

A lone adventure

What would inspire someone to take off on a journey of discovery on their own? Two writers recount their inner and outer voyages on two very different missions

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“The experience restored my trust in myself”

Katherine Baldwin had travelled solo as a backpacker and later as a Reuters correspondent, but how would she fare as a 40-something lone tourist in Mexico?

When I left university at 22, there was only one thing on my mind: adventure. While friends went into law or banking, I drove tourists around Tuscany, then bought a one-way ticket to Australia. I didn't come back to Britain, except for brief visits, for nine years. I spent the first two years backpacking around the world. I canoed through crocodile-infested gorges and hitchhiked on deserted highways. I waited on tables and cleaned toilets. I had no savings, no itinerary and – or so it seemed at the time – no fear. When my funds ran out, I got a job as a journalist in Mexico and roamed Latin America for work and pleasure, finally coming home at 31.

My globetrotting continued, albeit in different circumstances. As a political correspondent for the Reuters news agency, I flew to distant capitals or into war zones with prime ministers or reported on tsunamis. On holiday, I no longer stayed in hostels or thumbed a ride, but adventure still played a part.

Fast-forward to 40 and life looked a lot more conventional. I was self-employed, so no exotic work trips, and my holidays were orderly affairs. I went on yoga or activity breaks, looking for structure, comfort, like-minded people and a good night's sleep (I always booked a single room). But at 41, everything started to feel dull. So when

a Mexican friend said she was getting married in Acapulco in December, I decided it was an opportunity to shake up my life. When I realised I could rent out my London flat for the price of my flight and stay for a month, it felt like the best idea I'd had in years. Of course I was nervous. My younger self had thrived on travelling alone, but that was partly because unhealthy behaviours – binge-eating and excessive drinking to name two – had fuelled my bravado. What if I slipped back into old ways? I decided it was worth the risk. I was single, childless and not particularly happy. Besides, Britain was cold.

A few days into my trip, I began to think I'd made a big mistake. The wedding was delightful, the sun glorious, but it turned out the friends I thought I'd be spending Christmas with wouldn't be around. Panicking back in Mexico City, I started searching for yoga and meditation retreats online, but they were over-priced or full. Then I thought: I was a capable, well-travelled woman, fluent in Spanish and adept at making friends. What was I afraid of?

On Christmas Eve I arrived in the Pacific beach town of Puerto Escondido. I had a reservation in a nice hotel – I still craved comfort and security – but no idea what I'd



Katherine relaxing in Mexico – but it turned out she didn't need the laptop for company as much as she thought



do for the next two weeks. It wasn't quite the holiday I'd imagined, but I had a Kindle and a laptop for company.

My experience couldn't have been more different. Soon, I was dining with fellow travellers, exploring beaches or lagoons with new friends, taking surf lessons and dancing salsa with a Mexican beautician who'd invited me out after waxing my legs. Alejandra was a single, vivacious 30-something with an adventurous spirit – we struck up a friendship in a flash. Just as I was wondering how I'd spend New Year's Eve, I went out with an American backpacker – and before I knew it, I'd embarked on a holiday romance. Sam was tall, good-looking, athletic, and loved to travel, hike and surf. I was worried I'd get hurt if I got involved; he was a wanderer who would soon be heading south. But when I decided to just enjoy the relationship for what it was, I started to feel lighter and have more fun. We went dancing, skinny-dipping, surfed a little and laughed a lot.

By the end of my beach break, I'd barely opened my Kindle and I'd hardly written a word. But I felt like I'd re-awakened an adventurous spirit that had lain dormant for too long. Returning home, I felt stronger, happier and freer than I had in years. The experience had restored my trust in myself – in my ability to take healthy risks and to challenge fears that had been dragging me down.

I'd discovered comfort isn't so important and that serendipity beats structure. I'd slept best in the cheapest hotel, felt happier on rickety buses than in taxis, and had met as many like-minded people in beauty parlours and salsa bars as I would have done on a Zen retreat. Finally, I learned that while I'm perfectly happy to adventure alone – I'm planning another solo trip – I'm ready to take a chance if I meet a man I want to journey with. And perhaps such an encounter is more likely when I'm feeling alive and following my heart.

Katherine Baldwin writes a blog at fromfortywithlove.com >>>



“I just wanted to get away from everyone and everything”

After a death and a divorce, *Psychologies*' new editor **Suzy Greaves** decided to walk alone for 50 miles down the south-west coastal path in Cornwall

Summer had just arrived and we had lost Paula, my beautiful sister-in-law to cancer, aged 41. My divorce paperwork had also just come through. I felt blindsided with grief. I just wanted to get away from everyone and everything. I borrowed a one-man tent, bought a map and headed to Cornwall with only Oscar, my little black spaniel, for company. I wanted to walk, not talk, get some perspective and shout at a few seagulls.

By the end of day one, I just wanted to go home. It poured with rain, my tent weighed a ton and with no signal on my mobile, I couldn't get in contact with anyone. I'd eaten my packed lunch by 10am and my

emergency chocolate bar by 11am. I was soaked through, and the Cornish coastline that looked so lovely on *Doc Martin* seemed to take on a sinister air as the day wore on.

By 4pm, I was knackered and miserable. Only stubborn pride and the thought of a very long walk back to the car made me pitch my tent. I lay there with gritted teeth and read my guidebook. I had pitched my tent above a rocky headland where wreckers had lured ships to a watery grave. I made Oscar sleep in my sleeping bag that night.

The dawn eventually broke and with it came sunshine and warmth. A quick stop-off for a fried

breakfast and a shower at a campsite and I felt more cheerful. I tramped along with my big walking boots, as young kids in swimming trunks darted past me, surfboards at the ready. Dads looking like fat seals in black wetsuits dashed in after them, mothers stood with buckets on the shoreline, grandparents with flasks on blankets fussed over toddlers.

I missed Charlie, my nine-year-old son. He was with his dad. What was I doing here without them, I wondered? How did that happen? Where was my family? My son had never met my parents – they had both died of cancer when I was a teenager.

I phoned my brother Nik, who had now lost his wife as well as his parents, and all he did was encourage me. ‘I can't keep going,’ I said. ‘Just keep walking, Suzy,’ he said. ‘That's the only thing to do. Just keep putting one foot in front of the other.’ I had suggested that he have counselling when Paula received her initial diagnosis. Nik refused. His therapy was chopping fuel for his wood-burning stove, he told me. When I arrived for the funeral, I noticed that Nik had built five new log stores. They were all full. ‘Just keep walking,’ he said.

So I did. But with more rain in the afternoon, I made the mistake of visiting the witchcraft museum in Boscastle. It was warm and they allowed dogs. I was expecting *Harry Potter* but got *The Blair Witch Project* – pentacle wind chimes, film stills of Mia Farrow with cropped hair in *Rosemary's Baby*, death masks with eyes that followed you round the room. ‘A storm's brewing,’ said the lady on the till, without a smile, like a B movie extra.

And she was right, there was. The winds rose, the rain came in horizontal from the Atlantic and suddenly the cliff-top campsite seemed like the most desolate place on earth. As if by agreement, Oscar climbed straight into my sleeping bag and shivered beside me all night. I must have slept eventually, because I dreamed we were being chased by the Wicked Witch of the West: ‘I'll get you and your little dog, too.’ Our tent flapped so hard, I thought we'd wake up in the land of Oz.

When we finally did unzip our tent, it was as if the Good Witch Glinda had waved her wand. The sun was twinkling, the sea calm and flat, the surfers



Suzy immersed herself in the natural beauty of the south-west coastal path in Cornwall, starting near the medieval village of Boscastle and ending at Newquay

sunbathing on their boards. A Cornish pasty, a few plasters for my feet and we were off again. We were covering around eight miles a day. I just kept on walking. After a while you stop thinking about anything deep; you simply focus on the basics – where to find your next bar of chocolate? Will you have enough water to get you to the next village? Will the campsite have a working shower?

I can't remember exactly how I did it. But I did. I kept on walking. On my own, on the edge of a cliff, with my little black dog at my heels. My brother was right. You just have to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

Life can be a bit of blur sometimes, especially when faced with what can feel like heartbreaking challenges. But my clifftop experiences in Cornwall taught me that sometimes when there are simply not the words to heal the hole in your heart, a long, long, walk can at least keep it beating until it expands again and mends the broken, jagged edges. ■

LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF SUZY GREAVES