Some thoughts on female solo-travelling

Disclaimer:
I'm aware of the fact that there are already plenty of articles out there highlighting the issue of safety for women travelling on their own. However, even though the following post might not contain any really new information, it is a simple attempt to compile as many relevant information as possible with the intention to create awareness rather than fear -while in the same time encouraging every single woman out there to go and explore
the world if there is even the slightest desire to do so!

"Is solo-travelling as a woman safe?"

I think I already heard this question a million times and especially when telling people in Europe that I was about to do so in India I encountered loads of concerned and shocked faces... I have to admit that I had some concerns myself – especially as there is an endless amount of different stories reporting different things and even though you can do a tonne of research beforehand, in the end I always felt confused and never had the impression to have found a solid answer to this question. So I decided to go and see myself because how else could I find out otherwise? Simply not going was definitely never an option!

Well, with hindsight I quickly realised that there is no yes or no answer to this question (no rocket science – I know) BUT that it's still worth your time doing some research and reading other travellers' experiences before or while travelling. Not to scare you but simply to become more aware of cultural differences which are occassionally hard to detect e.g. clothing, body language, subjective perceptions on behavioural patterns etc.

I've been on the road for about 3 months now and the question about safety as a woman has constantly been on my mind until now. Not because I was necessarily frightened but simply because I tried to observe my gut feelings in various situations (which I've been using as my main judgement but more on that later) and also because I've been speaking to all sorts of (local) people about this issue. Not to my complete satisfaction though, as answers – again – depend on so many factors such as origin, gender, education, travel experience (else where in India/world), definition of the word "safety" ...etc.

Anyhow, generally speaking India is an incredibly friendly and generous country and there is literally always someone to help you out – no matter how tricky the situation may seem to you. This might range from finding a great place to stay, jumping on the right bus, knowing what you're about to eat or getting a train ticket in the mystical Indian railway jungle. You'll get what I mean when you're eventually on the hunt for a ticket

What I've also noticed is that it's always a good idea to make friends with a family or women in general as they will – for some reason – always watch out for you and make sure you're okay. This is likely to be caused by the strong family bonds in India. In some occasions there are not even words needed and a simple eye contact with a woman nearby asserts you to be safe and looked after. I'm not sure if I can describe my experiences properly but in these moments I just knew that I would be safe in any case.

However, since nothing in this world can be "generalised" is it also very important to be aware of a few things:

Firstly, I would definitely reccommend wearing appropriate clothes meaning not showing too much leg, covering the shoulders (apparently a very sexual body part in the Indian culture) and decoltee. You already receive enough attention as a white woman, so why attract even more if one can avoid it? Also, I was told that showing too much skin or behaving too smiley/flirty might be perceived as "easy to get" by Indians. Whether this is true or not, I pesonally always try to be friendly but not overly smiley purely to not create any false intentions and also to not constantly be approached by men to have a chat... believe me it can be tiring.

Okay, now some words on transport: There are a few apps you can use. In some cities Uber or the Indian version called Ola is working through which you can easily book tuktuks, cabs or motobike taxis. Advantages of such is that you not only get a fixed rate but also that you know where you're going, the driver is tracked and your ride is registered in the app. Ola even has an emergency-call button – not sure if it works though. Let me remind you that India is the land of mystery…. If none of the apps work (which is predominantly the case) I would still recommend having your phone with you just to check that you're on the right track and to show the driver where you want to go / guide him in case he just pretends to know and then at some point admits that he actually has no clue… daily struggles. If you travel during the night, I would also make sure to carry a power-bank with you and to get to the bus or train stations via taxi/tuktuk. Avoid walking alone in the dark, especially in remote areas – why playing with the fire.

Another important factor related to safety is WHERE you travel in India. India is a huge and extremely vast country holding so many different traditions and cultural aspects. One state might completely differ to the next one and also the level of "westernalisation" really does depend upon the place you're in. For instance, in Mumbai I felt quite safe and was also out and about in the evening after dark as there are still lots of people around. The same accounted for Puna and Goa. This doesn't imply it's a 100% safe though as in the end you never know – but what do we know in the end anyway? I'd say definitely speak to locals and ask for their opinions if you get the chance to do so.

However, to give you an idea of the complexity to find an appropriate answer to the overall safety-question, let's pick Goa as an example! In particular the attractive holiday-destination Goa is a tricky one as Goans itself are mostly very liberal and open-minded but it's also a place which attracts lots of Indian tourists coming from all over the country and not being as educated and liberal as Goans might be. So even though, Goans assure you that their state is safe, there are still horrific stories in the

news mostly involving Indian tourists and women… In most other places, it is not recommended to be out alone in the dark. Personally, I felt a bit anxious in Varanasi but that was also due to the fact that the city felt quite intense and a little bit aggressive to me. Which again was related to other reasons but going into details here would require another article, so I shall not.

Anyway, by now you should see that it's very difficult to give appropriate advise on this topic as it really depends on so many factors. There is good and evil everywhere in this world, not only in India so it's really tough to make a solid statement. Unfortunately there is one fact which is hard to deny though: India does have patriotic societal structures and often you get treated differently when you on your own compared to being accompanied by a guy or a group of people. This can be noticed in various situations such as the way you're looked at/spoken to in the streets, in travel agencies, in post offices or on public transport… to name a few. Personally, I sometimes felt that men take me more seriously if I was with another guy. Or that they often just spoke to the men rather than me. Additionally, it is sometimes more difficult to make them understand the word "no"… Well, I ended up seeing it as a practice now to really stand my grounds rather than becoming agitated about it. Sometimes hard to be perfectly honest though.

In case you've started wondering by now if that article actually does contain any useful advise, then the answer is YES:

What I feel certainly confident to recommend is to always go with your gut feeling and intuition! If you feel safe, go for it. But maybe still think twice rather than once ⬜ If you feel even the slightest unease in your chest, remove yourself from the situation while trying to remain calm about it. Do get a simcard with data and carry a power bank with you. Never say your alone (even though you might be) and at least pretend to know where you're going.

I would boldly say that everyone who decides to travel solo is strong – so make sure the world out there gets that impression too ⬜ On this note: if you should ever end up in a situation where you feel harassed, were being touched without permission or generally just feel very irritated and uncomfortable by someone's presence do make sure to voice yourself in public! Don't feel ashamed or shy, the "Indian way of public shaming" will be in your favour and it won't take long until you gather a crowd around you who is either willing to protect you or simply creates enough attention to make your enemy run away as fast as he/she (let's not assume that such incidents can only be caused by men please) possibly can.

Last but not least: Even if you travel/start off on your own, you never really are though. Most of the time you bump into other travellers on the way and there are also many other options how you can partner up with people if you should wish so e.g. Through the Facebook group "Backpacking in India" which hosts a huge community of backpackers from all over the world or the platform couchsurfing. If that's too much effort for you, I guess the easiest way is probably still to meet other people at hostels. However, both communities might also come in handy when you're on the hunt for good places to visit or stay or simply if you have generic questions related to your travels.

Alright, that's a wrap. Please take everything I say with a pinch of salt and see it as inspiration rather than advise which is set in stone! As mentioned above: in the end it's always best to go and find out yourself. Definitely more fun as well.

Travel safe but with an open heart.

Thanks

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