

Girls Wanna Have Fun Too

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For women executives, solo travel has its own joy. But there are also challenges, ranging from loneliness to safety

CONSPICUOUS BY their presence at airport lounges are laptop-toting women off on a business trip, usually, all by themselves. When it comes to deciding who should travel, the gender divide at companies seems to be a blurred line now. What are beyond dispute, however, are the unique set of challenges, especially security concerns, faced by women travelling on business. Not that any of these are a deterrent, but being safe rather than sorry seems to be the mantra for these women.

Well-informed Is Well-prepared

"There have been learnings about travelling alone over time, but I know how to be well-prepared for even new places now. I do my homework about a place I am visiting to avoid any surprises. I would research my hotel well, how to get to the hotel from the airport, the weather, customs regulations and other important things," says Satyavati Berera, Executive Director of PricewaterhouseCoopers, India. Adds Smita Yograj, heading corporate communications at Tecnova India: "I plan my business tour extensively before travelling. My motto is 'plan your trip beforehand for a safe journey.'"

Being Safe On Arrival

Without exception, everyone avoids late night arrivals into any city. "While I don't feel insecure when travelling, I must say, I don't feel very comfortable either. I always like to land at a decent time; companies can ensure all trips are scheduled at convenient times," says Saroj Sridhar, CEO of Feedback Business Consulting.

Recounting an experience that taught her lessons for the future, Mani Lamba, Account Director at Adfactors



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Public Relations, says: "I had a harrowing experience when my train reached at two in the night in a city I had never visited before. Thankfully, I knew someone locally whom I could call to pick me up. Since then I make sure not to land in unfamiliar territory when it's dark; scheduling a morning or afternoon arrival can be safe, discounting for a delay of a few hours."

Settling Into The Hotel

Even when women stay in well-located, quality hotels, they may not always feel comfortable being alone. "In hotels, it is not the insecurity so much as the silence that gets you; one tends to switch on the TV to make it less lonely," says

Sridhar. "I keep all doors locked, and retire to bed early," adds Swati Piramal, Director of Nicholas Piramal, India.

Keeping these and other concerns in mind, hotel chains like the Marriott, Hilton and ITC Welcomgroup have introduced women-only-floors. "Some properties have special floors only for women, where even the housekeeping and room service staff are women," says Khushnooma Kapadia, Director, Marketing and Communications of Marriott Group of Hotels, India.

Avoiding the unwanted and undesirable attention of men weighs topmost on the minds of women travelling alone. "Propositioning by men when they see you alone happens many times. Lewd remarks and gestures are never far



PLAYING IT SAFE:
Swati Piramal, director
of Nicholas Piramal,
keeps her distance
during overseas
business trips

ensuring women play it safe when going about town. "I have heard about cases of muggings during late hours in Washington DC on a roundabout I pass by on the way back to my hotel from office; so I avoid being out late. It helps that my hotel is close to my office," says Minakshi Seth, heading communications for the South Asia region for the International Finance Corporation. Being out late night all by themselves is definitely a no-no for most women.

"If there is no choice but to be out late, I ensure I am escorted by one of our staff or a trustworthy driver," says Bhavna Sood, Chief of Corporate Communications at Dharampal Satyapal Group.

"Most of the time, I avoid interacting with strangers, prefer carrying travellers' cheques, don't wear heavy jewellery, keep a set of extra batteries, make sure the cellphones are fully charged and keep some money in an outside pocket to avoid fumbling through my bag for tips and other expenses. I stick to crowds to be inconspicuous and usually stand in a group while waiting for a cab," says Yograj of Tecnova.

Agrees Srinivasan when she says, "The right body language is very important; one should not call for unnecessary attention and expose oneself more than necessary. Our company's administration department always knows the number of the car we use and driver's name, and intimates us, too; in most cases they also dictate the route to be taken to avoid use of deserted roads."

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away," says Lamba. According to Vidhya Srinivasan, Chief Operating Officer at Integrated Brand-comm, "Men are always inquisitive, especially older men, but most of them are nice. If you carry yourself confidently and behave business-like, nobody dares to misbehave." "Travelling is a mixed bag of experience. One just needs to present oneself with confidence and carry oneself well while out alone. Men do differentiate and understand your personality, and it is on us how we portray ourselves," add Sapna Aggarwal, Director Human Resources of GlobalLogic.

Staying Secure

Experience and advice from colleagues go a long way in

Pubbing And Dining

"A negative of travelling alone is that one is confined to having dinner in the room only," says Piramal. True for many women who avoid going out to have meals and drinks all by themselves, except at coffee shops and speciality restaurants; they feel being alone in a bar immediately could expose them to being propositioned by strangers. Of course, with friends or colleagues, anything goes.

"I do go to a restaurant, or even a pub, by myself, but I don't venture out of the hotel I stay in. I enjoy sitting quietly in a non-smoking corner observing people, how they dress, what they talk, how they behave. It is as good as reading a book and the experience can range from entertaining to enriching and insightful. I even take a book to read while dining," says Srinivasan.

Travel may not always come easy for women, but they make sure the precautions makes it all worth it.

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