

# Chicago Tribune TRAVEL



A trip to Morocco with the Women's Travel Club includes a camel ride to a desert camp for the night.

THE WOMEN'S TRAVEL CLUB

## Sisterhood of travelers

Rapid growth seen in trips that go beyond spas, shopping

BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER  
Tribune Newspapers

A typical trip with the girls once meant shopping, spa treatments, culinary tours or wine tastings. While each pursuit remains appealing, many women today want these experiences and more, particularly the growing number of baby boomers who've been there, done that and have the means and desire to explore distant corners of the world.

Camel trekking in Morocco, anyone? Horseback riding in Iceland? Or how about a hike to Machu Picchu or yoga in Bhutan?

In the last six years, the number of women-only tour companies has grown 230 percent, said Marianne Southall, a founder of the Women's Travel Club. Women join these tours because they "don't have anyone to travel with. Their husbands are busy, or their friends are not interested or (don't) have the money to travel."

Women-only travel companies report that most of their customers are 40 to 70, with a core group in their 60s. Many are married. Depending on the company, trips range from outings in the U.S. to international excursions to exotic adventures.

Taking a women-only group tour "is a safe and convenient way to travel with like-minded individuals," said Debra C. Asberry, president of Women Traveling Together. Before she founded her company in 1997, she said it wasn't always socially acceptable for women to travel without their husbands or a



WOMENTRAVELING.COM

A Women Traveling Together group is accompanied by five Masai warriors who guard their campsite in Africa.

family member. Now they "own the idea that this is my money, and I'm going to spend it how I want to spend it." The baby boomers are "pushing this niche of the travel industry forward," Asberry said. They have passed the "acquiring phase of their lives," establishing a career, buying a home and raising a family.

While some book a trip with a friend, Asberry said, 80 percent of her customers join a tour by themselves. If you talk a friend into a trip, you feel responsible for her, to "make sure she is having a good time," she said. Those who go solo "have nobody to impress or keep up with."

Millennials want to go on their own, while older women prefer guided trips in a group, said Emilie Cortes, president of Call of the Wild, where 75 percent of women join tours by themselves. "They've had their families. They are ready to travel," she said. "It's a generational trend."

A women's tour group has "an entirely different dynamic," Cortes said. In general, men vie for attention, are competitive and not always supportive of others who are struggling, she said. Women don't

want to travel with men "who might pressure them to keep up the pace," whether it's a hike in Yosemite or a climb up Mount Kilimanjaro.

Susan Eckert, who founded one of the first women's-only tour groups in 1982 when she lived in Evanston, Ill., said women want to interact with local people and learn their culture. On one of her Adventure Women tours in Poland, for example, the group visited a Polish woman in her home and prepared a meal alongside her.

Beth Whitman, whose WanderTours are 80 percent women-only, said her groups connect with local charities — an orphanage in India, women's and children's aid societies in Vietnam and Thailand — and some women are moved to tears by the experience. At their urging she started a giving program for women who wish to donate to these causes.

Where do women want to travel? Asberry sees destination preferences as a funnel. At the top are the greatest number of women, those who have not traveled abroad much and prefer an English-speaking country in Europe, such as Ireland or England. The



WOMENTRAVELING.COM

A Women Traveling Together group heads for one of the Galapagos Islands. Future trips include Zion National Park.

next-largest group, the experienced travelers, might choose an African safari or a trip to Brazil or Egypt. At the bottom of the funnel, the exceedingly experienced travelers are game for Bhutan or Borneo or a ride on the Trans-Siberian Railway.

Women must be in good health with no mobility issues. "We are feet on the ground," Asberry said.

Eckert rates her Adventure Women tours for physical activity. An easy trip might be to the Virgin Islands or a barge trip in France, while a more moderate level of activity would be required in Italy's Lakes District, where the group hikes 3 to 7 miles a day.

More challenging trips include horseback riding in Iceland for excellent riders who can do 20 miles a day. One of the roughest adventures, paddling along the Missouri River in Montana in replica Lewis and Clark canoes, has a softer side. The staff sets up comfortable tents and prepares meals so paddlers need only wash up and grab an hors d'oeuvre at the end of the day.

Still, "these are not girlfriend getaways," Eckert said. They are adventure trips in which everyone

participates, not a tour for passive observers. Among her most popular are trips to Iceland, Cuba, New Zealand and the Galapagos Islands.

Southall, of Women's Travel Club, said European trips are always big sellers, but women who "have done the very comfortable travel" want to go somewhere more exotic, such as Bali or Morocco. Most itineraries build in free time for shopping and spa options, when available.

Phyllis Stoller, of The Women's Travel Group, said hot destinations include India and Italy but also Turkey because some other Middle East countries are unsafe now.

Women on these trips often form friendships that continue after they return home. And repeat business is high. One woman has taken 37 trips since 2000 with Women Traveling Together, said Asberry, and between 25 and 30 have taken 10 trips or more.

"They make these great connections," said WanderTours' Whitman. There's a misconception about women's travel groups. People say, "Why would you want to do a women-only tour?" picturing a bunch of catty women who fight over

6 tour companies with examples of women-only trips in 2016

**Adventure Women**

- Cuba: A People-to-People Cultural Experience, price to be determined;
- Hiking Big Sky and Yellowstone, price TBD.

**Call of the Wild**

- Yosemite Ten Lakes Loop, \$950;
- Uganda Rwenzoris, \$4,295.

**The Women's Travel Group**

- Colors of South India, from \$3,895; Mexico City, from \$960.

**WanderTours**

- Bhutan Cultural and Yoga Tour, \$5,300; Vietnam and Cambodia, \$3,920.

**Women's Travel Club**

- Morocco Beauty Tour, from \$2,100
- Bali Eat, Pray, Love Tour, from \$2,240

**Women Traveling Together**

- Bryce Canyon & Zion national parks, price TBD
- England's Castles and Gardens, price TBD

seats on a bus, she said. But it's not like that: "It's a wonderful sisterhood."

And men are realizing this is what their women want. Husbands are not only supportive, they also contact women's travel companies to inquire about buying trips as gifts for their wives.

They believe she'll be happier at home if she has an opportunity to travel on her own, Whitman said. "As the saying goes: Happy wife, happy life."

Katherine Rodeghier is a freelance reporter.