

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

Adventure holidays are increasingly more about community encounters and purpose-driven travel, says Laura Miller

Arriving at a noisy, sawdust-strewn carpentry workshop in the small town of Altit in Pakistan's breathtaking Hunza Valley, I observe women of all ages clad in colourful shalwar kameez milling around wearing ear defenders, expertly operating lathes, drills and circular saws.

They are working at Ciqam, a social enterprise set up in 2003 as part of an ongoing female empowerment initiative by the spiritual leader Aga Khan. I am here as part of an all-female trip with Intrepid Travel, which aims to provide an insight into the lives of women, from its teeming capital, Islamabad, to small, rural villages in the far north.

We are led by pioneering tour guide

Aneeqa Ali, who set up her own travel company, The Mad Hatters, in 2017 – the first woman in Pakistan to do so. Over 12 days we visit a range of projects, interacting with inspiring women and exploring landscapes from jagged glaciers to snow-capped peaks and ancient forts on rocky outcrops.

A SOFTER APPROACH

This is the new face of adventure travel. Rather than scaling Mount Kilimanjaro, rafting the rapids on the Colorado River or shark-diving in South Africa, today's traveller is looking for something altogether more considered. According to the World Tourism Organisation, recent statistics have shown that the

UK is the largest adventure tourism market in Europe, with 19% of the world's adventure travel tourists. In addition, a Mintel report from 2025 indicates that around one in 10 UK adults has taken a group touring or adventure holiday in the past five years, with another fifth interested in future group adventures.

"Today's travellers want more than just a standard holiday," affirms Joanna Reeve, General Manager UK and Ireland at Intrepid.

"They want to come away from their trip feeling changed, accomplished, and inspired."

It's safe to say that the trend shows no sign of slowing down, but the word "adventure" has, of late, taken on ►

Pictured: Hunza Valley, Pakistan

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► new meaning. As my trip to Pakistan shows, we don't need to do anything particularly risky to be taken out of our comfort zone.

Travelling to countries once viewed as dangerous or inhospitable, which are now deemed safe by the FCDO, or meeting people you'd never ordinarily interact with, all count too.

Intrepid's trip ticks several boxes when it comes to rising trends, too, including solo travel, female-focused trips, and older travellers.

In my group of four women – who were all travelling alone – the eldest was a well-travelled 69 year old.

"Last year, we saw a 59% rise in bookings for our women's expeditions," says Reeve. "These were created to offer travellers an insight into the daily lives and challenges of women in countries like India, Morocco, and Nepal."

Pictured: (clockwise from top) The Paro Taktsang monastery in Bhutan; a secluded beach in Paraty, Brazil; a hot spring in Iceland; travellers are requesting trips which involve community activities



CULTURAL CONNECTION

The most popular trends in adventure travel are now guided by the wish for more purpose-driven and responsible travel experiences; to give something back; to have a positive impact; and to see how local communities live.

Clare Tobin, CEO of Wild Frontiers says: "More and more, people want to connect with local communities and give back in a meaningful way, whether that's staying in a family-run guesthouse, joining a cookery class in Georgia, or learning traditional felt-making techniques in Kyrgyzstan. These hands-on encounters are becoming as essential to the journey as the landscapes themselves are."

Companies such as Outback Spirit, part of Journey Beyond, support Indigenous communities, such as those in the Kimberley and Arnhem Land in Australia, through employment opportunities, community sponsorships, and partnerships with Indigenous-owned businesses. The

company also employs local interpretive guides, which not only provides guests with an authentic insight into the environment and culture but also helps preserve Indigenous heritage.

THE THRILL OF THE NEW

While today's adventure travellers may not necessarily be looking to reach Mount Everest's basecamp, they're still interested in being active and enjoying activities such as hiking, trekking or e-biking – only in more diverse destinations than the Dolomites, or the Scottish Highlands.

"We're seeing an increasing number of tourists seeking out adventurous projects in unconventional locations," enthuses James Wilcox,

Founder of Untamed Borders.

"This year, we've taken group trekking trips to the Wakhan Corridor in Afghanistan and the Pamir Mountain Lakes region of Tajikistan, and have registered significant interest in our upcoming Zagros Mountains trekking

"Trends are guided by purpose-driven and responsible experiences"



trip, in Iraqi Kurdistan, and our new Yemeni trek.

"In addition, countries which are now making it easier for people to visit have sparked interest. We have added trips to Somalia, Algeria and Mauritania, thanks to the countries' new e-visas."

Themed adventure travel is also on the up. As Iceland Travel's CEO Helgi Eysteinnsson notes: "Travellers have long gravitated to Iceland for an adventurous holiday, but we are now introducing new themed trips to cater to different traveller types, such as noctourism, wellness and digital detoxes."

And softer adventure is attracting those who might not have ordinarily thought themselves as particularly bold or adventurous.

Wayne Perks, MD of Ramble Worldwide, says: "The rise of long-haul, weekend adventure breaks and self-guided itineraries is attracting 50-60 year olds, more solo travellers and niche groups such as female-only departures."

"This reflects a clear market trend: travellers are increasingly seeking holidays that are active, meaningful, and aligned to their lifestyle."

ADVENTURE WITH PURPOSE

Rio and Beyond: Brazil's Hidden

Highlights: Pura Aventura's new and original overland adventure aims to let visitors discover Brazil far beyond the tourist trail. A two-week cultural immersion designed around, and with, local people, it's the first in a series of new trips the sustainable operator is launching to Brazil. pura-aventura.com

Bhutan and India's Himalayas Explored:

Rated moderate, this trekking trip will take clients from Darjeeling's tea plantations to lush rice fields, fragrant cardamom plantations and hill stations. In Bhutan, they'll hike to the cliff-clinging Taksang Palphug Monastery, famously known as Tiger's Nest, in the Paro Valley. rambleworldwide.co.uk

Bear watching and star gazing in

Finland's Wilderness: This six-day journey through Kuhmo and Tulijärvi in Finland's Arctic Taiga promises encounters with wild brown bears, wolverines and caribou, plus stargazing and potential sightings of the Northern Lights. ecttravel.com

Saudi Arabia: Women's Expedition: In Intrepid Travel's increasing portfolio

"More and more, people want to connect with local communities and give back in a meaningful way"

of all-female trips, this takes guests through the country's dramatic landscapes and UNESCO World Heritage sites, introducing them to the diverse lives of Saudi women today. As well as learning traditional recipes and exploring historic cities, they'll unwind at a womens-only beach club on the Red Sea. intrepidtravel.com



LAURA MILLAR

→ The former travel editor of *Metro*, Laura Millar now writes for titles including *The Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail*

Pictured: (clockwise from top) The craggy landscapes around Mawat in Kurdistan, Iraq; a traditional mountain village in Saudi Arabia; bear watching in Finland