

Women are gutsy when it comes to travelling



Women are increasingly taking holidays designed exclusively for them.

Photo: *Lonely Planet Images*

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Women are increasingly banding together to tackle their fears, learn new skills and pamper themselves on organised travel experiences exclusively for them.

Whether it be to rejuvenate, release, experience, or just to meet other like-minded women there has never been a better time to forge international friendships with women.

Gutsy Women Travel is an American-based organisation centred on the motto "It's Your Life, Live It!".

Founded in 2001, Gutsy Women organise tours all around the world, drawing together women with similar interests, be that in food, fashion, wine, indulgence or just a particular cultural experience.

The philosophy of the organisation is that women "need to to make time for themselves to refresh and renew the mind, body, and spirit, reconnect to her inner being, and establish bonds with other women".

April Merender, who's co-founder of the organisation, says that women travel differently to men.

"We like to spend more time in a place, like to get to know the locals, try the local food and wine," she says.

But travelling alone, particularly in a foreign country, can be unnerving.

"... in travelling with a group of other women, there is safety in numbers and you undoubtedly have more fun and laughs than if you were going alone and had no one to share the experiences with," she says.

The travel group has recently had their first Australian join.

Melinda Rickert, from the Gold Coast, embarked on a 12-day Chinese odyssey organised by Gutsy Women.

The tour of eight women who had never met, bar one mother and daughter pair, took in the traditional tourist sites of China, were immersed in cultural aspects and enjoyed pockets of free time.

The women elected to bunk up in pairs to cut costs and meet others.

"It was an intimate experience ... I didn't feel intimidated ... and I would absolutely do it again," Ms Rickert says.

The 42-year-old, who has two children, is so thrilled with the experience that she is in the process of establishing an Australian wing of Gutsy Women.

"It just makes it easy, it takes out all the worry and once you go you want to go again," she says.

For adrenaline junkie women who crave a challenge, Adventures in Good Company, another American (and non-profit) organisation, gets them hiking, canoeing, sea kayaking, dog sledding, cross country skiing, rock climbing, and horseback riding.

The average age of participants is around 50, however mother and daughter programs are also on offer and an 85-year-old woman has already set the pace.

Program manager Deb Malmon says that women are more likely to challenge themselves with the support network of other women.

"There is a level of openness and support that comes out with all women travelling together both for the physical activities and the more personal situations that you don't typically find with co-ed trips," she says.

Adventures in Good Company aims to meet the needs of women of all ages in all circumstances and offers financial assistance to single mothers who want to embark on a journey.

"There is probably no one who more needs time away where she gets taken care of a little," Marian Marbury, founder of the organisation says.

Some of their activities are pretty rigorous, so for older women it is suggested that they do the research to select a suitable trip and, from there, they are encouraged to meet their goals.

"I can tell you that we have often have women in their 60s who are in better shape than some of the younger women," Ms Marbury says.

Suzanne Brownsworth, the founder of Women Walking, based on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, has found the same thing but she says younger women benefit greatly from spending time with older ones.

She runs walking holidays that take in the coast as well as the Hinterland, as well as indulging in great food and exploring boutiques, markets, galleries and other "shopping delights". She says her holidays are planned by women for women. And the aim is for the women who may not pamper themselves too often to be spoiled.

She says a lot of women want to travel but may not have friends or family available to go with and sometimes they don't feel comfortable even walking in the bush on their own. So her groups give them the opportunity to meet other women and have fun, get exercise, stay in beautiful accommodation, and also be introduced to an incredible location.

She insists her holidays are not "anti-men".

"We're all women who enjoy the company of men too," Brownsworth says.

Another group of women has come together here to push their boundaries. They have one link - they are all breast cancer survivors.

Amazon Heart was established three years ago when two breast cancer survivors, Meredith Campbell from Australia and Megan Dwyer from the United States, met.

The women found it refreshing to share stories of their ordeal with women who had faced the same situation. More so, they wanted to give women a new lease on life, beyond cancer.

Campbell directs the Australian arm of the program which rallies up a cast of about 30 women and pushes them out of their comfort zone on at least five tours a year.

Amazon Heart provides three types of programs: the physically challenging which involves mountain climbs and treks, community projects such as the latest trip to India to build an orphanage, and the motorcycle trips, the next of which will see the leather-clad women feel the wind in their hair down the Great Ocean Road.

Campbell says each program is built around the key elements of challenging the women while offering an element of peer support.

"It is an incredible supportive, nurturing and non-competitive experience ... it is very empowering," she says.

The program is available to women at any level of their cancer treatment and at any age.

Donna Handley went on her first motorcycle ride with Amazon Heart in 2004 and is about to embark on her sixth.

Diagnosed with breast cancer six years ago, the 41-year-old Sydneysider says: "Being part of a big gang of women is so powerful.

"It made me feel a lot more confident as a person. I've achieved so much since my first event.

"I've learnt to never say no and that I'm not going to miss out."

Amen sister!

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