

55+ life

IT'S YOUR JOURNEY

Traveling solo

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On the Road Again

Solo traveler?
No problem

BY CARI SCRIBNER
PHOTOS COURTESY JAN HAGEN

Ah, the many hassles of vacationing with family or friends. You may wish to be near the ocean, but one person in your group hates the smell of seafood. Some like to pack in a whirlwind of sightseeing at a pace brisk enough to wear out your favorite walking shoes. Others want to doze on the beach (no judgment). Selecting places to stay can also become a headache, as one member of your group wants a 5-star hotel with a view, and another wants a remote cabin in the woods. Some love to cruise;

others have no sea legs.

Perhaps it's time to think about your own wishes and finally shrug off the notion that traveling alone will be lonely. Traveling solo may be just the ticket for the vacation of a lifetime.

Older adults may want to try out their solo travel theory by booking a group tour with a guide and transportation to bring them to all the sites they want to see and experience. You can choose tours ranging from visiting Iceland to the turquoise

◀ Jan Hagen with Minnesota-based friend Luranne McLean on a Road Scholar trip to southern Utah in March 2023. "We go back to junior high school!" Hagen says. "We reconnected in 2020 on a trip to Belize with another friend, also from Minnesota."

waters of Cancun or the sumptuous restaurants in Italy.

Jan Hagen, a former professor at the University of Albany, knows firsthand the benefits of traveling alone but with a group. She has been traveling, among other favorite activities, since her retirement in 2013. “I think some people like to stay close to home,” Hagen says. “I like to venture out and see what’s going on in the rest of the world.”

Now in her 70s, she still loves the outdoors, especially camping, hiking and canoeing, and despite using a cane since recent hip surgery, walks every day. “The cane doesn’t slow me down,” Hagen says from her Albany home. “I used to walk five miles and now I only walk three, but that’s fine with me.”

Hagen also likes to travel on group tours, and has taken a dozen trips organized by a group aptly named Road Scholar, because the idea is to learn all you can about each destination. Hagen has been to Iceland, Prague, Easter Island, the Himalayas, on a boat down the Amazon, Moscow, New Zea-

land and many other exotic places.

One of her fondest memories took place during a recent trip to Puerto Rico, when she went snorkeling during a moonlight swim. “It was the experience of a lifetime,” Hagen says. “It was easy, too. If you can float, you can snorkel.”

Jan credits a high school Spanish language class for her desire to visit new places and immerse herself in the culture. “We learned about the Aztecs and South America, and I immediately wanted to see it for myself,” she says. “I can still make sentences in Spanish; my problem is understanding what’s being said back to me.”

While Hagen is just fine traveling by herself on group tours, she is also often joined by a former classmate from Minnesota who’s also in her 70s. “We went to Belize and stayed in tents on platforms,” Hagen says. “There was no internet, no cell service, and it was so peaceful.”

Another of Hagen’s most memorable trips was right in the U.S. “I stood on the rim of the Grand Canyon, and it was

breathtaking,” she says.

Hagen says she’s always felt comfortable being solo on the road—or airplane or boat, for that matter—but being part of a tour makes it a social activity. “I’ve made many friends along the way,” she says. “We choose the same trips because of our similar interests. They also put together tours at various activity levels, so none of us are overwhelmed.”

Most tours have free time built into the schedule, during which Jan likes to wander a bit, albeit cautiously. “For safety reasons, I would say always stick to main thoroughfares,” she says. “Tour guides will map out the area for you.”

Not surprisingly, Jan has a treasure trove of trinkets from her travels around the world. “I picked up whatever struck my fancy,” she laughs. “But now it’s time to downsize, because I am running out of space.”

What’s next for the seasoned traveler? “Who knows where else I might go?” she says. “I was thinking about Croatia. That might be fun.” ■

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◀ Another Road Scholar trip Hagen took, this one to Alaska. Below, Hagen and McLean in Utah, and Hagen in 1989 on a trek in Nepal in the Himalayas, home to Mount Everest.



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▲ Hagen in 2016, in a view overlooking Lake Baikal in Siberia.

Tips for Successful and Satisfying Solo Travel

Try something new! Group tours in particular can be an easy way to visit a place you might not normally consider as a solo traveler.

Research and plan every step of your trip before you depart. Whether you're traveling across the country or around the world, make reservations ahead of time. This includes everything from accommodations to car rentals or shuttles to and from the airport. While you're at it, make a copy of your itinerary and leave it with a trusted friend or family member. Arrange for times to check in with someone back home in case you switch up your plans. If your heart is set on dining in a special restaurant or touring a certain museum, check online about reservations and when to go to avoid busy times.

Be aware of your personal safety in all surroundings. (See our story on travel security on

pg. 21.) It's easy to be distracted by the sights and sounds of a new city or lush tropical setting. Keep track of your purse or backpack, and be aware of your surroundings. If you're part of a tour, stay with the group.

Pack as lightly as possible. The best-case scenario is to limit yourself to one piece of luggage with wheels and one carry-on. Consider a cross-body bag or belt a pouch around your waist. If you use a backpack, wear it in the front rather than on your back. Pack accordingly for the activities you'll be experiencing. Always have a water bottle on hand to stay hydrated.

Be open to meeting new people. It may feel awkward at first, but make an effort to start conversations with others on your tour. You could make lasting friendships on solo vacations, and thanks to social media, remain connected.

— Source: AARP

GROUP TOURS FOR THE SOLO TRAVELER

- Walking the World walkingtheworld.com
- Road Scholar (formerly Elderhostel) roadscholar.org/collections/solo-travel
- Elder Treks eldertreks.com
- Firebird Tours firebirdtours.com
- Overseas Adventure Travel oattravel.com/ways-to-save/leader-in-solo-travel

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