



GOING SOLO



Charging down the Mekong river, it's just me and the boatman and his longtail boat. Pakse to Champasak. Champasak to Don Khone Island. This part of the river, through Laos, is a busy highway for local fishermen, water taxis and heavily laden freight boats that sit low and slow in the water. The Mekong is wide and fast, dangerous and unpredictable, so the boatman's local knowledge is invaluable as he weaves the boat back and forth across the river, navigating ever changing channels.

Occasionally he leans forward to point out landmarks. He has only a few words of English, but it's still far better than my Lao, so we talk in smiles and gestures. Other communication is almost impossible over the roar of the longtail outboard motor, which is essentially a truck engine with a propeller on a shaft sticking out several metres behind.

Mostly, though, I am happy to sit and absorb the unfamiliar landscape and watch the people whose lives depend on the river. These are yet more pinch-me moments etched into my memory banks. It's real and I'm here at last, on the Mekong. In Laos. Astonishing.

Before Laos, Singapore and Vietnam. After Laos, Cambodia and Thailand, then England, Scotland, North America and back to Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. A year of solo travel, taken more than three decades after most people take their gap year.

Why so late? I'd watched friends do their OE young, but that hadn't been my path. Career, marriage, children and home had happily consumed so many years.

And then life took a sharp turn, as it invariably does. This was not the first crossroads, just the latest, they come at us throughout life as a matter of course. At any crossroads, the choice is to carry on the same path or to head in a new direction.

Now, though, a year of solo travel, wandering the world on my own terms, seemed like a wonderful option.

Family responsibilities had changed again with my Mum's passing and daughters' independence. I'd always wanted to travel long term, and now, in that space between weddings and grandbabies, was my chance.

For many years, I've kept, on my desk, a tiny book of quotes about travel, that has continually offered a reminder of lands far away. My favourite is from Richard Bach, author of *Jonathon Livingston Seagull*, who wrote, "I have always wanted an adventurous life. It took a long time to realise that I was the only one who could make an adventurous life happen to me." At this crossroads, turning right into a year of solo travel was definitely right, in every sense.

When we choose to make change, there are plenty of people to give us advice. Friends and family often believe they know what's best for us, and, even with the best of intentions, their counsel reflects their own fears. Some friends - strong, confident women who make change happen instead of waiting for it, said 'go for it!' My daughters agreed.

Others were not so encouraging, offering up all the reasons why a woman travelling solo 'at my age' was ill-advised. All their wotifs came out to play. Wotif you have an accident? Wotif you don't speak the language? Wotif you run out of money? Wotif you get mugged? Wotif you get lonely? Wotif you get lost? A hundred and one reasons that spoke volumes about their fears and none about mine. My biggest fear was Wotif I don't go? Mark Twain reminded me that 'Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did.'

As with many things in life, making the decision is the hardest part. Committing to what matters most. So, having decided to go, the next twelve months were, both literally and figuratively, about getting my house in order. It seems that once you've made one decision, others cascade from it.





Committing to travelling led to decluttering, selling my house and putting the few remaining personal treasures into storage. Honouring work commitments for the year led to a rethink about the work I would return to. For almost thirty years, my focus had been on communicating and connecting across cultures, with the past decade as a self-employed trainer and coach. While the work I'd done for so long still resonated, it no longer made me leap out of bed. Perhaps it was time for a complete change.

From a long time passion for personal development, my bookshelves are lined with the wise words of others, well-thumbed with margins full of highlights. Yet in all the years of reading these books, very little had actually changed. I'd read a chapter, and think, 'Oh that's powerful' and move on. We can read until our eyes glaze over, but the only path to sustainable personal change is by taking action. Solo travel represented a huge step in the right direction, testing courage, independence, and resilience.

It was a bold move, but one that I soon discovered many others have done before. There are plenty of online solo traveller forums, where women and men share experiences and encouragement for long-term travel.

In early December 2015, with only 7 kgs of carry-on luggage, I hugged my daughters goodbye and flew out on a year of adventure. Having an outline, rather than an itinerary, kept plans open to serendipity. My choice was to travel slow, spending more time in fewer places, to make time for deep conversation and to listen to people's stories. I wanted to figure out where I was going in the second half of my life, by learning how others around the world were living theirs.

The conversations and friendships with fellow travellers, Air BnB hosts and locals, became the basis for a book of stories about how women are reinventing their lives beyond fifty. I spoke with women who were tired of settling for whatever they were given. Women who picked themselves up after divorce, death or drama and set a new course. Women who wondered how on earth they had ended up where they are, and are determined to move on. All bold women who are living singly or partnered, towards fulfilled lives, that make a positive difference.

Over the ensuing twelve months, my passions for textiles and colour, rivers and trains, gardens and history lead to places far beyond Trip Advisor's top ten tourist traps. Artisan silk weavers in Luang Prabang, and block printmakers in Chiang Mai. An orchid farm in Bangkok, and the Lost Gardens of Heligan in England. Trains from Edinburgh to Southampton and from Toronto to Vancouver. And, of course, the Mekong River. A year of magical moments and memories and, most importantly, of learning more about myself than any self-help book could ever teach.

So, what of the wotifs? Did I get homesick? Of course, and it reminded me that there are people I care about and places that I belong. Did I get lonely? Rarely, because people are always happy to speak with someone who is interested in them. Did I always speak the languages? No, but we got by, and the lessons of being comfortable with discomfort go further than asking where the bathroom is! Did I get lost? Often, and then found again. Did everything run smoothly? Of course not, but even when things went wrong, it all worked out fine in the end. Yes, planes fall out of the sky and things can go wrong, but that can happen anywhere, and the risks of going were far outweighed by the regret of staying home.

A year, almost to the day, I flew back into Auckland International Airport. The waiata and birdsong that sound as you come through to the customs hall are the undoing of many a homecoming Kiwi. You know where you belong and there's time for reflection in those final minutes before the long, welcoming hugs with loved ones.

Solo travel is about the freedom to choose where you go, when and how. The only agenda is your own. It is a chance to boldly follow your passions, to be an adventurer in your own mould. While it is certainly important to be physically travel fit, solo travel in the second half of life is substantially a head game. Over the year, I encountered fellow baby boomers whose travel choices ranged from backpackers to five star. All are reinventing what it means to age. Far from retiring and slowing down, they are seizing the day, following their hearts and having adventures of a lifetime. Different, richer and bolder than they ever imagined. ✨



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