

SOLO TRAVEL AND LOVE

Love and travel makes for a great partnership, but you don't need me to tell you that. Social media overflows with #relationshipgoals: beautiful, bronzed couples stood side by side underneath waterfalls in Bali; sprawled across beaches in Australia; casting Insta-perfect smiles to the distance during sundown in the Maldives. Images of an impossible lifestyle catapulted figures like Alexis Ren and Jay Alvarez — some of the first to recognise profit in the business of love & travel — into the realm of online stardom. The super-photogenic couple were Instagram's OG loved-up, world-travelling couple, and made a fortune off of visiting exotic locations, spawning hundreds of thousands of copycat accounts in the process. Unsurprisingly, people love the idea that your 'soulmate' makes for the best travel companion. Aesthetically, it sells. These profiles continue to pop into existence by the hour — some of them genuine attempts by young travellers to build a record of authentic adventure and romance, others merely flaunting a sponsored fairytale of days lived out under the sun. Anyone with half a brain should know that these popular accounts portray a lifestyle that is totally unrealistic and never the full picture, but there's a reason why they're popular. There *is* truth to the idea that traveling with your partner can be the best experience ever, and being in a relationship certainly doesn't mean you have to tame your adventurous spirit.

The reality, however, is certainly more nuanced than what Instagram shows. While it's true that being in a relationship doesn't mean you have to tame your adventurous spirit, that's not necessarily because you bring your partner along to everything. It's because you can — and, in my opinion, should — leave each other to go your separate ways every now and then.

I've always had an overwhelming need for autonomy. I crave space. I think it's important to be alone sometimes — and to know *how* to be alone, always — because being alone provides vital perspective that strengthens your relationships with and empathy for other people. Liking my space doesn't mean that by default I thus dislike space shared — I just think that there's a time and a place for both, and you need one to be able to relish the other. And that's exactly how I feel about traveling with other people versus solo, too.

You can learn amazing things about someone else when you travel; some you like, some you may not. But the things you learn about yourself when you travel alone are invaluable.

I don't need to elaborate on the list of gains because they're obvious: global perspective, experience, independence, introspective study, personal growth. You can build friendships across the gulf of race, culture, background, and upbringing, making profound personal connections with the people you meet and the places you go as well as with yourself. On another level, it's nice to step away sometimes from a daily life that is largely shared with others and just do *you*.

And that's what we've realised. We now live in "the age of individualised, experiential and aspirational travel", a time that is every bit as exhausting and rewarding as it sounds. Millennials not only travel more, but know exactly what they want: bucket lists have been made, reviews had been read, and a full grasp on personal travel preferences is had. People know what they're looking for in accommodations and destinations, and are aware of their limits when it comes to group trips. Gone is the 'one size fits all' approach of yore: we're no longer expected to express equal enjoyment and satisfaction at the same thing. Sure, some couples are 100% holiday compatible. Some aren't. Either way, I believe the best way to take your holidays as a couple nowadays is to plan a few major ones together, but give each other leeway to plan trips alone or with friends on the side – think of them as necessary side dishes.

A recent TravelZoo survey found that 60% of British solo travellers are in relationships, while 43% of those heading off unaccompanied on a city break, hiking trip or yoga retreat are married. This is evidence of significant ideological progress, not only in how we travel but in our relationships too. We're determined to spend precious annual leave and hard earned cash on experiences that relax us and inspire us, and nothing less.

Love and travel go hand-in-hand because sometimes they choose not to. You *can* have it both ways. The guy I'm seeing is about to pop off to Canada for two weeks, a place I've dreamt of going since I was little. Am I jealous? Hideously. Do I hope he has the time of his life and finds his best travel companion in himself? Absolutely.

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