



GETAWAY

GO IT ALONE AND BECOME YOUR OWN BEST TRAVEL PARTNER.

BY ALISON MILLER

T

o whoever thought a to-do list could neatly exist on an 8-by-3-inch sliver of paper hanging on the refrigerator... you have clearly never experienced what I call “the pull.”

One day you’re a carefree 22-year-old, and then *whoosh*, you have a spouse, a child, a dog, a house, a car and a career. And you love them all.

But attached to each of these beloved extensions of you are gripping tentacles of need so strong, so persistent, you are often literally—as is the case when I’m walking the dog and holding the hand of my 3-year-old—pulled in multiple directions at the same time.

My to-do list? A complex ledger with the column headings Work, Groceries, Home, Other.

Don’t get me wrong, I like my life. But the other day when an editor asked me to answer a series of questions about myself for the contributor’s page, I was befuddled. Best gift received? Couldn’t tell you what I got for Christmas. Favorite board game? I think I used to play Scrabble, you know, before evenings were a cacophonous parade of mealtime, playtime, bath-time and book time that ends with a graceless collapse on the couch.

It’s time, I realize, to hang out with me—the real me—just like I did in the old days.

If that kind of focus can help me reel in a 22-inch trout, what could I do if I did one thing at a time, all the time?

Sitting down with Google Maps, I ponder what the real me needs at the age of 33, settling on a simple prescription: the outdoors, good food, a soft bed in a room devoid of toddler toys. Of the multitude of scenic driving-distance destinations North Carolina offers, Bryson City, a small town with a river running through it and the Great Smoky Mountains rising in the not-too-far-off distance, sticks out. After searching for local activities, a challenge-and-reward theme begins to form. By day, I’ll do something I’m scared of or not so good at. Then I’ll have a fabulous meal and retire to a luxurious hotel.

So on an unseasonably warm Tuesday in late February, I start driving until the road snakes and the cell signal drops—an apt prelude to my first destination: a mysterious site called The Road to Nowhere.

BEST PRACTICES

Lifelong traveler and former diplomat and foreign correspondent Leyla Giray Alyanak helps women travel smart, safe and solo by sharing her own experiences on WomenOnTheRoad.com. Here are her tips for first-time solo travelers.

DO YOUR RESEARCH. Knowing about your destination is your best travel investment.

MAKE A PLAN. But be prepared to throw it away when a better alternative comes along.

SHARE YOUR TRAVEL ITINERARY. Leave all your contact addresses with a trusted friend or relative at home.

DARE TO DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY. Take advantage of being on your own.

LEAVE FEAR AT HOME. Solo travel is no more or no less dangerous than any other kind of travel.

BEWARE OF OVER-PACKING. Remember, you’ll be carrying it all yourself.

MEET LOCALS. Ask about their favorite dishes and trust them.

LOOK CONFIDENT AND USE COMMON SENSE. No need to tell the world you’re traveling solo.

TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS. If something doesn’t feel right, it probably isn’t right.

BE OPEN TO NEW EXPERIENCES. That’s why you travel, after all.

Remains of a never-completed scenic byway, the eerie, dark tunnel delivers hikers to a network of quiet trails.

I zip my jacket and venture into the cool, dank darkness. It’s early afternoon, but the 1,200-foot-long tunnel is nearly pitch black. Fear ripples through me.

I’m one of the lucky ones: I go through my life mostly unafraid. I couldn’t tell you the last time my heartbeat sped up out of fright. But for the five minutes I spend alone in that dark, unfamiliar place, I am downright terrified. Then another sensation creeps up, one I haven’t felt in quite some time: I feel wide awake and wholly alive.

I’ve hiked a lot, but rarely by myself, and soon I realize there’s a certain can-do confidence that comes with going alone. It’s not long before the pride of self-reliance kicks my uncertainty aside, and I break into a confident stride. After 4 miles, I turn a corner and meet the tunnel’s cavernous endpoint once again. I rustle through my backpack for the car keys, startling an emerging couple. “You scared me!” the woman says, catching her breath. “You’re out here alone? You’re so much braver than I am.”

I shake it off with a laugh and a smile. But having finished the hike with no wrong turns or run-ins with wild animals leaves me feeling

pretty damn good. I march through the darkness without looking back.

Back in Bryson City, I settle into a stately room overlooking Main Street at The Everett Hotel. The king-size bed, covered in a wrinkle-less white down duvet, bears no fewer than eight pillows. A plush bathrobe greets me from the closet.

When I walk into the restaurant downstairs, a slim, gray-ponytailed man holds court at the bar, regaling the bartender with the story of his dog Beau's recent run-in with the business end of a skunk. I soon learn that in addition to being an accomplished annihilator of skunk odor, John oversees construction of local homes, practices massage therapy and deals cards of destiny—a discipline involving numerology, astrology and symbology.

I down a cup of curried pumpkin soup and then slice into a chicken pesto crepe. John asks, "When's your birthday?" I tell him. "Aha," he says, leaning back to ruminate. "That's the three of clubs, the writer's card," he continues. "Threes of clubs have tremendous creativity and are in need of expression."

"Sounds about right," I say between sips of wine.

"And of course, being a Virgo, your ruling planet is Mercury, so you have quick-moving energy," he adds. "Movement is good for the three of clubs."

I order dessert and ask for two plates, one for me and my newfound spiritual adviser.

The next morning, I wake up to gray skies and falling rain. "We fish in all conditions," Eugene, my fly-fishing guide, tells me on the phone. I hop into Eugene's work vehicle, a mud-slung, dust-covered Hummer H2 with the words *Fly Fishing the Smokies* emblazoned on the sides.

There's a timeless and useful adage: Surround yourself with people who are smarter than you. This is especially true when fly-fishing. Lucky for me, I hired the best. Eugene Shuler grew up in these mountains. The Tuckasegee River is his playground. He's held numerous titles, won countless trophies and guided some 4,000 aspiring anglers. I've been fly-fishing twice. He'll have his work cut out for him.

"I want to get a feel for the water, see what they're biting," Eugene says. He casts a line and before I even even spot where it lands, there's a fish on the end.

So begins our four hours of fly-fishing. Me slowly relearning the roll cast, him whisper-yelling, "Mend... mend... set!" Me failing to recognize the subtle pull of a trout nibble, yanking the rod to the right, half a second too late.

And then something clicks. My arm relaxes, my grip loosens, my wrist remembers the gentle flick. Over and over, I cast the line and stare at that tiny floating puffball cruising downstream with such exacting focus that I hold my breath and forget to blink. "Get ready," my river guru whispers. And I hook one.



Eugene scoops up the fish with his net and excitement washes over me. "How big do you think it is?" I ask, breathless and bubbling.

"Well, this net is 22 inches and..."

He holds a hand under the fish. Its body stretches nearly the length of the net. I hold that shining rainbow trout in front of me just long enough for Eugene to snap a photo. Instagram doesn't lie—I was beaming.

Not until I sit down at the sandwich shop in town do I realize just how exhausted I am. At home, my focus tends to be fractalized, kaleidoscopic. I don't know if my attention—more than that, my entire brain and body—has ever been so precisely fixed on a single thing for that long. If that kind of focus can help me reel in a 22-inch trout, what could I accomplish if I did one thing at a time, all the time?

5 UNDENIABLE BENEFITS OF SOLO TRAVEL

1. You learn how to be alone with your thoughts.
2. You gain confidence.
3. You meet new people.
4. You'll discover new things and experiences you enjoy.
5. You're the master of your schedule.

I recall an article I'd read a few days before about how young kids, forced to sit still for too many hours during school, are growing up with a marginalized sense of balance. In other words, they are so out of touch with their own physicality that they topple over like Weebles. As the parent of a 3-year-old, this evolutionary hiccup is alarming. Walking through the woods on another solo hike the following day, without teetering, I can't stop thinking about it.

When I left for Bryson City, my family and I were two weeks away from leaving our suburban Charlotte home to run a small inn in Windham, New York, a Catskill Mountains town of just 1,700 year-round residents. Although the nearest supermarket would be 13 miles away, unbridled nature would be instantly accessible in every direction. Cradled by the powerful quietude that can only be found outside, I feel more than ever that we're making the right decision—one that will allow me to retreat to the natural world easily, when the to-do list gets unwieldy or the can-do confidence wears thin. When "the pull" yanks too hard, I promise myself, I'll reel it in.

It took traveling alone to understand that I can't be the best version of myself without occasionally setting everything aside and checking in with that self: challenging it, rewarding it, allowing it to prove its mettle, sharpening its focus, and giving it the space to ponder its next move, which I realized, is best done on your own two feet. ♦

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