

Traveling alone

Overcome your fears, meet other people and have a good time

By Iris Sanderson Jones
special writer

HELLEN HAMILTON of Farmington Hills wasn't afraid to travel alone. She just needed somebody to give her a nudge.

Helen Gibber of Birmingham was terrified of traveling alone. When she

travel log
Iris Jones

Solo travel isn't always a big risk

While I was writing the adjoining story, about widowed women who must learn to travel alone, I realized how universal our travel problems really are. All of us have some degree of discomfort about being alone in strange situations.

You don't have to be mature or widowed to be afraid of traveling to unfamiliar places, to want some reassurance about travel companions, to succumb to inertia when hit by the complexities of travel.

I have seen it happen to the very young, to the happily married and to the winging single, as easily as it happens to the widowed woman.

CHOOSING A trip from all the hundreds of choices available is enough to give you ulcers. It costs a lot of money to travel, and nobody likes to make an expensive mistake. Having said that, I have several pictures in my head of people who have broken through the inertia barrier and taken a chance.

It seems to me that the people in those pictures have something in common. They are not afraid to make mistakes; they learn to enjoy the little incidents that occur; and they learn to have fun wherever they go.

One such picture is of a group of young women hoisting the sails on the Caribbean Schooner Cruise Ship Vela, one of those do-it-yourself vacation cruises out of Nassau.

They didn't know whether they would like the other passengers, the daily routine of morning sailing and afternoon beach life, the food. They didn't meet many young men aboard, and I'm sure that they used every opportunity available to have fun. And they are still talking about it, years later.

ANOTHER PHOTO is of a friend called Betty aboard the Oceanic Independence, a cruise ship that does a one-week run around the Hawaiian Islands.

The ship itself was like a home. She could keep her clothes in one place, eat with familiar faces, have fun with friends at night. At the same time, she could get off every day and tour to her heart's delight without worrying about her next bedstop.

Good thinking for anyone a bit nervous about travel.

I also picture a young married couple sitting under a great spreading tree in a small town in France. They didn't know where they were going, they didn't have much money and they were hungry. But they had done their homework, and they knew that Europeans eat their main meal during the day and not at night.

So, eyes open, they drove into a small town, spotted a busy sidewalk cafe, checked the posted menu to be sure they could afford it and had one of the most memorable meals of their trip.

Any single traveler, male or female, or any pair of women, or any older traveler, or any couple could have enjoyed that experience without risking anything. Party because the sun was shining, and none of these travelers need worry about whether they belonged in that restaurant, could afford it, or could go alone.

left for her first solo cruise, one of her daughters said: "We feel like we're taking mother to camp."

Shirley Martney of Bloomfield Township was an experienced traveler long before she was forced to travel alone, but there are some things she still won't do. "I don't like to go out for dinner at night alone in a strange city."

All three of these women are widows who were suddenly deprived of a valued travel companion. Their combined experience sends a clear message to women who are divorced or widowed or married to men who won't travel. The message is: overcome your fear of traveling alone, start with a group tour if you're nervous, and take it for granted that you will meet other people and that you will find help if you need it.

ACCORDING TO psychologist Margaret E. Beckman, writing in a recent issue of *The Travel Agent*, a travel industry magazine, widowed women are part of a growing segment of the travel population — the person who travels alone. The travel industry is becoming increasingly aware of the special needs of such travelers.

Sometimes, like Helen Hamilton, they only need a nudge. She grew up in a large family where there was always a friend, a date or a relative to go out with. She seldom went alone, even to a movie. After her husband died, Helen went to Europe with her son Bob, who handled all the logistics of travel. After that, she stayed home.

One day, years later, Bob heard her say, once too often: "I would really like to see the Rose Bowl Parade in Pasadena."

"Walk out of this house right this minute and go to a travel agency," he said. "You've been talking about it long enough."

Helen did just that — saw the Rose Parade, San Francisco and Las Vegas — and is so delighted with travel that she is mapping out her next trip — to Hawaii.

"It wasn't fear, it was inertia," she said. "I needed someone to give me a nudge."

During that western trip, Helen and two other single women teamed up for dinners, sightseeing and bus tours. When she joined a second tour, up the coast from Los Angeles to San Francisco, she promptly met another woman to chum around with.

"By the time I had two days alone in San Francisco, I was glad to be alone," she said. "I wanted to be the Top of the Morn'g for cocktails before dinner. I might not have done it at midnight, but it was easy at dinnertime."

A final three days, alone in Las Vegas, polished off the trip. By then, Helen was taking cabs or walking to the midnight show, and she has never looked back.

HELEN GIBBER of Birmingham had another problem. "I never traveled with my husband except by car with the kids to nearby locations. A year and a half after he died, I signed up with a university group to cruise on the Rhine River in Germany. I was terrified. How much money should I take? How would I handle foreign currency? What if nobody was friendly towards me?"

"I finally decided that I was a big girl and that if all else failed, I could read a book all the way down the Rhine alone."

"My daughters drove me to the airport. I was so scared I was ready to burst into tears, when one daughter said to the other: 'I feel like I'm taking mother to camp.' That did it. I had done that often enough."

Three cruises later, Helen has some advice to share: "Most cruises have an open breakfast, so you can sit where you please. Don't choose a small table or one filled with other single women."

"I ask for the largest table, because I meet more people that way, and I often ask to sit with a couple. Every day I sit at a different table for breakfast."

This allows me to meet many people, to enjoy the company of couples and not to be trapped in the singles-only group. There are always other people around on a cruise, but you may be alone in a big city. Sometimes the people I have met at breakfast ask me to join them on the city tour."

Helen has also decided against traveling with a friend. "Sometimes a friend wants you to make all the decisions. Being with a special person stops you from meeting other people. You are better to go on a cruise alone."

Most mature women will tell you that they are not looking for romance, but that it is very nice to have a dinner companion while traveling. Otherwise, you must dine alone.

SHIRLEY MARTNEY of West Bloomfield is a very adventurous traveler, but she still doesn't feel comfortable going out to a fancy Parisian res-



Singles can relax on a cruise ship, enjoy a midday meal in a French sidewalk cafe, or hoist sails at sea.

taurant alone. "I eat a nice meal at noon, and just go out to a nearby place for a sandwich at night," she said.

Shirley was an experienced traveler when she met her husband, Don, on a trip to California. He traveled on business, and Shirley and the children went with him whenever possible.

"One day, in the spring of 1975, I was trying to plan a trip that I could take alone, because my husband couldn't go at that time. I tried to plan a sensible trip, like visiting relatives, but it just wouldn't jell."

"Suddenly my husband said, 'Why don't you do what you really want to do?'

We both knew that meant going to Paris."

"I was worried about two things: Would I be safe, and what would it be like to eat alone? You are safe almost anywhere in Europe, if you don't walk down dark alleys alone at two in the morning."

Shirley took that trip, and two months later her husband was dead. She knew how to travel alone then, and she has been to Europe regularly since.

"I feel sorry for women who live less than a full life because they are afraid to take a chance," Shirley said. "Go with a group, go alone, but go."

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