

# Traveling Alone, in Groups

Group tour companies are accommodating more and more solo travelers, who are looking for company — and someone else to handle the complexities of traveling during the pandemic.

By Debra Kamin

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After Sheila Katz's husband died of a degenerative nervous system disorder in April, she knew she had to get away. But her husband had been her travel partner, and without him, she was hesitant to travel alone. The pandemic's ever-shifting travel regulations were intimidating as well. So Ms. Katz, 45, did something she'd never done before: She joined a group tour.

"I wanted to not be totally alone, but also to be able to do my own thing when I wanted," she said. So in July, she joined a group of 17 fully vaccinated travelers heading to Belize with EF Go Ahead Tours, making friends as she snorkeled, visited Mayan ruins and took chocolate- and tortilla-making classes.

Solo travelers like Ms. Katz are joining guided tours at unprecedented rates, say tour organizers, with some companies reporting single bookings up 300 percent over those from couples, families or clusters of friends. The majority of these lone travelers have never taken a group trip before. After years of planning their own trips and traveling solo or with a partner, the pandemic — with its months of isolation and its Byzantine travel rules for testing, masks and vaccination — has pushed them to change their ways.

Ms. Katz, a sociology professor at the University of Houston, had just endured the tenure-review process while also navigating her grief. She was exhausted, and had no interest in parsing border regulations or stressing out about potential exposure to the coronavirus. For her trip to Belize, everyone in the group had to be vaccinated, which lifted a proverbial weight from her shoulders.

"Had it not been a pandemic, I probably would have just gone to lie on a Caribbean beach for seven days," she said.

## 'Even solo travelers want to travel with people sometimes'

The National Tour Association, a professional organization for tour operators, said the group travel industry as a whole has yet to recover from the pandemic's blow to its business. "Half of our tour operators don't expect their company to outperform 2019 metrics until 2023," said Bob Rouse, N.T.A.'s vice president of communication.

But even before the pandemic, group travel was gaining a foothold among two key demographics: women and millennials. Travel companies catering specifically to women have increased by 230 percent over the past six years, while a flurry of new travel start-ups, including AvantStay and TRIPS by the Culture Trip, have grown by marketing toward those born after 1980.

Women's interest in group travel is perhaps most notable. Katalina Mayorga, the chief executive of El Camino Travel, which offers small group tours for women, says that sales for the fourth quarter of 2021 are 200 percent higher than the same period in 2019, and 65 percent of those booking are doing so as solo travelers. Contiki's customers skew 60 percent female. Allison Scola, founder of Experience Sicily, says solo women on her tours now make up 66 percent of guests, while at Indus Travels, 80 percent of customers booking spots on tours for solo travelers are now women. Ninety percent of Indus's customers this year are booking for the first time.

"Even solo travelers want to travel with people sometimes, especially people who they have something in common with," said Amanda Black, the founder of The Solo Female Traveler Network, where women can book individual tickets for group trips across the globe. Ms. Black, 35, restarted her tours in May after shutting down at the start of the pandemic, and said bookings have been steadily climbing.

After months of isolation, it seems, many women miss socializing.

"I live alone, so, it's been a lot of alone time," said Jes Maxfield, 34, a client service manager in Boston who booked a trip to Greece with FTLO Travel in August. The group included eight women and one man, and the man broke his foot on the second day and had to fly home. By the end of the trip, a sisterhood had emerged. "It was really nice to meet so many similar, like-minded women, and to share a beautiful place with them," she said.

The idea of safety in numbers also plays a part. “To hike through the woods by myself isn’t exactly the safest thing to do,” said Emily Cardona, 36, a New Yorker who took outdoor group trips over the past 18 months with Outer There, a New York City-based tour company. The trips were a refuge, she said, from the stress of her two jobs as a senior care manager and mental health therapist.

### **The millennial connection**

“It’s almost as if the difficulties of traveling during the pandemic have helped millennials get over the idea that group tours aren’t cool,” said Tara Cappel, the founder and chief executive of FTLO Travel, where bookings for 2022 are up 225 percent over 2019. FTLO caters to 20- and 30-somethings, and first-time customers — many of them joining solo — now comprise 82 percent of those bookings; 75 percent of travelers booking for 2022 are women.

In many cases, the shift to millennial-focused marketing is redefining the idea of what it means to travel on an organized tour in the first place.

“It was really intimate, and we kind of just looked like some friends who were traveling,” said Autumn Lewis, an attorney in Los Angeles who took her first-ever group tour, a trip to Greece run by Tripsha, in July. “It’s not like you’re having an experience where you just follow the guy with the umbrella.”

The pandemic’s solo travel trend is not limited to tour groups. Solo air bookings are up overall, with Orbitz reporting that single round-trip tickets climbed 200 percent over last year this past Labor Day weekend. In years past, it was difficult to parse whether those tickets indicated single leisure travelers or those flying alone on business, but with business travel still sluggish, 2021 is an exception, said Mel Dohmen, senior brand manager for Orbitz.

And while there’s no definitive way to track how many of those solo travelers join up with groups at their destinations, tour operators are reporting major growth in their overseas destinations.

At Devour Tours, which runs culinary walking tours across Europe, 22 percent of bookings this summer were for just one person, which is more than double what it was during the same period in 2019.

Overseas Adventure Travel (O.A.T.), which offers small group tours for travelers age 50 and above, has seen an uptick of 7 percent in the percentage of solo bookings since the beginning of the pandemic. Eighty-five percent of their solo travelers are women.

### **The new allure of organized travel**

“If there’s one thing the pandemic has shown us, it’s that the value of tour operators has increased tenfold,” said Terry Dale, president and chief executive of the United States Tour Operators Association.

Like travel agents, who are also enjoying a resurgence in popularity, much of that value comes when a traveler can delegate the pandemic mental load: Which vaccine card is valid? On which day do I need to take my P.C.R. test?

But after months of isolation, the group tour’s strongest draw may be its most obvious: It comes with a built-in community.

“Women who have been booking tours with us have definitely been doing so because they want someone who can navigate the Covid restrictions. But there are a number of other motivations,” said Meg Jerrard, co-founder of Solo Female Travelers, which runs small group tours for women. Safety is a major concern, she said, and “the stigma of being alone is another key motivator.”

Ms. Katz, the widow in Texas, had expected that for some meals on her tour, people would go off and do their own thing. She was wrong.

“Our tour guides had to go out of their way because we all wanted to have all of our meals together,” she said. “I think we were all just so thankful to not be in our living rooms, staring at the wall.”

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