

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