

A woman with brown hair, wearing a brown tank top and a patterned camera strap, is holding a camera. She is standing in a city square with a large stone tower and a church with green domes in the background. The scene is set during sunset or sunrise, with a warm, golden light. Other people are visible in the background, some walking and some taking photos.

# Go YOUR OWN Way

'Do-it-yourself'-style adventures can be inherently liberating, but are they for everyone?

WORDS: EMMA GREEN



If you crave convenience, group dynamics or expert-led experiences, a guided tour can still have a lot to offer

**I**n the age of digital booking platforms, real-time reviews and wanderlust-fuelled social media feeds, independent travel has never been more accessible or more popular.

Independent travel is defined as any trip where you're in charge of the itinerary, accommodation and transportation, as opposed to signing up to a package holiday or group tour. This could entail booking everything from scratch yourself or partially working with a travel agent to handle some of the trickier logistics while you take care of the rest. For those who seek autonomy and a fully customised adventure, this approach has clear appeal. However, independent travel possesses both rewards and pitfalls, and being aware of them is key to planning a successful trip.

### THE ALLURE OF INDEPENDENT TRAVEL

One of the major benefits is personalisation. As your own travel agent, you get to build a trip that matches your interests. Whether you're a foodie chasing Michelin stars, an architecture buff exploring Art Nouveau buildings, or someone simply looking for peaceful hiking trails away from the crowds, you can craft a trip around what truly excites you. With a group tour, you're somewhat limited to what the itinerary dictates, and not everyone wants to see five churches in a day or cram in all the tourist hotspots of a particular destination. As an independent traveller, you get to skip the places or activities that don't spark your interest.

Another major reason people opt for independent travel? Freedom. You get to call the shots: when to wake up, where to go, how long to stay, and when to veer off-course if a spontaneous opportunity may arise. For those who like to move at their own pace or change plans on a whim, this kind of flexibility is priceless. Not everyone enjoys the rapid pace of organised tours, which try to pack in as much as possible and there is little time to digest the sights you are seeing. Additionally, not everyone wants to be answerable to a group of strangers or have to wait around for any inconsiderate stragglers.

"Independent travel allows you the possibility to linger longer," says Angela Philp, leadership and resilience coach, and creator of solo travel experience the Pyrenees Vision Quest. "Our lives are overplanned and we always seem to be chasing time and running late. With independent travel, ►



Romanticised Instagram shots and travel blogs make it look effortless, but independent travel requires strategy

If you thrive on control, love planning and value solitude, independent travel could be perfect for you

## TYPES OF TRIP



Being your own travel agent means bypassing the rigid itinerary of a tour group and creating your own bespoke experience

time expands, you get to breathe, explore and linger... and that's profoundly relaxing."

Another built-in benefit of independent travel is privacy, particularly for introverts or travellers who require downtime after a day of exploring.

"You get to choose whether you participate and lean in or whether you get time on your own," says Philp. "There are no expectations and that's remarkably liberating."

For many people, travel is about reflection and personal growth, and independent travel can offer a much-needed opportunity to spend some time in your own company, whenever you feel like it.

Another potential perk is cost control. Contrary to the popular belief that tour groups are cheaper, independent travel can actually be more cost-effective, especially for short breaks or off-season trips. After all, you get to decide your budget per night, select affordable meals, skip pricey excursions and avoid tour markups. Price-comparison tools, flight alerts and last-minute deals can also empower budget-conscious travellers like never before.

Additionally, you're more likely to gain authentic local experiences than if you opted for a group tour or package holiday. Without a pre-set tour dictating your day, you can interact with locals and stumble upon hidden treasures, such as a grandmother selling homegrown olives or a jazz

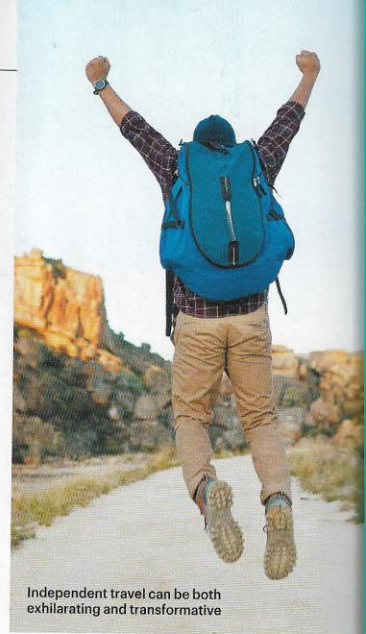
night in a tucked-away Parisian bar. You may also find local gems that don't appear on mass-tour itineraries, either spontaneously or through recommendations from locals or fellow travellers. These unplanned experiences can often become the most memorable parts of any trip.

### WHEN INDEPENDENT TRAVEL IS LESS THAN IDEAL

Despite its ever-growing appeal, independent travel isn't for everyone – or at least, not for every trip.

"I think you know if you have the right personality for independent travel," says Una Wirkebau, who has been travelling solo for decades and whose travel blog, *The World According To Una*, documents her many adventures. "If you don't need set rules in place and enjoy flexibility, are open to change and lack a fear of the unknown, independent travel will be suited to you. But if you don't like making decisions or find speaking to strangers or eating alone intimidating, a guided tour might be more up your alley."

It's also worth noting that booking a trip from scratch requires a considerable amount of planning and effort upfront. Spending hours searching for the best hotel, restaurant or rail route in a sea of options can be a real drawback for those who are busy or easily overwhelmed. Travel agents can eliminate any stress or planning fatigue by



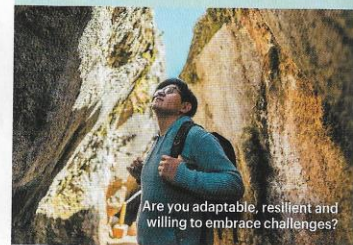
Independent travel can be both exhilarating and transformative

### IS INDEPENDENT TRAVEL FOR YOU?

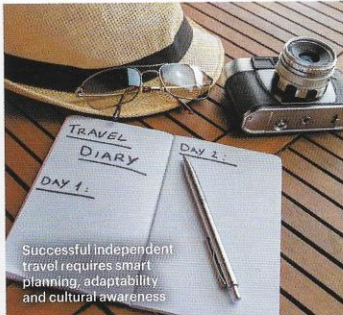
Ask yourself the following questions before booking that solo DIY trip:

- Do I enjoy planning trips and researching destinations?
- Am I comfortable dealing with uncertainty and having to make on-the-go decisions?
- Do I prefer freedom over convenience?
- Can I handle being alone for long periods, or find ways to socialise if I want to?
- Am I confident using maps, public transport and translation apps?
- Do I have a backup plan if anything goes wrong?

If you answered 'yes' to most of these questions, then independent travel could be perfect for you. If not, maybe consider a semi-guided option or enlist the help of a travel agent to handle any tricky bits.



Are you adaptable, resilient and willing to embrace challenges?



Successful independent travel requires smart planning, adaptability and cultural awareness

## TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL INDEPENDENT TRAVEL

While you want flexibility, booking key aspects – such as your accommodation for the first night or long-distance trains – can save you stress and money and provide a safe base from which to explore. Book popular tourist spots in advance but leave space in your itinerary for downtime or detours. Start with the broad strokes first: destinations, major activities, transport links and visa requirements. It is also wise to keep someone informed of your movements. Apps like Polarsteps or simply sharing your itinerary with a friend can offer an added sense of security when travelling alone.

handling all the logistics for you. Group tours can also offer maximum efficiency, especially for those wanting to tick off as many experiences as possible within a limited window of time.

There is also a higher risk of hiccups with independent travel. Mistakes such as booking the wrong train or not realising a museum is closed on Tuesdays are more likely to happen when you're planning everything yourself, and can quickly derail a trip. As the sole travel planner, you have to be completely self-reliant and there's no guide to turn to for help, which can put a lot of unnecessary pressure on yourself.

Judith Hamilton of Hamilton Horizons, an independent travel agent and tour operator, says that one of the perks of using a travel agent is the protection that they can provide.

"A good agent ensures their clients' bookings and hard-earned cash are fully protected," she says. "Independent travel often doesn't provide full protection, putting travellers at risk of losing their money or being stranded abroad."

*Independent travel builds confidence that lasts long after your return flight lands*

A travel agent can also dispense much-needed assistance if needed.

"A good agent will support their clients all through the process, including when they are in their destination," she explains. "Should anything go wrong during a trip, an agent is there to help resolve any issues quickly, and clients can then get back to enjoying their holiday."

Booking everything yourself also means you forgo the chance for insider knowledge. Tour guides often impart historical context or local insight that you may miss on your own. In less tourist-

friendly regions, having a tour leader who is fluent in the local language or customs can be invaluable. Travel agents can also bestow specialist advice.

"Agents are experts in their field and have insider knowledge about

destinations, activities, accommodation and flight routes," says Hamilton. "Agents also have personal relationships with suppliers, and often have access to special rates, free upgrades, perks and packages that aren't available to the public."

Although all travel comes with risk, independent travel tends to be less safe than organised tours. Some destinations may be less suited to independent travel due to political instability, or can be more dangerous for certain demographics,



Preparing for potential hiccups is crucial if you plan to go it alone

such as women or LGBTQIA+ travellers. In these circumstances, travelling with a group or a tour leader might be safer.

## FINDING MIDDLE GROUND

It's important to remember that you don't have to dive in headfirst when it comes to embracing independent travel. Hybrid travel is becoming increasingly common and many seasoned travellers blend the two, using agents for long-haul flights or accommodations, while organising the rest. Others book small, local experiences within an otherwise unstructured trip. The beauty of modern travel is that it can be whatever you want it to be and this blend of structure and freedom can provide the perfect balance for travellers wanting to tiptoe into their first foray with independent travel.

Independent travel is about more than skipping the group tour. It's about the empowerment that comes from navigating unfamiliar places, solving problems and learning as you go.

"Independent travel will change your life in a way that group travel never could," says Philips. "It helps to stretch our limits, find our own sense of intuition and reconnect with ourselves. This is something you can't do on a tightly planned tour."

Yes, you might get lost or order the wrong dish but you'll also get to see sunsets that no tour guide could plan, meet people that no itinerary could factor in, and build confidence that lasts long after your return flight lands. That is the reward for owning your own journey. 41