

We're the driving force in travel, making it easier for us to explore the world. Here's a selection of enticing opportunities available to solo female travellers and the sisterhood alike.

It's a woman's world

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Clockwise from left: Laura Dell'Aira at her winery; a remote Tuscan farmhouse; join a tag-along Aussie road trip. Opposite: Taking in Tuscany's landscape.



Long gone are the days when women travelled only with a partner or family. Today, female-led travel is on the rise, and almost two-thirds of travellers worldwide are women. These days, Flight Centre's typical in-store customer is a 49-year-old female looking for solo travel inspiration. And they're prepared to splash out: Last year women spent 31 per cent more than men in Flight Centre's stores.

There are many reasons women are embracing solo travel, says Luvena Lee, the Team Leader at Flight Centre Zetland. They include the opportunity to meet new people; getting out of their comfort zones in pursuit of personal growth; the freedom of being able to do what they want, when they want; and not missing out on exploring the world when family and friends may have other priorities.

It's not all about fun or sight-seeing, though. "Some customers who are booking solo travel are looking to unplug and use the trip as a time to disconnect and reflect before making big life decisions," says Luvena. "Not only do they create unforgettable memories, they gain new perspectives which they can take back to their careers or families."

Whether you're making solo travel plans, organising a trip with girlfriends, or joining a group experience aimed at female travellers, we've rounded up some exciting possibilities to whet your appetite for your next trip.

Women travelling solo, together

Meg Jerrard and Mar Pages co-founded the Solo Female Travelers Facebook group in 2015, and it's now a thriving community of 300,000 women who love to travel. The COVID-19 pandemic brought a big spike in membership as people "re-evaluated where their lives were going and sought out others to connect with," Meg says. The pair launched small group tours in 2021 when members told them, "We'd love to connect with other like-minded women to travel together." This addressed the key challenges of women's travel that members had noted in surveys: Safety, getting lost, and the fear of being lonely.

Highlighting successful women in their destinations is a meaningful part of their tours. In Tuscany they take guests to female-owned wineries such

as Fattoria di Fugnano, owned by Laura Dell'Aira, who defied her Sicilian family's wishes when she opened the winery at the age of just 23. In Tanzania, tour participants can join a local woman to shop at the markets and then cook a meal together. See solofemaletravelers.club If camping or caravanning appeals, the Rolling Solo community will connect you with like-minded women across Australia. Their tag-along road trips take place across all states, and you can join with just a car and a small tent. See rollingsolo.com.au

Soul sisters

"I walked the 800km Camino de Santiago in 2017 solo after raising my sons, and was captivated by the experience and personal transformation that occurred on foot," says Darene Puttergill, co-founder of women's pilgrimage program Soul of My Feet. "It was like



The best places to go

Popular among solo female travellers are:

- European countries such as Iceland and Switzerland.
- Canada.
- New Zealand.
- Southeast Asia.

— Luvena Lee, *Flight Centre* travel expert

a rite of passage, stepping into the fullness of myself and the world.” There she befriended Canadian Sylvie Chouinard “and we decided we had to return with other women and guide them through the same soulful journey.”

Since then, Darene, from Noosa, and Montreal-based Sylvie have led groups along ancient paths in Spain, Italy and Portugal. “Without exception,” Darene says, “everyone has come away with profound personal insights.”

The next pilgrimage is planned for April 2024. See soulofmyfeet.com and [facebook.com/soulofmyfeetoncamino](https://www.facebook.com/soulofmyfeetoncamino)

Queens of the jungle

Eager to answer the call of the wild? There’s a tour for that. “We identified a gap in the market where women were seeking adventure but hesitant to venture out on safari on their own,” says Bench Africa’s Julie De Palo. Cue the Escorted Ladies Tour, a female-led exploration of Kenya’s best-known parks, including Tsavo and the Masai Mara.

Wildlife isn’t the only attraction: Guests participate in activities such as cooking classes and Masai beadwork lessons. The best part? There’s no single supplement. “This means women can enjoy the privacy of their own room,

and pay the same as if they were travelling as a couple,” Julie says. See benchafrika.com

Coasting along

Make a team of four and join one of Wild Women on Top’s Coastrek fundraising walks, which take place in many parts of Australia, including the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria, part of Western Australia’s stunning Cape to Cape Track, and a bushwalk taking in Lake Burley Griffin in the ACT. It’s not just about the destination: Training with friends ahead of the walk and working together to fundraise for the Heart Foundation make it a feel-good adventure with your favourite women. See coastrek.com.au



Clockwise from top left: Walking the Camino trail in Spain; India’s Taj Mahal; on safari in Africa. Opposite page: Sunrise from the Altar of Zeus in Turkey; a cooking class at Turkey’s Nisanyan Hotel.



Wine, women & sarongs

• Sip your way through local and international wine lands with Travelling Divas’ Fabulous Ladies Wine Series, run in collaboration with Jane Thomson, founder of The Fabulous Ladies Wine Society. See travellingdivas.com

• Tap into your inner goddess – and the Red Centre’s healing power – during World Expeditions’ four-day Larapinta Goddess Walk in Comfort. See worldexpeditions.com

• Feel the rhythms of the old Silk Road on Red Door Tours’ 13-night Temples, Textiles and Tastes of India trip. See reddoortours.com.au

Number ONE

The thrill of going it alone

A mid-trip break-up with a boyfriend in my late 20s plunged me into my first solo trip. I’d always travelled with a partner or friends, but on a road trip in Croatia, my relationship ended abruptly. After blubbering my way up the coast on a bus from Dubrovnik, I wound up in the central bus station of Zagreb at midnight.

Instead of being terrified, I astonished myself by feeling thrilled at the possibilities as I read the departure board. I could surprise a dear friend in Prague or take a summer hike in the mountains near Salzburg. I chose south-west Germany and worked a job teaching business English, instead of returning to Australia as planned.

Ever since, I’ve grabbed the chance to travel solo whenever I can. Webjet reports that there has been a 78 per cent rise in bookings made by solo travellers in 2022-23, so although I might be travelling on my own, I’m not alone!

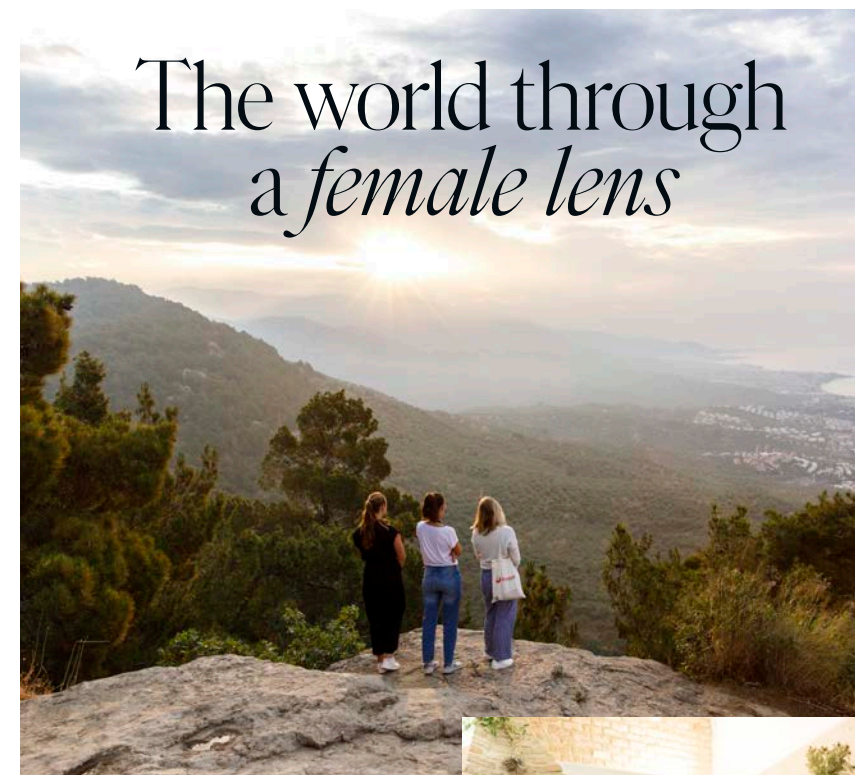
Top tips for novice solo travellers

- Take a book: Reading at a solo dinner dissolves your self-consciousness.
- Be kind to yourself: Choose a familiar destination for your first solo adventure.
- Earmark someone to check in with each day: A concierge, fellow traveller or family back home.
- Follow your instincts: If you don’t feel safe, move on.
- Pack light, as you and your baggage will be going everywhere together.

— Amanda Kendle

ALAMY, GETTY IMAGES, ANNAPURNA MELLOR/INTREPID TRAVEL, BENCH AFRICA, SOLO FEMALE TRAVELLERS.

The world through a female lens



The road to Istanbul is awash with women’s stories. Fatma Çelik Karakol, one of few female drivers in Turkey,

manoeuvres her tour bus into the tightest of spots; Aysenur Genç exudes the resolve that’s helped her forge a career as a guide in a male-dominated industry. I’ve joined a group of women from Australia, the UK and the US on Intrepid Travel’s Turkey women’s expedition, which showcases female-run enterprises and invites travellers to see the country through women’s eyes. And what a world it is: The lives of queens and concubines are conjured at Topkapi Palace’s imperial harem; the goddesses’ power is writ large in the ruins of Ephesus. Visits to female-run NGOs illuminate the strides that are being made in Turkey’s quest for gender equality.

The importance of female participation in the tourism workforce became apparent to Zina Bencheikh, Managing Director of Intrepid EMEA (Europe, Middle East and Africa), when she was running the company’s Morocco operations in 2018. “More than 80 per cent of our Morocco customers were female, so why would



they want only male guides?” she says. “There’s a lot of information you can get from a female lens, especially in a conservative country, where the culture is so strong and different. Creating this branch really helped give women access to meaningful jobs, to open their eyes. It’s creating an exchange between women from two different cultures and backgrounds so they can both empower themselves and grow from that experience.”

That exchange is sharply focused as we dine at Hatice Mercan’s Bizim Ev Restaurant near Selçuk. She started a gozleme business 30 years ago and sold just two of these stuffed Turkish flatbreads on her first day of trade. Today, Mercan is a noted restaurateur and cookbook author. Our plates spill over as she shares stories and laughter with us. — Catherine Marshall See intrepidtravel.com/au AWW