

The changing landscape of women's travel

-Anju Anna Alex



Women have been travelling more than ever, overcoming the long-drawn history of systemic prejudice and gender bias, with both inbound and outbound tourism witnessing accelerated growth. Women are earning more and therefore spending more. This is dynamically changing the travel landscape; the potential of the women's market surpassed \$19 trillion in 2015 given that 80% of travel decisions are made by women.

The concept of women travelling solo and in women-only groups is an emerging trend. High purchasing power that comes with increased financial independence and freedom to take decisions independently has accorded to the rise of the modern female traveller. This can be construed as flexibility to take one's own financial decisions, easier access to information and increased affordability. Therefore, the desire to travel solo or in women only groups has made it to the bucket list of a lot of women.

Women find travel empowering and liberating. Elizabeth Gilbert's immensely successful book, 'Eat, Pray, Love' was enlightening, in the sense that it redefined the purpose of a woman's travel. From mother-daughter getaways to bachelorette parties to detox getaways, women are willing to push the envelope of travel in return for unique experiences. Figures indicate that the number of women embarking on business trips have doubled over the last decade or so. Subsequently, the number of travel providers offering their services exclusively to women has increased, not to forget the umpteen services offered by hoteliers to entice the millennial female solo traveller.

Adventure tourism is rapidly gaining popularity amongst female travellers and has many takers. This is contrary to the clichéd belief that women prefer leisure shopping getaways to adventure trips, signifying a transformation in the women's travel segment. Concurrently, such change of trends are reflected in the travel trends pertaining to Indian women as well.

According to Ranjini Nambiar, CEO, Footloose Yatra Consultants, “There has been definitely a surge in women’s travel. More than the financial independence, this increase can be attributed to exposure to the international arena thanks to the internet and more specifically social media. The exposure to diverse and varying options has empowered people to define what they want. They are able to define with clarity the kind of travel they prefer and the activities they want to participate or indulge in. This is to say that the requirements have become very specific and clients have become very eloquent about it. Recently we have been getting many requests to plan something novel as detox tours wherein travellers want to completely rejuvenate and ‘detox’ or cleanse their mind and body. These tours are not necessarily religious. The girlfriend getaway or the mother-daughter getaway niches amount to impressive figures”. Commenting about the notable growth in the number of women travellers, Sonia Karnani, Director, Arunodaya Travels says, “The all pervasive landscape of the internet has provided women with multitudinous options of accessing information about destinations or activities that in turn enable them to take informed decisions about travel. This surge in the number of female travellers is reflected in every segment and every age group”.

Travel has become a way of expression and therefore an exercise of free will. Indian women too are breaking the shackles of patriarchy with the drift towards modernization and globalization. Recent statistics suggest that more than 40% of Indian women opt to travel alone. Hence there is also a proliferation of hoteliers offering dedicated services to women travellers opting to travel solo. Gauri Jayaram, Founder, Active Holiday Company, notes that “On the one hand this is certainly a reflection of the changing socio-economic landscape where Indian women are becoming more independent and have more money in their hands. Interestingly, however this also has to do with our society being so male dominated. There are many men – be it fathers or husbands who are not comfortable with women from their families travelling in a mixed group, however they have no issues if women from their homes join other women groups”.

Ranjini opines, “The gender barriers have become more relaxed with more and more women warming up to the idea of travelling in mixed groups or travelling solo.” “The need of the hour is experiential travel, the demand for travel being very specific and well defined. Therefore, the notion of travelling to a destination for the sake of going to that particular tourist destination has lost its significance. Instead people want to explore particular experiences in specific places”, she adds.

When it comes to the trend of disintermediation, Sonia explains, “Young travellers prefer to curate their own itineraries whereas mature travellers prefer to book through trustworthy, reliable expert travel consultants”. Ranjini shares a similar opinion about the preference of travellers when it comes to making travel plans. She says, “A few years back we witnessed the trend of more and more people making their own travel plans. But clients have begun to realize how social media works and the way reviews, testimonials and ratings can be fabricated and manipulated. This information overload has stirred confusion in the minds of the users. However, people have started going back to resorting to the habit of booking through travel agents or travel consultants.” The middle aged segment is particularly witnessing an upswing in the number women travellers owing to lesser responsibilities especially with regard to children coupled with financial flexibility.

Talking about the travel trends pertaining to travelling in groups Sonia says, “People these days prefer to travel in small private groups as compared to large groups. Younger travellers opt to be more adventurous, tend to make their own itineraries and are willing to compromise

luxury for unique experiences. Airbnb and hostels are popular options for the younger category whereas the 35-45 age category, prefers budget stays and 45 plus category prefers luxury stays. Senior travel is an emerging trend and therefore a growing segment in women's travel. Recent figures indicate that most female travellers who undertake trips in small groups are over the age of 45." Gauri goes on to explain "The real credit for seeing this opportunity and developing this segment actually goes to WOW (Women on Wanderlust) – everything that has followed has been a me-too travel experience. However India is a huge country and there is space for everyone to grow and thrive. We do have several companies who are offering women only travel and they all have their own niches. For example F5 serves Indian women who want to travel in India. We serve active women who want to be adventurous." She explains, "We just ran two back to back fully booked out wildlife trips for 14 to 18 year olds. And then there are people in their late 20s, mid 30s and early 40s who are getting out."

Ranjini says that, "Countries in Eastern Europe like Italy and Spain with its cultural cocktails continues to fascinate and entice female travellers." Sonia also shares a similar view of the topic and says, "Eastern Europe is much sought after by women travellers. Countries like Croatia, Austria are welcoming more and more female visitors."

One of the biggest challenges that the Indian tourist industry is faced with is the issue of women's safety. This message of women's safety should be emboldened in our marketing communication strategies to ascertain India's position as a top MICE and leisure destination and to regenerate consumer trust as a credible brand. At the same time, authorities should take remedial measures to ensure the safety of the tourists which should further translate into necessary actions. Commenting about the current scenario in India with respect to female travellers, Gauri says "This is exactly why group travel for women is a big segment. Apart from the fact you have someone taking responsibility, you also have safety in numbers when you travel in groups. Like I said before, we have women who control their own money and decide on which trips to spend it on and at the same time you have women who do not control their own money but their families will 'permit' them to travel with women only groups being not comfortable travelling in mixed groups. More and more women believe they deserve the time off and want to explore the world". After realizing the urgency and gravity of the situation, many Indian states are adapting fast to the rapidly changing scenario by introducing women-only modes of transportation and women drivers. In 2013, the government allotted Rs 1,000 crore towards the Nirbhaya fund, to protect the safety and dignity of women which currently amounts to a total corpus of Rs. 3,000 crore. There is a compelling need to effectively and judiciously utilize the funds to ensure the safety for women travellers in the country as well.

Ranjini is of the opinion that there is an element of danger anywhere you travel in the world and her personal experiences have taught her that India is relatively safe. But she throws in a word of caution that it is always best to avoid deserted places when travelling alone, be it anywhere in the world. "If you have booked your tour through a reliable operator, there isn't much to worry." Speaking about the subject of women's safety Sonia says, "Booking through a proper channel is quintessential for travellers especially in the case of women". Given the strong potential of women travellers in India there is an urgent need to address the safety concerns in order to provide further impetus to the women's travel segment.

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