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ap by my side in my leaf-green rental Volvo, I followed the well-marked road signs to North Lindberg, a tiny hamlet of no more than a dozen farms. The radio blared Swedish pop tunes, and the fragrance of sun-warmed wildflowers wafted through the open window. I was on a

grand adventure that had taken me far from my home and family in Seattle.

Like an increasing number of women these days, I've realized it's important for me to follow my passions, even if it means traveling to distant locations on my own.

My particular passion is Swedish folk culture—the dance, music and art of this gorgeous country that my great-grandfather Axel called home. I was in the province of Dalarna, treasure-hunting for *dalahäst*, the carved, painted horses emblematic of Sweden. The road swept around bends and over rises with picturesque red houses, white lace curtains at the windows and horses grazing in meadows.

I parked at the edge of the pine forest outside Bosse's Träslöjd (woodworking shop) and was ushered into Bosse's tidy studio. A flax-blue horse with gilt mane and tail had a tiny shell at its neck. Bosse explained that it reminded him of the sea where he grew up, on Sweden's west coast. Another, an ivory mare with gold swirls and a bell, was patterned after his own Shetland pony, *Blända*.

As we shared tales of growing up with horses, Bosse invited me to join him and his wife the next day to visit a herd of horses at a nearby *fäbod* (summer farm).

Of course, I said, "Yes!" When traveling solo, opportunities such as this happen much more readily than when traveling with others. I've traveled solo for many years and have had numerous remarkable experiences that stemmed from meeting the locals.

While solo travel seems like something only adventurous young women do, you don't have to be young and single; in fact, I'm middle-aged, with a husband and young daughter. While I enjoy frequent travels with my husband, he recognizes that an occasional solo trip fills a need for me to follow my personal interests.

There are many benefits to going it alone: Drawing on your own resources while traveling helps build confidence that serves you well throughout life. You can do exactly what you most enjoy each day—no need to accommodate someone else's schedule. Locals are more likely to welcome you into their world when you travel solo. And I guarantee you'll return home to daily life reinvigorated.

Beth Whitman, author of *Wanderlust and Lipstick: The Essential Guide for Women Traveling Solo*, went on a nine-week, 7,000-mile solo motorcycle trip through Mexico and Central America. Through careful planning and by following her intuition, Whitman had a safe journey and amazed herself with her courage. In the process, she challenged her own and others' perceptions of what's possible for a woman traveling by herself.

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traveling solo

Women discover the joys of the open road—alone

BY LESLIE FORSBERG

“It was the biggest dream I had ever had,” she says. “I thought it, dreamt it, ate it, breathed it. Nothing was going to stop me.”

Lori Talcott, a master goldsmith whose jewelry designs embrace ancient techniques (her works can be found at the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s Renwick Gallery and the Tacoma Art Museum), recently hiked Norway’s Pilgrim’s Path, from Oslo to the shrine of St. Olav, in Trondheim’s Nidaros Cathedral. She backpacked 400 miles in 29 days, through farm fields and over the Dovrefjell mountain range, to Norway’s west coast.

Talcott did her trek solo, as a meditative journey; she found it inspiring to travel a path taken by so many for thousands of years. “The concept of pilgrimage was a major part of medieval life, and I’ve always been interested in art history,” she says. “The roots of the word ‘pilgrim’ come from the Latin *per* (through) and *ager* (land). I started to think about what you take and what you leave behind when you walk out into the world. Traveling the Pilgrim’s Path brought together these elements,” Talcott says.

Occasional obstacles are inherent in solo travel. But the chance to confront and overcome these challenges helps women travelers develop personal strength.

Talcott’s trial took the form of a 600-pound rogue male muskox, pawing the ground and snorting, dark eyes boring into her, when she rounded a thicket on a steep hillside above Drivdalen (Driva Valley). With a cliff face on one side and a 3-foot drop-off on the other, there was only one place to go: straight down. Stepping off the ledge, she clung to U-shaped birch trees, then picked her way around the beast.

Experiences gained when traveling alone are more vivid. There’s nothing to distract you from the “here and now.” One of these moments of sweet intensity arose for me while visiting Bingsjöståmman, one of Sweden’s largest folk festivals, deep in the birch woods of eastern Dalarna. On a hot summer day, I strode through a sea of picnicking people as children in colorful folk costumes played fiddles for coins tossed into their fiddle cases.

I found a grassy spot in the shade. Swallows cut invisible ribbons in the air as a young man with dark locks falling over his eyes played fiery fiddle tunes that spoke of longing. Next up, a slip of a girl with flaxen hair, wearing jeans and a wide belt, sang of the wind while accompanied by a boy blowing softly into the microphone. The whisper swelled as, one by one, instruments—fiddles, a bazouki and percussion—joined in, until it became rollicking, percussive jazz-rock.

It’s the perfect analogy for solo travel: It begins as a quiet, contemplative experience, then, infused with newfound friends and unanticipated adventures, it swells to become a vibrant, melodious whole to be savored long after. **■**



Houses in Sweden’s folk province of Dalarna are typically painted red, with white trim.

TOP 10 TIPS FOR Solo Travelers

1. Learn some of the local language. You’ll gain respect, and others will be more likely to assist or befriend you.
2. Ask friends before you leave for introductions to their friends in the places where you’ll be traveling.
3. Consider traveling beyond the big cities and tourist attractions. The locals will welcome you, and you’ll have a richer experience.
4. When you arrive in a town, ask about any security concerns at the local tourism office.
5. Youth hostels in Europe draw people of all ages; they’re safe and great for meeting other travelers.
6. Get to know the hotel/hostel/B&B managers; they’ll give you great insider tips on things to do and see and will often lend assistance if you face any difficulties.
7. Showing interest in locals is a great way to meet people and you’ll learn something in the process.
8. Use your instincts about whom to trust and, if it feels safe, take up that offer of a meal or sightseeing outing.
9. Take small gifts from your hometown and photos to share with new friends.
10. The best combination safety tip and way to make friends: Show confidence and smile. —L.F.