

The unexpected joys of travelling without men



Plan your next adventure with like-minded women CREDIT: GETTY

By Emma Thomson

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A new wave of women-only tours is emerging, and for good reason

She led me into the darkness of her hut, and lifted her faded black T-shirt, gleefully. Her breasts, marked by motherhood, hung deflated against her chest, but that wasn't what she had wanted to show me. She grinned and jiggled her hips, showing off the rows of multicoloured beads that encircled her waist – maybe 20 or more. "One from each lover," she said, erupting into flirtatious laughter.

I ran my fingers over the round glass beads. Without warning, she whipped up my top, detached some from her waist, and reattached them around mine. "Now everyone will see you have admirers too," she winked. It was a gesture that struck a chord of friendship between us and an exchange that only took place because we weren't in the presence of men.

She led me back outside and across to where a cluster of her friends, all from Tanzania's Warangi tribe, sat in the shade of a mud-brick wall. I lifted my shirt and circled my hips. Catching sight of the waist beads, the women whooped in delight, clicked their fingers, stamped their feet and flashed wide white smiles. They crowded around me, warm palms gripping my waist – the barrier between visitor and local had been well and truly broken.

The women I was travelling with wandered over to see what the commotion was about and the Warangi women lifted their fingers to their mouths to ask if we were hungry. We nodded.

One left the group, bowed her head as she entered her hut and rustled in the shadows to find a plastic bag. She returned and squatted on her haunches next to a small black cauldron nestled amid glowing embers. Reaching into the bag, she grabbed a handful of dried mlenda leaves and sprinkled them into the roiling water. Picking up a stick she stirred the brew; rubbing the wood between her palms as if trying to start a fire.



The Warangi women wear waist beads CREDIT: ERIC LAFFORGUE/GETTY

She motioned for each of us to copy, and we took it in turns to squat beside her and stir, watching as it congealed into a gelatinous green gloop. Sticking her fingers into the pot, she scooped some up and offered it to me. I tasted it, gingerly – gritty and bland, as expected. For the women of the Warangi, this rough mixture was a food staple when supplies were short, as they often were, and sharing it with strangers was a heart-touchingly generous act.

As the night fell and the stars rose, we were led to a long-dry riverbed where a fire was made. Backlit by flames, the women started to dance; shaking their hips in ways we couldn't and letting out joyous high-pitched trills of the tongue. We haltingly attempted to copy their dance moves. We needed practice.

I first felt trepidation about my first all-female adventure, but as the days passed, I noticed a sense of sisterhood between our group and our hosts. It wasn't just about the women; we did spend time in the company of men, but on every occasion, it was their voices and activities that dominated the day. But while the traditions and customs of the men were compelling, our time alone with the women brought a different alchemy.

Given the space, their humour shone through, as did a sense of playfulness that was too shy to be expressed in male company. There were also conversations about marriage and motherhood. The time we spent together may have been simple, filled with everyday activities, but the insight they allowed us into their lives had been deeper and more lasting than anything I'd ever experienced before. As we danced beneath that open sky, without

embarrassment or judgment, there was no way of distinguishing between our different shadows.

In today's travel market, a gamut of escorted tours are available: for solo travellers and backpackers, epicureans and photographers. Now, a new wave of women-only tours is emerging, one that has the potential to redress the balance of male-to-female employment in an industry still largely dominated by men, but this new insight isn't about MeToo. It's about accessing places and witnessing traditions inaccessible to men. It's about signing up for a backstage pass to see what women's lives are really like, in places that are culturally or religiously conservative. By seeing a society previously out of bounds, we can create a dialogue about our roles, clearing up any misconceptions.

Such tours connect women with a common interest, boost confidence, and provide a safe travelling environment for those unsure of going solo. Here is a varied selection of some of the best women-only tours.

Walk on Scotland's wild side

Take on the challenge of the West Highland Way, Scotland's first – and most famous – long-distance hiking trail which stretches 95 miles from Milngavie, on the outskirts of Glasgow, all the way to Fort William at the foot of Ben Nevis. Stride away from work, stress and the city amid the jaw-dropping landscapes of Loch Lomond, Rannoch Moor and Glencoe – so stunning that it earned a cameo role in the James Bond film Skyfall. During the week you will learn about the area's history and legends, as well as its flora and fauna, all in the company of fellow female hikers.

A seven-night trip with Wilderness Scotland (01479 898624; wildernessscotland.com) costs from £1,695 per person based on guests sharing. Departs June 1 and Sept 14 2020.

Skill swap in Malawi

Combine fun with philanthropy on an Orbis expedition to Malawi. Travelling as part of a team of 10 women, you will take part in a series of "challenges" interspersed with excursions such as a riverboat safari and a luxury stay at an off-grid ecolodge on Mumbo Island. The challenges include skill-swapping with Malawian businesswomen in Blantyre, hiking up Mulanje mountain, and delivering workshops to secondary school students on the shores of Lake Malawi.

An eight-day trip with Orbis Expeditions (01548 800694; orbis-expeditions.com) costs from £2,600 per person, excluding flights and visa. Departs May 16 2020.

Up the creek with a paddle, Canada

More than a century ago, the wilds of the Yukon in north-western Canada were the domain of male prospectors who came in search of their fortune during the Klondike gold rush. Today, a new canoe adventure launched specifically for women leads you through this raw wilderness in the company of an expert female guide. Departing from the "capital" Whitehorse, you will

paddle past Fort Selkirk, a former Selkirk First Nation trading post, and into more remote, quieter sections – think camping on gravel bars or in near-forgotten cabins after evenings filled with campfires, storytelling and campfire cooking. The adventure concludes in the historic (and unchanged) gold-mining town of Dawson City.



The wilds of the Yukon in north-western Canada CREDIT: GETTY

A 12-day women-only trip with Frontier Canada (020 8776 8709; frontier-canada.co.uk) costs from £2,795 per person. Departures between June and August 2020.

Diwali in the Himalayas

Festivals shed a different light on destinations and give insight into the lives of locals in unexpected ways. Join a small (maximum six) women-only group walking from village to village through the Kumoan region of India during Diwali. In the company of a local female guide, you will spend five days staying at local guesthouses within a handful of Binsar communities to learn about women's lives by learning how to cook traditional dishes and joining the family as they design rangoli (coloured-rice designs) and light lamps to celebrate the atmospheric Festival of Light. And as an added bonus, travel in October guarantees clear-sky views of the Himalayas and coincides with a riot of wild flowers.

A 10-night holiday with Village Ways (01223 750049; villageways.com) costs from £996 per person based on two people sharing, excluding flights and visas. Departs Nov 10 2020.

Roar and Restore, Kenya

The white male face of African wildlife conservation is slowly changing, and this groundbreaking Kenya trip gives you the exclusive and rare chance to meet the women leading the revolution. You will spend time with East Africa's first all-female anti-poaching and conservation ranger unit at the Segera Conservancy; meet Dr Shivani Bhalla, director of Ewaso Lions which safeguards the future of Kenya's rapidly declining populations; and listen to Dr Lucy King, head of the human-elephant coexistence program for Save the Elephants, discussing its revolutionary beehive fences to deter elephants from smallholding farms near Tsavo East National Park. Guests stay throughout at luxury lodges where women hold key roles, such as head chef. It's a pricey but hugely profound insight into Kenyan conservation.



Meet the women of Kenya CREDIT: GETTY

The one-week Women's Empowerment Retreat with Roar Africa (001 855 666 7627; roarafrica.com) costs £11,700 per person, excluding international flights and visa. Departs June 18 2020.

Easy rider, Indonesia

Get your motor running astride a character-packed Royal Enfield motorcycle on a nine-day Girls Ride that traces the 690-mile-long Volcano Trail through Bali and Java. Journeying through the volcanic core of the islands and completing 12 stages, you will travel along back roads and take in Ubud, the famous Jatiluwih tiered rice paddies, spas and villages. You will also watch baby turtles hatch, hike up Mount Ijen, snorkel and meet sulphur miners. Led by an English-speaking guide, the trip suits intermediates – but if you lack experience, you can ride pillion.

A 12-day tour with Vintage Rides (020 3289 8785; vintagerides.travel) costs from £2,639 per person, excluding flights. Departs Sept 20 2020.

Classic Camino, Spain

Not all of us can invest the full 35 days required to walk the Camino Way from Jean Pied de Port in France to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. However, if you can spare a week, you can complete the last 60 miles of the trail from Sarria to Unesco-listed Santiago, passing through woodlands, farmlands and rustic hamlets. You will travel in the company of an expert guide, who will explain the history, flora and fauna of the Galicia region en route. After special requests from clients, women-only departures are now available to evoke a sense of spiritual sisterhood.



Spain's glorious Galicia region CREDIT: GETTY

A seven-night women-only departure with Camino Ways (020 3468 1516; caminoways.com) costs from £666, excluding flights. Departs Oct 3, 10 and 24 2020.

GI Jane Bootcamp, UK

This military-inspired female-only fitness boot camp in Kent offers three, four or seven days of intensive physical training supported by a professionally trained team to help you get fit and gain mental strength. Rising with the birds at 5.30am, you will find your day jam-packed with a roster of two-hour treks, assault course challenges, netball, boxing, running and Iron Man drills. Lights out – if you don't fall asleep beforehand – is at 8pm. The small and close-knit groups are also taught meditation and given life-coaching, combined with a nutritionally balanced diet to help you realise new physical and mental boundaries.