

Solo Budget Travel

Maximum Rewards Come from Traveling Light and Alone

By Alexa Hackbarth

Have you ever wanted to climb Mayan temples or spelunk your way through caves in the rain forests

of Belize? Enjoy Christmas in London's West End or a midnight glass of wine on the smooth pebble beaches of Nice? Perhaps you have always wanted to do these things, but you are trying to work your way through college and take care of the payments on your car, and you think you don't have enough time or money to finance such trips.

Sadly, if you think you don't have the time or finances to enjoy the world around you now, it is unlikely that you will have the resources in the future. Although my family is not rich and I am working my way through college, I love to travel, so I find ways of seeing the world despite the money restrictions. I actually prefer "shoestring" travel to traveling "in style."

And to get the most out of travel, I do it on my own. The taxi driver who drove me to the Manchester airport at 3 a.m. seemed amazed that I would rather travel alone than with friends. I couldn't seem to convince him that there are benefits to traveling solo. I can wander wherever I wish, eat when I get hungry, and stop when I get tired. I can change my itinerary on the spur of the moment and leave for a new city without having to let anyone know that I'm going. I can meet all sorts of people, locals as well as other travelers, and share their company until I feel that it's time to move on. I can delve more deeply into the culture and experience more of its nuances when I'm on my own.

Preparation

Traveling solo takes more planning and research because there is no one else to fall back on when the unexpected occurs, which it inevitably will. Search the web, talk to people who have traveled or lived where you're going, learn about travel consolidators and companies that offer student or youth prices, and stay in touch with student organizations and publications.

But remember that no matter how much you plan, you will always be surprised. Being prepared involves your mental attitude, not your packing methods. Things will go worse than planned sometimes, but they will go better at other times. Patience and good humor will serve you better than anything you could possibly pack into your bag.

You will need a credit card or two, a guidebook ("shoestring" travelers prefer Lonely Planet, with Let's Go coming in second), a phrase book, a small calculator for money changing, a journal or notebook, and a pen. A money belt is the best way to keep your credit cards, money, emergency information, passports, and visas. Don't be afraid to take a good camera on your travels because it might be lost or stolen, just keep it out of sight. A travel alarm is also important when you are traveling on your own. And you'll always need extra socks.

You can save money by staying in hostels and shopping for food, but there is no way to get around paying the \$15 to see Michelangelo's David. These little charges add up, but you are traveling to see wonders of the world. Don't be cheap.

And remember: people are much more willing to help you out if you do not assume that the entire world speaks English.

Safety and Security

Some hostels offer a secure luggage room where you can leave your pack for the day. I would advise you to take advantage of this; the less you carry with you the better.

Always walk with confidence and assurance, even if you don't know where you are going. Avoid looking confused or lost. If you feel threatened by anyone or anything, do something about it. Paranoia is not a friendly travel companion, and you will be missing out on some great opportunities if you refuse to talk to people or explore new places. It is wise to stay alert and aware of your surroundings. If you feel threatened, leave. Approach a policeman or other civil officer, go into a shop or restaurant, or introduce yourself to a group of friendly-looking strangers. Do anything but sit there and stew in your own paranoia.

Culture Shock

It constantly amazes me that with all the commotion about our "global community" we still need a McDonald's to greet us on the other side of customs. When you are traveling overseas, the only thing the golden arches should represent to you is a free bathroom. Experiencing another culture's food is one of the best ways to feel close to the area.

In addition to sampling the local cuisine, wander the little towns and out-of-the-way spots which are not overrun by tourists. Search out the experiences that will make your trip more than a checklist of things everyone has told you to see.

Meeting People

People constantly and incorrectly assume that because I travel on my own I travel by myself. It is actually easier to meet people when you are on your own because you are more likely to strike up a conversation with the person sitting next to you if you don't have your best friend at your side. You will make friends waiting in line, riding on trains and buses, and by striking up conversations in the lounges of the hostels and pensions in which you stay. Perhaps you will become friends or perhaps you will never learn anything more about them than their name, but their company will enhance your enjoyment of your travels.

I had been in the Republic of Ireland for four days when I decided I wanted to see the Cliffs of Moher on the southwest coast. I caught a bus to the town of Doolin; the bus driver helped me find the town's only hostel. Once there, I met five other travelers who offered their company on the next day's outing to the Cliffs. The morning of the trip, we all scraped together sack lunches, rented bikes, and borrowed a map to the Cliffs. Our group consisted of one Australian, two Americans, one South African, and two Germans.

While we ate lunch we began talking to an Irish man who had brought his German girlfriend up to see the Cliffs. The eight of us spent the next few hours exploring the tower perched at the edge of the cliff and watching the ocean break against the rocks and fall into the eddies in the caverns. When the sun began to set, we threw the rented bikes into the back of the Irish man's van and went into town for dinner. Over dinner we decided to make our way up to Galway instead of staying another night in Doolin, so we again piled into the van. We spent the next few hours singing Irish pub songs in the back of a rickety old van.

I have not heard from any of those people since that night. However, their company that weekend made my trip to Ireland all the more memorable.

Solo traveling is an incredible, life-changing experience. Take chances, be adventurous and assertive, make big plans, and take advantage of the travel opportunities while you are still young and not responsible for a family, a career, and a mortgage. There are ways to see the world on a budget. You just need to be a bit more creative with your planning than you would if money were no object.

ALEXA HACKBARTH spent last fall semester in Ormskirk, England. She will be a senior at Baldwin- Wallace College in Ohio.