

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Coping with the challenges of traveling solo
- » Exploring a destination for the first time
- » Opening channels of communication

Chapter 1

Exploring the World as a Solo Traveler

Going out into the world as a solo traveler is something you should do at least once in your life. Even if you have traveled widely, the experience of traveling alone is one that will change you and the way you see the world.

Traveling to places beyond your home base expands your worldview and shows you that despite our differences, people are fundamentally the same the world over. By going it alone, you will open yourself to people and experiences in a way that traveling in the cocoon of companionship prevents. It's a brave step, but one that will change you in ways you can't imagine before you set out.

In this chapter, I discuss how to build your confidence when traveling solo for the first time, how to get the most out of going back to favorite destinations, and give you tips on how to stay safe when you're on the road alone.



Throughout this book, I reference all kinds of online resources to help you plan and enjoy your travels. To find a handy list of links to all these resources, go to www.dummies.com/go/solotravelfd.

The Pros and Cons of Going It Alone

If you're new to solo travel — or just contemplating it for the first time — it might seem daunting. It's no small thing to be out there in the world on your own, with no support system or ready-made friend to share the ups and downs with. It's a worthwhile exercise to weigh up the pros and cons of traveling alone before you decide to abandon the idea — and with luck, you will come to see that the benefits of solo travel do outweigh the downsides.

Like life in general, all travel has its bad days and disappointments, especially if you are on the road for a long time. The hotel room might not be quite what you expected — but oh, how that sunset from the balcony makes up for the tiny bathroom! Then there are the truly awful days when you really just want nothing more than to go home to your own bed . . . but the next day will reveal something wonderful, and you remember why you are on this journey!



REMEMBER

This book is definitely pro-solo travel, but I also guide you through all the realities of a traveling life on your own, not just the good ones. As with all styles of travel, traveling alone can be a roller-coaster that you need to learn to ride. Knowing what the ups and downs might be is the first step towards a smooth ride.

Why traveling alone may be the best decision you ever make

Traveling solo may be the most empowering decision you ever make. No matter your age or gender, learning to be self-sufficient while dealing with everything that travel throws at you will teach you more about yourself than you could ever imagine before you start out.

From the moment you begin to plan your trip, you'll be free of the shackles of traveling with someone else. There's no need to wait for others to confirm their vacation dates or save up enough to travel. By traveling solo, you can start your trip whenever it suits *you* — and you alone! Take advantage of cheap deals, make your bookings instantly, and be spontaneous.

The same applies once you are on the road. Want to stay somewhere an extra day or two, or move on more quickly than you

planned? You can do it. There are no compromises or negotiations to be made, no one to consult . . . just the freedom and flexibility to do exactly what you want to.

Solo travel will definitely push you out of your comfort zone, even if you're traveling in your own state or country. Knowing that — *expecting* it — will help you deal with it. You'll face your fears and overcome them (the worst ones will probably never even eventuate).

Making all the decisions, from where and when to go, how to get there, where to stay, how to cope when things go wrong (which they inevitably will sometimes) and meeting new people along the way will give you a new sense of independence. Your confidence will grow and your self-reliance will be stronger every day. You'll learn to deal with people of all kinds and to keep yourself safe in situations that you may not have encountered at home.

Most of all, traveling solo will change your perspective on the world. Without the distraction of a companion, you'll be more aware of your surroundings and more observant of what is around you.



REMEMBER

Solo travel also allows you to learn about yourself. Time on your own inevitably results in self-reflection — “Hey, I did that!” — and time to contemplate what you're seeing as you travel. It may make you appreciate what you have at home and how your life has panned out so far. Then there may be those moments when you give thanks for a life that is far removed from those you are seeing on your travels. Clean running water — or *hot* water for your daily shower — may suddenly seem not so much a necessity, but a privilege.

If you're traveling to escape a difficult or traumatic situation — a romantic break-up, a job that didn't work out, a bereavement that you need time to adjust to — then traveling alone can be a healing process. Getting away from your everyday life and thinking about challenges you face on the road, or simply soaking up the beauty of the world, can put things in perspective again.

Solo travel gives you the space to be yourself, to take each day as it comes, ditch the pressures of your everyday life, and — even for a short while — become the person you know you really are.

Knowing it won't all be smooth sailing

All travel has its ups and downs, whether you're on your own or not. Solo travel might seem to amplify those highs and lows when you have to cope with them yourself. But knowing from the outset that it won't all be easy is the first step to dealing with problems when they occur.

There are moments when things go wrong when you'll really wish you had a traveling companion. For example, when you're waiting by the luggage carousel in Lisbon while your bag is holidaying in Havana, you're on your own, with no one to borrow clothes or toothpaste from. Or you lose your wallet and cards and there's no travel companion to lend you money to tide you over until the bank can sort things out for you. But you will cope because you always do!

Travel can be exhausting and it's important to look after yourself mentally, emotionally, and physically when you're traveling alone. It's quite natural to go through periods of loneliness or to feel homesick from time to time, and those times are likely to be when you're tired. Sometimes all you want is to have someone along to help you make decisions or to toss ideas around with. Just know that these feelings will pass. Take a day off from everything, curl up with a book, have a cry, and you'll be ready to tackle the world again.

Culture shock is one of the big things that can upset your equilibrium. When nothing is familiar, people don't behave the way they do at home, and you're floundering to make yourself understood, it can feel like you can't cope. But you will.



TIP

Doing your research before you leave home can help you anticipate and deal with culture shock if you are going to a foreign country. If you are well prepared for what you are seeing or experiencing, culture shock can be a great learning experience. Be open to the differences between what you are used to and how other people live. There may be a degree of discomfort, but that will ease as you adjust to new surroundings, new languages, and new sights, sounds, and smells.

Language barriers are one aspect of culture shock that may be hard to deal with; not everyone in the world speaks English, and communication may be difficult in some places. One of the biggest

challenges you may face in some parts of the world is that you may not be able to make yourself understood, particularly in a situation where it is important, such as illness or being a victim of crime.

Solo travel will definitely help sharpen your problem-solving skills, and you will learn to be self-reliant very quickly.

Why solo travel doesn't have to break the budget

Travel expenses can be higher when you're a solo traveler, but that doesn't mean you'll have to scrimp to avoid busting your budget.

The most annoying part of solo travel on a budget — any budget — is the single supplement that's imposed by some tour companies and cruise ships. Hotels generally charge by the room rather than the person, so you'd be paying the same amount with a friend or partner, but sharing the cost; while that's not strictly a single supplement, the effect is the same. However, there are ways around it (see Chapter 6 for more details).

While solo travel means you don't have anyone to share the cost of things like accommodations or car rental with, it also means you have complete control over how, when, and how much you spend while you're traveling. Effective planning, knowing how much you have to spend, and pre-booking where you can in order to know what your available funds can stretch to are the keys to sticking to your budget.



TIP

The cost of accommodations can be kept to a minimum by choosing to house-sit, home swap, or stay in a shared room in a hostel (and if you don't fancy that, hostels have private rooms that are often cheaper than a hotel room). See Chapter 6 for more ideas on ways to keep your cost for accommodations down.

Traveling solo means no one is going to insist that you spend up big on a fancy dinner at a Michelin-starred restaurant . . . you can opt for those three-minute noodles in your room if you like. And if you do go to an expensive restaurant, as a solo diner you can order what you like without potentially having to subsidize someone else's menu choices, and you can savor every minute of the experience without distraction.

Look for ways of saving money — you have no one to negotiate with over how you do that — and make the most of free activities you can find in your destination. Many outdoor activities such as hiking or hitting the beach are free, as are many museums, galleries, and festivals.



REMEMBER

Overall, the independence you have as a solo traveler will be a benefit that will outweigh the fact that you have no one to share costs with.

Things to consider when traveling independently

Solo travel doesn't necessarily mean being on your own all the time. Some solo travelers prefer to travel, at least some of the time, as part of an organized group. That option might be something that if you are just starting out on your solo travel journey, you might want to consider — you'll be solo but not alone.

Purists might argue that joining a group tour is not solo travel, but I think it's a very reasonable way of easing yourself into a greater adventure in the future. As a first-time solo traveler, you will be gaining an insight into how you feel about being the solo in a crowd — and learning that you will likely never be the only one! If you are contemplating a trip to a place where you might be worried about security or about making cultural missteps, such as the Middle East or Africa, a group tour will give you reassurance that you'll have guides to lead you through the tricky parts.

Taking care of your health is vital to a successful solo trip. Preparation is important; make sure you have all the necessary vaccinations before leaving home and carry with you everything you'll need to deal with minor ailments or injury (see more in Chapter 9). With no companion to take charge if you get sick, it's important to avoid that happening if you possibly can. And I really can't stress too strongly how important it is to have travel insurance to cover not only any potential medical costs but also every aspect of what can go wrong when you're traveling.

Will you get lonely? The honest answer is yes, probably . . . at least sometimes. Maybe you'll be missing someone's birthday or a family gathering of some kind. Maybe you've just spent too much time on your own lately and need to start reconnecting with other travelers or meeting the locals in a more meaningful way.

When everything around you is unfamiliar, or things don't quite go to plan, it's easy to give in to loneliness. The trick is not to bury yourself in your room, but to get back out there and engage with the world again. Have a good cry, then get on with it.

Recognize that there will always be moments when you wish you had someone to share the experience with, but comfort yourself with the thought that at least *you* are getting to do it (rather than sitting home, dreaming about it).

Is it safe to go it alone?

All travel comes with risks, but that's no reason to stay home. Life is full of risks, and people take them every day without thinking too much about it. As a solo traveler, particularly abroad, you'll need to keep your wits about you and take precautions that you might not bother about at home — but for the most part, you'll be safe as long as you're sensible and maintain an awareness of your surroundings.

Research your destination before you go, even if you're traveling in your own country. Find out which neighborhoods to avoid or if there are particular scams you should know about. Talk to other people who might have visited your chosen destination, or look at social media sites that might have useful information about the area you'll be in.

Basic security measures — like not leaving your drink unattended in a bar, keeping your cash or valuables out of sight (or locked in your hotel room safe), and not walking alone at night — will help lessen your risk of assault or robbery. For women solo travelers, an extra level of vigilance should be applied, particularly about revealing that you are traveling alone or where you are staying. Being friendly is fine, but in some cultures this can be misinterpreted. Again, research is the key.



REMEMBER

Traveling alone is common, and most trips are without any major safety issues for solo travelers. Common sense, knowledge of the place you are visiting, and some basic precautions (outlined in Chapter 3) will help to keep you as safe as possible.

Choosing Your Destination

If you've already taken the plunge into solo travel, you're half-way there when it comes to choosing your next destination. If you're still on the fence and trying to decide where to go for your first foray into the world of solo, I would suggest starting small and close.

What I mean by that is choose a destination in your home country. If you're not sure you'll be comfortable as a solo traveler, test the water by traveling without one of the major stresses of language problems. If you're in your home country, you won't have any trouble being understood or following what's going on around you.



TIP

A weekend away is a good test. If you can do two days away on your own, you can likely do a week. Build your confidence slowly before tackling a longer trip. Take a road trip to a nearby town where there's plenty to see and do, or go and hang out at a resort for a couple of days. There's no rule about what style of trip you need to take. It's all about *knowing* you can do this on your own!

If you just fancy winding down with a cocktail and a good book beside a swimming pool . . . do it! If you want to go hiking in a national park, lace up those boots. The choice is yours, and that's the beauty of solo travel.

Once you've built up that confidence, look at going further away. If you're going abroad on your own for the first time, the same thing applies — choose an English-speaking country, where the culture shock won't be so great. You'll still find plenty of differences, whether you're in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific, or the Caribbean — but at least the language will be the same.

Step three will be to up the ante again, and book a ticket to somewhere that's completely foreign to you. Do your research, of course, but by now you'll be match-fit for solo travel and ready to handle anything. In Chapter 12, I suggest a few places I have traveled solo that I think you'll enjoy.

Exploring new places

Take the advice of the Dalai Lama: “Once a year, go somewhere you’ve never been before.”

There’s a certain thrill attached to the prospect of going somewhere you’ve never been before. I find this even if it’s somewhere in my own country! That expectation and anticipation of what you might find and who you might meet never grows stale.

Of course, you will have done your research before you arrive, but a good way to introduce yourself to a new city is to take a short tour that will give you the lay of the land. Depending on what kind of traveler you are, choose a method that best suits you.

Walking tours are terrific, giving you the chance to talk to the guide or to other people on the tour, picking up some tips for what to see or where to go later on. It’s also a brilliant way to counteract jetlag when you’ve just arrived. Another way of tackling this introduction to a big city is to take a bus tour, such as those hop-on, hop-off tours that cover all the major sights.

If you’re in a smaller place, I recommend just pounding the pavement on your own. Work out what you want to see and head out with your phone or a map to guide you. Or just wander and see where you end up (without getting lost, hopefully). Ask at your hotel about what the locals recommend, chat to people in coffee shops or small stores you might visit. The locals will have the best ideas.

The first time I ever stayed in Bangkok’s Chinatown district I took a free walking tour offered by my hotel. It ended at what is reputedly Chinatown’s oldest coffee shop, founded in 1927 and still owned by the same family. It’s a time capsule, with paint peeling off the walls, the clientele mostly elderly men, smoking, gossiping, and drinking strong black coffee. I would never have found it on my own.

Cross off the major sights you want to see, then explore further. Check if there are any events on that interest you and head out to concerts, markets, festivals.



WARNING

Whenever you are exploring a new place, find out which neighborhoods to avoid. Wandering is wonderful, but your safety must be a priority.

If you have a particular interest, or if your destination is known for something special, try to find a tour that fits that. If you're a cook, look for a cooking class or food tour that focuses on the region's specialty or maybe you'd like to learn to play an instrument that is associated with the place you're visiting. I'm not a foodie, but I love art and can happily wander any city looking at the sculptures, statues, and street art. Public art is free, and you never know what's around the next corner.

Taking public transport is another way to take a dive into a city's real life. Not only is it a cheap way of getting around, you'll be traveling alongside the people who live there.



TIP

Even if you're not planning to self-cater, pop in to a supermarket — it's a revelation! I was astounded at the aisles and aisles of vodka on sale alongside groceries in Polish supermarkets, and I love to look at the unfamiliar labels on products in foreign languages and try to guess what they might be. Even if there's a language barrier, usually some sign language with a local will give you the idea.

Nowhere is exactly what you expect. You can do as much research as you like, but the reality will always be just a little bit different and surprising. And that is one of the joys of travel.

Revisiting favorite destinations

If you find somewhere you love, there's nothing to stop you returning again and again. I've been to Thailand eight times and to Vietnam five times. My first overseas trip, as a 19-year-old traveling solo, was to Norfolk Island, a tiny island in the South Pacific, pictured in Figure 1-1. I've been back four times over the years. You can't keep me away from New Zealand, and that's not only because I have family and friends there.

While it might seem strange to return to the same place again and again, when there are so many other places in the world to explore, keep in mind that each country is multifaceted and has many different destinations and experiences to enjoy. On your first visit, you might tick off the must-do sights and experiences, but that's not all that a place has to offer. Scratch the surface of any city or region in a country, and you'll find the differences that make it worthwhile going back again and again. If you really fall in love with a particular destination, you'll want to get to know it as well as you can — and that might mean returning more than once.



Lee Mylne(Author)

FIGURE 1-1: Norfolk Island, a tiny island in the South Pacific.

Take my Vietnam trips as an example. My first visit was aboard a large cruise ship, which sailed from Singapore to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). I didn't care for the cruising part very much, but I absolutely fell in love with Vietnam. Among the passengers on the ship were a group of Vietnamese war veterans who were returning to Con Dao Island, which had been used as a prisoner-of-war camp in several eras of Vietnamese history. Our day on the island was an insight into an element of war history that I didn't know, from the Vietnamese perspective, and I learned something of the veterans' history with this place.

On my second trip, I hit the main tourist stops — Ho Chi Minh City, Hue, Hoi An, and Hanoi — ticking them off, seeing more history, and having some cheap clothes made by the skillful tailors who whip up whatever you want the same day. My third trip was to the resort island of Phu Quoc in the south, with a few days in Saigon.

On my fourth visit, I concentrated on the north of Vietnam, heading from Hanoi to beautiful Ha Long Bay, where I spent a night aboard a traditional junk among the limestone outcrops that make it famous (that's more my style of cruising). Then it was on, by overnight sleeper train, to the highlands of Sapa where the highlight was market day, attended by hill tribes in their colorful traditional dress, pictured in Figure 1-2.



Lee Mylne(Author)

FIGURE 1-2: Colorful dress of hill tribes, Sapa, Vietnam.

A few years later, my next visit was split between the beach resort town of Nha Trang and the hill town of Da Lat, where I munched on fried crickets, visited a silkworm factory, and saw the surrounding countryside on a motorbike tour.

Every time I returned, there was something new and different to discover and explore. And I know if I go again, there will be another layer of this fascinating place to peel back.

So if you find somewhere you enjoy but don't have time to see everything, keep it in mind for a return visit. Sometimes short trips with bite-sized exploration is a better way of seeing a place. The worst thing is to try to see *everything* in a short time. You'll be moving so fast, you'll get only a glimpse, a brief impression of what the place is about. Stay put in one city, state, or region and get an in-depth look at what it has to offer.

When you travel far — from one hemisphere or continent to another — it's tempting to try to see it all, but slow travel is going to give you a more authentic look at a destination. That doesn't mean you have to stay a long time, but rather than rushing around, slow your pace and you'll enjoy the experience more.

Encountering Others on Your Solo Journey

You are much more likely to meet new people if you're traveling solo. It's easy to stay in your little bubble with a traveling companion and not branch out and talk to others. Solo, you are much more approachable to other people and you are more open to making those new connections, whether they are fellow travelers, expats, or locals.

If you're staying in hostels, you'll find plenty of chances to meet new friends or even potential travel buddies, for a few days (or longer, if that's what you're looking for). Apart from staying at close quarters in a dorm, many hostels are great at organizing social events, so it's unlikely you'll ever be lonely. If you're on a well-worn tourist path, it's not unusual to run into the same people again later in your trip.

You'll also meet fellow travelers by signing up for tours. Often the best ones are those that involve an activity or adventure component, such as a group hike or a kayaking tour, where you're all in the same boat (so to speak).

Connecting with locals is often more difficult. Learning the language is a good start, even if it's just a smattering of phrases that show you are interested in communicating with them. If you are going abroad, it's definitely a good idea to do some serious research into cultural differences, to ensure that you do not give unintended offense or breach any customs or rules. But with some effort on your part, and goodwill on theirs, you can usually make meaningful connections with people from your host country. Smiles and genuine attempts to communicate go a huge way to breaking down barriers.



REMEMBER

Solo travel will make you a better communicator, whether you are looking for a doorway to understanding another culture, a short-term travel companion, or even a romantic liaison. In Chapter 9, you can discover more about all these aspects of traveling solo.

