

Finding a safety net in the experiences of the unknown

 **pink pangea**
the community for women travelers (Miranda Bogen)

Through my own adventures, I realized women needed a great resource for traveling abroad

• RACHEL SALES

When I was 18, I headed to Israel to spend the summer volunteering on a kibbutz. This had been a rite of passage in my family. I'd grown up hearing stories about my father's experience on Kibbutz Mahanayim, where he once witnessed a chicken run around without its head, and my mother's experience on Kibbutz Mishmar Hanegev, where she was paid in chocolate and cigarettes.

I expected my adventure to include anecdotes like these – as well as working in the fields, meeting young people like me from all over the world, and practicing my Hebrew. But my experience on a kibbutz in the northern Galilee was nothing like that. When I look back on all the mistakes I made that summer, I realize that they gave me the foundation I needed to become a strong female traveler.

It was on the kibbutz that summer that I learned how to size up a driver before hopping into any old hitchhike on the side of the road; I learned that it's essential to develop trusting relationships before drinking too much in a crowd; I learned how to set boundaries when traveling with a guy friend; and I learned how one amazing adventure abroad only fuels the fire for more.

Each summer and winter break, I continued to travel throughout the world – and though I thoroughly planned for each trip, I discovered that as a female traveler, I always faced unexpected challenges along the way. On a trip to Fez, Morocco, I found that my jeans and sweaters didn't stop people from ogling me, so I purchased a *jallabiyah* in the local market to cover up. In Kiev, Ukraine, I heard that intercity overnight trains could be dangerous for solo women travelers, so I canceled my trip to Odessa. While volunteering in Beersheba, I found that a local Israeli student wasn't just helping me build the website I'd promised a nonprofit because he cared about Russian immigrants; instead, he was trying to hook up with me.

When I landed a job at MASA Israel in New York, I found a community where we used to hear about women's escapades all the time. I used to joke with my co-worker, Jaelyn Mishal, that we should create a guide for women about dating in Israel.

Then we realized it wasn't a joke after all. We realized women travelers really needed a great resource for traveling abroad. Throughout my trips, I'd wished I'd had a place to connect with other women travelers and ask them about their experiences abroad.

That's how Pink Pangea, the community for women travelers, was born. On Pink Pangea, women all over the world have shared their travel experiences, writing about the challenges they've faced, the obstacles they've overcome, the beautiful places they've seen – inspiring other women to get out there and see the world.

The writer is co-founder of www.pinkpangea.com, the community for women travelers.



RACHEL SALES in the Black Desert, Egypt, in May 2007. (Courtesy Rachel Sales)

Looking tough in Cairo

• JACQUELYN OESTERBLAD

When things get tough in other parts of the world, they have bread riots; in Egypt, we are having felaful riots.

Not literally, of course. There are many things conspicuously missing from Cairo at present – most notably a reliable police force and a functioning constitution – but there does still appear to be enough food to go around. I never would have guessed that, though, when I walked to the neighborhood felaful stand around noon yesterday and saw more than two dozen men clamoring past each other, waving scraps of paper in the face of the (incredibly stressed) old man who was working the counter. He was working frantically, his movements like those machines in the cartoons – dials spinning madly and parts shaking until they inevitably explode. Protestations broke out from the crowd every time he took a new slip, and as he yelled back, I could hear the strain in his voice from having lived too many years in this city.

I paid, took my slip of paper, and walked out some five minutes later with three felaful sandwiches. Sometimes there are advantages to the way I stick out in a crowd, like when the starved mob makes room for you at the front of the crowd. But usually, not so much. Usually, walking around Cairo with a shock of blond hair sticking up off your head is not an advantage at all.

Female travelers to Egypt have been warned for years about the sexual harassment, and it's only gotten worse since Hosni Mubarak's fall and the lack of a strong state presence. Catcalls abound on the streets of almost every country in the world, including America (and, for that matter, Morocco), but the celebrity of Egypt's harassment problem is testament to its magnitude. Walking the streets of Cairo is like nothing I've experienced in my life.

I walk downtown twice a week to teach English at a refugee services organization; on my way there, I walk alone during the dusk rush hour, and coming back, a friend and I walk together in the dark. It's a crowded route. Our recorded av-

erage is one incident per 24 seconds, and while most incidents manifest themselves as a mere, “Welcome!” from an ogling and thoroughly unwelcoming teenager who never feels a need to greet our male colleagues, it runs the gambit up to groping or blocking one’s path forward. And it starts to add up. It is draining. It is annoying. And sometimes, it is darn near terrifying.

Knowing that you’re constantly being watched is a strange feeling; you don’t know how to carry yourself. It’s like constantly feigning a candid photo, or like being around a person you’re really attracted to. You don’t know where to put your hands, how to balance on your hips, the best way to tilt your head. Except you’re not posing for a picture or a love interest in a way that says, “Please find me beautiful”; you’re posing for some hated jerkwad in a way that says, “Eff off.”

I have perfected what I call my “bitch face” and my “aggressively late for an appointment” walk, and I have learned to never break out of it for any reason. Walking along the corniche in Alexandria a few weeks ago, I saw the most adorable young boy fishing alongside his dad, the sunset illuminating them both in profile. I allowed myself a smile at the sight. The dad saw me, elbowed the boy, and this kid – this eight-year-old child – clicked his tongue and yelled something unfit to print at me.

So I don’t smile in public anymore. Ever.

But I’m not Egyptian. I don’t have the slightest understanding of the effects of such an environment on Egyptian women; I’m still recovering from the idea of a 10 p.m. curfew, parental permission to leave on weekends, and male maintenance workers being led into the female wing by a maid yelling, “Man on the floor!” at the top of her lungs. There is a culture of sexual dynamics here that I can never hope to fully comprehend. And I have nobody to ask because I have no female Egyptian friends.

Almost none of my students are women. There are rarely women in the cafes or on the streets; women don’t work in the drink stands or drive the cabs or refill the coals in a shisha. Even inside the walls of my university, the girls in my classes never talk to strangers, and on what basis would I initiate the conversation when we don’t even greet each other with a smile? It’s hard to selectively deprogram “bitch face” when you were born learning how to make it.

To be honest, I would have no Egyptian friends at all if it weren’t for the young men who approach me out of the blue in the library or at a cafe, obviously hoping to date me but who nonetheless stick around after I shut that down. And isn’t that just harassment by another name?

There are no women on the streets of Egypt because the streets of Egypt are not safe for women. And the streets of Egypt are not safe for women because it’s so rare to spot a woman there. Whichever direction the causal relationship runs, however ingrained the culture of harassment is – something has to give. Because “bitch face” is turning me into a bitch. ■

The writer hails from Arizona, where she is studying for her BA in politics and the Middle East. She left Cairo in July following the military takeover, but she hopes to return in the near future. For now, she’s happy working as an intern in the US House of Representatives and watching Arabic movies in her oh-so-rare blocks of spare time.



JACQUELYN OESTERBLAD gets local with a head-covering in the Egyptian desert. (Jacquelyn Oesterblad)

MANDI SCHMITT jumps from a cliff during her travels in India. (Mandi Schmitt)



Defend yourself against assault in India

• MANDI SCHMITT

“You have very beautiful eyes.” And with that statement, seemingly innocent and complimentary, the whole context of my conversation with the Indian man sitting next to me was immediately altered from a friendly exchange aboard an overnight bus to Bangalore to a heart-stopping, potentially threatening situation.

By itself, this incident seems perfectly harmless. And it’s tough and unfair to automatically jump to conclusions when one of the beauties of traveling is meeting and communicating with strangers. But after three months of living and traveling throughout India, after three months of the unrelenting inability to blend in as a white Western woman, and after three months of frequent sexual harassment and molestation, I was on my guard. Big time.

During my stay in southern India, I, and many of the female volunteers with whom I was acquainted, had experienced multiple instances of uncomfortable staring, catcalling, marriage proposals, unwelcome cameras flashing in our faces, and groping. Fortunately, to my knowledge, nothing worse happened. But these occurrences were enough to keep us all on edge, even when we wore modest clothing and traveled in groups. To be constantly vigilant about protecting yourself from the wide varieties of threats is not only exhausting, it diminishes your ability to fully immerse yourself in your surroundings.

To immerse yourself requires you to have trust in people, and sometimes that just isn’t safe. Most of my bad experiences occurred while traveling alone via bus, especially on overnight trips. I did my best always to have at least one travel companion, and I highly recommend making sure you are with another person on long, overnight bus or train trips throughout India. If you are unable to do this, try to find a seat next to a woman or one in which you can easily get away. If this is not possible, and you find yourself next to a man and/or in an uncomfortable situation, do not let your fears control you. Be forceful and loud. Even if he doesn’t understand what you’re saying, he will understand your angry facial expressions, and

your raised voice will attract the attention of other people. This should be enough to make him back off and leave you alone.

Being in a country in which you don’t understand the language, that has a tendency to discriminate against women, and that has unfamiliar laws and police force structure is unbelievably intimidating. When I was attacked, I felt like I didn’t have any way to report the crime or seek punishment for the man who had violated me. I felt entirely alone and defenseless, and that is a difficult thing to come to terms with. Upon returning to America, I felt like I could finally fully relax and breathe in a way that was impossible in India.

Although these are some unnerving and disturbing realities, it is important not to throw in the towel and forgo any future travels. Being the independent, adventuresome woman I am, I don’t want to adjust my travel plans in the name of misogyny and sexism. That would be akin to letting discrimination win, and I can’t stand for that. You shouldn’t let a few bad experiences prevent you from enjoying all the beautiful things the world has to offer. It is important to be aware of the issues and potential hazards to which you could be subjecting yourself, but that doesn’t mean you have to hide in the confines of your comfort zone.

Since my stay in India, I am still somewhat anxious when I find myself in situations with strange men and am extremely wary when it comes to a man making physical contact with me. It is something that will unfortunately always stay with me. But the fact that in less than a month I’m packing up my backpack and heading to southeast Asia for three months – and solo traveling for some of the time – proves my resiliency and desire to give the world another chance. ■

The writer always knew that a sedentary lifestyle wasn’t for her, and she’s made it her life’s ambition never to stop exploring. For the past six years, she has made her way around the world, studying, working, backpacking, volunteering, and always writing. She now resides in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, volunteering and freelance writing.