

The girls' guide to travel survival

We all know that women make the best travellers (guys: letters to the usual address, please), but who couldn't use a little extra know-how and confidence before setting off into the unknown? From basic bushcraft to Pill problems, here's our 5-step guide to being a travelling superwoman ▶



1 Learn some bush skills

Sarah Baxter unearths top tips for women travellers on a girls-only survival course

Just call me Raymona Mears. For I'm off into deepest, darkest, er... Sussex, to join a day-long bushcraft course.

I'm not here to skin rabbits or learn to make a life raft out of a juniper berry – it's not often my travels drive me to such extremes. But knowing a bit more about coping in the natural world increases confidence – always a handy trait when travelling. And this course is for girls only, mixing outdoor survival with female-friendly advice in an atmosphere unblemished by male 'I want to play with that knife' bravado. And it sounded like fun...

Time: 09:24 Like a proper girl, fashion is my first concern. In a clearing up ahead a clump of khaki-clad instructors are camouflaging into the trees. I look at my bright red jacket and realise I stick out a mile. Mistake number one? Or cunning plan to be more visible in a survival situation? The latter, I decide, as bush man Wayne runs through our coppice's code of conduct.

Top tip: Consider the environment. Pack out loo paper, don't start a blaze in a forest-fire risk area and don't take all your fuel from trees closest to camp.

09:39 Briefing over, we start with knives. After some safety lessons we're set loose in the woods to fell hazel and make our own tent pegs. I've never been one for seizing the opportunity to chop stuff – I would usually leave that to my boyfriend. But in the absence of other males, I find I'm rather enjoying making cross cuts and carving pointy bits. I feel an inordinate sense of pride at my peg.

Top tip: A knife is one of the most essential bits of bush and travel kit – you won't need (or be allowed to travel with) a blade longer than about 7cm, adequate for whittling tent pegs, cutting picnic cheese, etc. Just don't pack it in your hand luggage.

10:46 There's hot chocolate on tap! With full mugs we gather round the fire as travel expert Becci gives us some packing advice. Her favourite items are lavender and tea tree oil which between them appear to be good for almost everything. However, most fuss is made over the Shewee, the reusable device that allows us girls to pee while

standing (no one demonstrates). Ex-military man Aidy knows women who swear by them. Most of us screw up our faces at the idea of carrying round a urine-covered funnel. There was some interest in the leopard-print eye mask though...

Top tip: Pack camomile tea bags – as well as making a soothing cuppa, you can use them to calm sunburn, wash your hair and infuse a relaxing bath.

Tampons make great fire-lighting tinder – dunk them in Vaseline and they burn longer

11:06 "I love fire!" declares fellow bushcrafter Catherine, a girl guide leader hoping to pick up some skills she can pass on to her pack. We're not rubbing sticks together (takes too long) but we practise creating sparks with fire steels and generally turn into a bunch of pyromaniacs (in the safest possible way). Wayne sets fire to a blob of antibacterial hand gel: "It burns for ages," he says. Of course it does: it's alcohol-based. But it wouldn't have

How to start a fire with chocolate (and other handy hints)

- **Fire starter** Chop off the bottom of a beer can and polish the concave side with a piece of chocolate or toothpaste to make it shiny. Add tinder and place in sun.
- **Travel iron** Pack a metal mug with a flat bottom; fill it with boiling water and use to press your clothes.
- **Insect repellent** Slice an onion in half and leave it by your bed: it will help keep mossies away. Tea tree oil

- and citronella also work wonders.
- **Not getting lost** When walking, frequently look behind you. That way you'll recognise your route if you walk back the other way. Maybe even give weird buildings or trees names so you remember them.
- **Not getting lost 2** Put a mini compass on your keyring – even in cities it will be invaluable for gaining your bearings.



occurred to me to use it as fuel. And that's what this course is all about – thinking around situations and using your common sense.

Top tip: Tampons make great tinder – rip them apart to increase their surface area and they'll light easier. Dunk them in Vaseline and they'll burn for longer.

12:19 Finding water – and making it drinkable – is our next challenge. Digging holes and filtering out sediment with an old T-shirt is interesting, but I'm unlikely to ever go *that* bush. What is useful is learning about iodine. I've used it many times but never knew that the fruit squash I pour in to mask the nasty taste hinders the purifying qualities of the chemical. You can add your juice or neutraliser after 20 minutes or so, once the iodine has done its job, but you then need to rinse out your bottle before purifying again, as the squash residue lingers.

We also have a stab at making our own water purifiers – plastic bottles filled with nature's filters: sand, charcoal, moss, grass. I was rather disheartened to see my water drip through sand-orange at first, but after a few minutes it came though Evian

From left: "Girls! Stop ogling the chocolate brownies and watch while I demonstrate how to light a fire..."

(well, almost) clear. Again, strangely proud.

Top tip: If you're treating water with iodine, do it in a black or frosted water bottle as sunlight reduces the chemical's effectiveness.

13:27 Why is it that sandwiches munched in the great outdoors always taste so much better?

Top tip: In the absence of soap, the following make decent hand cleaners: horse chestnut leaves and water; garlic; fat; coconut oil; charcoal.

14:07 Thanks to Aidy I reckon I can now build a shelter. Better still, I can make a bean bag! Half-fill a sturdy bin liner with leaves and, hey presto, a comfy, insulated seat. Repeat twice and you've got a mattress; repeat three more times and you have a duvet – a whole bush bed.

Top tip: Pack bin bags – light and good for just about anything, from collecting dirty washing to making an emergency rain coat.

14:38 Attracting attention is often something you don't want to do as

a travelling women – which is why Becci stresses the worth of packing few clothes and buying outfits when you get there so you can better blend in. But when you do want to be noticed, a whistle is a good (and cheap) alarm, in wilderness and city alike.

Top tip: Pack a compact mirror – great for mascara application and signalling. It's one of the only visual signals that works in the daytime; reflect sunlight off the glass to create a flash for help.

14:55 So, have we learned anything? Wayne sets us a challenge: to purify and boil a litre of water, and build a shelter to drink it in. We set to work, and our brains are already thinking differently; there's no panic, just a divvying up of tasks with unprecedented enthusiasm.

Collectively we filter, forage, chop and construct. There are difficulties (our pan-suspending structure is too ▶

weak for our pan) and Wayne and the gang periodically come over to point out far simpler ways we could be doing things. But my tampon-started fire is a success and, as our water rolls with the ferocity of a witch's cauldron, we clink mugs of hot chocolate and toast our success.

Top tip: Stop, think and improvise – whether you're making a fire or getting lost in a city, don't rush. Pause for a bit, think through the situation and work out the most sensible course of action.

16:14 Safety and chocolate brownies next (the latter making the former harder to concentrate on). I knew about women's-fit money belts but it's never occurred to me to put the Do Not Disturb sign on my hotel room door when I'm out for the day.

Top tip: You might pack a torch but do you keep it to hand? Leave it on your bedside table when

sleeping, put it in your pocket when on planes and carry it around cities at night.

16:47 As the day and the hot chocolate flagon come to an end, we chat round the dying campfire. I decide to ask Wayne and the others about their favourite kit, which provokes a lively dispute on the worth of penknives and army surplus trousers. Seems even expert outdoorsy types can't agree on everything. But

what they can agree on is the importance of being prepared. Knowledge is key to staying safe, both in the great outdoors and when travelling in general.

As we clamber back through the wood to civilisation I feel I've definitely gained

knowledge – both of the directly applicable and the 'that's interesting' type. This kind of course isn't essential for recreational travellers but it does give a certain confidence in your own ability to look after yourself, be it in the wilds or on wild city streets.

Top tip: If all else fails, pack a bushcraft instructor... ■

To book a women-only bushcraft course (£70) and to buy gear for girls, contact Girls' Travel Club (07766 016502, www.girlstravelclub.co.uk). For a range of other outdoor survival courses, contact Forest Knights (07771 540184, www.forestknights.co.uk)



From left: Hazel twigs make great tent pegs

John Nicholls



3 Get the right kit

There's lots of gear aimed specifically at women – but is it worth it?

CAUGHT SHORT

Weeing on the road can be problematic or unpalatable for women – thanks to nasty toilets, wilderness destinations or inconvenient activities.

The **Shewee** and the **Whiz** (which has added antibacterial properties) are plastic funnels for use in just these situations, enabling intrepid ladies to pee



while clothed and standing. And if the thought doesn't make you squeamish, they're pretty good – they don't leak and, thanks to hydrophobic materials and sealable carry bags, are hygienic. The similar-sounding **She Pee P-Mate** is made of cardboard and therefore disposable, which might sound better than carrying a used funnel, but creates more waste – ick vs eco. Whichever you chose, just remember: never pee into the wind

Is it worth it? They're not essential, no, but worth considering – more for wild places (especially in cold climes, where you don't want to strip off) and wilder activities (think sailing and harness-wearing escapades) than nasty toilets – what's wrong with squatting?

Whiz: £8.50, www.whizproducts.co.uk;
Shewee: £4.99, www.shewee.com; **P-Mate:** £3 for five, www.pmate.co.uk

LUGGAGE FOR LADIES

"Rucksacks come in men's and women's versions," Nomad Travel Store's Paul Goodyer explains, "but they should really be labelled 'large' and 'small.'" Picking the right pack is more about your body size than your sex, with shorter men often preferring women's styles (shorter, squatter packs that stick out further), and tall, broad women preferring men's (longer backs, narrower shape). Women's packs are often designed in more feminine colours, too, and have shoulder straps that will sit better on narrower shoulders.

Is it worth it? It's all about comfort – the most important thing is to thoroughly test any rucksack in the shop. Girl's style, boy's style – it comes down to your style. Specialist shops will have staff trained to help you pick the right pack.



2

Find companions online

Whether you want to join an expedition, find a trusted contact on the ground or simply get some tips, there are plenty of resources catering to women travellers online.

→ **Make friends** Search for female travel companions online.

Visit www.wanderlust.co.uk/connections and www.goWander.com to link up with like-minded Wanderlust women. Also, www.thelmaandlouise.com is an online community and travel agent for girls only, allowing you to swap stories, find female travel buddies and book trips.

→ **Buy gear** Suss out the best in women's travel gear and get pointers on women's health, personal safety and travel skills courses at www.girlstravelclub.co.uk

→ **Book women-only trips** From walking to kayaking to horse-riding, several companies provide 'no boys allowed' tours. Look at the 'special interest' section on www.responsibletravel.com for some all-gal gatherings, or research worldwide options on (US-based) www.transitionsabroad.com

→ **Learn from a local** Find a friend at the other end: Your Safe Planet (www.yoursafeplanet.com) has a global network of trusted locals providing advice on how to travel safely, see the best bits, support local communities and avoid getting ripped off. Tailored advice costs from £45.

THAT TIME OF THE MONTH...

Periods are a pain when travelling: tampons and towels may be hard to find, bulky to carry or difficult to dispose of in remote places. One alternative is the **Mooncup**, a reusable rubber menstrual cup. Dr Caroline Evans, medical advisor for Nomad Travel Stores, thinks it's excellent: "I used one on a cycling trip in China – it worked very well and was far more environmentally friendly than tampons." It's particularly good for expeditions when you'd have to burn or pack out your used items. But is it hygienic? Dr Evans thinks so; you just have to remember to take water into a toilet cubicle with you.

Is it worth it? If you're comfortable with your own body and its functions, and if you're organised enough to carry water, this can be a godsend. It's also cost effective and eco-friendly. Do practise with it before heading into the back of beyond with no back up, though – it can take some adjusting to.

£18.99, www.mooncup.co.uk

A WOMEN'S WARDROBE

Men's vs women's **travel clothing** – is there actually any difference? "It all comes down to cut and colour," says Paul Goodyer. "Five years ago women's travel clothes were all pretty frumpy. Now much more effort is put into styling." There is no technical difference; you just have to pick what is comfy for you. There are a few exceptions: skorts (half skirt, half shorts), for example, look a bit odd on men. And the **Royal Robbins Global Traveller Zip N' Travel Skirt** (£35, www.royalrobbins.com) might be a good investment for girls who like their kit to be multipurpose – this long skirt zips off to a shorter version, the detached section converting into a handy shoulder bag!

Is it worth it? "If you're packing light, taking only one pair of trousers, you want to make sure they look good," says Paul. Decide which brands and cuts work for you – that might be a technical women's travel trouser, or a pair of men's combats from Primark.

For Nomad products, call 0845 260 0044 or visit www.wanderlust.co.uk/reviews



A LITTLE LUXURY FOR LADIES

Design Go Dryer OK, not essential for every Kili climb or jungle jaunt, but sometimes you want a good hair day on your travels. This dryer is dual voltage and folds down to a dinky 100mm x 145mm. (£13, Nomad)

Tisserand lavender rollerball

This essential oil in an easy-to-apply container is good for burns, cuts, spots, grazes, sunburn, headaches, stress and jetlag. Will almost pack your bag for you... (£4.99, www.girlstravelclub.co.uk).

**Eagle Creek Koala Wash Bag**

Like a portable bathroom, this bag stores your toiletries but also folds out, hangs up and comes with a handy mirror. (£13.99, Nomad)

Lifeventure flowerprint trek towel

Pink! With a cherry pattern! Oh, and it's antibacterial and dries quickly too. (£27, 0118 981 1433, www.lifeventure.co.uk)

Somerset's Women's Shaving Oil

This tiny bottle lasts an age and is great for sensitive skin and close shaving. (£3.50, Nomad)

4 Know your own body

Dr Jane Wilson-Howarth helps girls stay safe and healthy worldwide

Certain travellers maintain that the best way to avoid mosquito bites is to bring along a woman. Just a chauvinistic joke? Not necessarily. When it comes to travel health, women do have more to consider.

Once bitten

There is actually scientific evidence to back up the bug claim: generally **mosquitoes** bite women in preference to men. Moreover, talkative women get bitten the most. Pregnant women are even more attractive to mosquitoes – perhaps because of their higher body temperature, as well as increased surface area!

Women, then, need to pack plenty of repellent and consider proofing their favourite travel clothes with permethrin. This is pleasant to use and if you have sensitive skin or are pregnant it is safer than DEET. It is best to take advice on which is the right antimalarial pill; note that doxycycline reduces the effectiveness of the combined oral contraceptive pill, although only for the first three weeks of taking these daily capsules.

What a clot

One big concern for many travellers is developing a **blood clot or deep vein thrombosis**, and healthy women are more likely to develop this than healthy men.

Developing a clot is unusual; the risk for most people is low. Even so, anyone taking the female hormone oestrogen (as in the combined contraceptive pill or as hormone replacement therapy) increases their risk by four times.

Pregnancy makes women ten times more likely to develop a clot. Other factors that increase DVT risk include being very short, being over 40, cancer and recent surgery. If you're concerned, make sure you exercise every hour or so



The female bladder has a lot to answer for, and can make distracting demands in places with little privacy

on long journeys and consider buying a pair of flight socks. The 'mini-pill' and other progestogen-only contraceptives do not increase the risk.

The call of nature

The female **bladder** has a lot to answer for, and can make distracting demands in places where it can be difficult to find enough privacy for a pee. Wearing a long, full skirt can help.

Some unwise women deliberately restrict the amount of fluids they take

in when travelling, but dehydration predisposes you to infections of the bladder or urinary tract.

Typically such bacterial **infections** increase the desire to 'go' to an unbearable urgency but only small amounts are passed, with deep pain. These symptoms will probably settle only on taking a three-day course of antibiotics, but if you can't get to a doctor or pharmacist, taking plenty of fluids that change the pH of the urine may stop the attack or give you time to take that bus trip into town. A heaped teaspoonful of sodium bicarbonate (baking soda) in a big glass of water drunk every couple of hours will help, as will taking vitamin C (ascorbic acid) tablets with lots of water or juices – these infections need 'flushing out'. Such attacks of cystitis are more likely if your sex life is on the up.

Women sometimes mistake the harmless fungal infection thrush for a urine infection. Vaginal thrush tends to cause itching and soreness, which can be made worse by peeing. However, the discomfort is more like a chemical stinging on the outside. Eating yoghurt helps replenish friendly bacteria – it is especially good to take some fresh yoghurt after completing any course of antibiotics. Thrush seems to be more common in the tropics and is improved by wearing skirts rather than tight trousers. Airflow is soothing and healing.

The monthly curse

Almost anything can happen to monthly **periods** when travelling. It is probably not worth starting the contraceptive pill just to make periods more manageable and predictable – travellers' diarrhoea will probably mess up any rhythm and may lead to troublesome 'break-through bleeding'.

If you dread your period then think about starting a long-term progestogen contraceptive well before travel: an implant or a Mirena IUS will probably stop your periods altogether, but it may take six months to get

5

Take
inspiration
from the past

Tips for women travellers circa 1850...



complete control. Three-monthly Depo injections also stop most women's periods. Pack enough tampons assuming you will bleed erratically.

When considering how to cope with menstrual loss remember that you may be in places where washing isn't easy (making the use of Mooncups more challenging). Also, if using disposable sanitary wear in the wilderness pack it out or burn it.

Avoiding sexual hassles

When visiting a new region it can be easy to give out the wrong signals. In some orthodox communities, women



who dress skimpily may attract more advances than they would wish, and this can lead to considerable unpleasantness, or even violence. It is worth covering up – to keep off mosquitoes, avoid skin aging and skin cancer, and deny lecherous eyes. ■

Dr Jane Wilson-Howarth got caught out with cystitis in the Pindos Mountains and can testify to the efficacy of the baking powder she bought in a mountain hamlet. There are more tips for women in her book Bugs, Bites & Bowels (Cadogan, 2006)

HEALTH TIPS
FOR WOMEN TRAVELLERS

→ If you use tampons, pack plenty – they can be hard to find in some developing countries

→ If you are in the wilderness, burn or pack out your used sanitary items

→ The combined pill increases your risk of DVT; the following contraceptive methods do not: progestogen-only (or 'mini-') pill; intrauterine contraceptive devices; the Mirena IUS; Implanon and other 'implants'; Depo injections; caps; condoms

→ Doxycycline and other antibiotics reduce the effectiveness

of the contraceptive pill, as can travellers' diarrhoea – travel with back-up

→ Sort out any contraceptive method several months before any big trip; it is no fun tracking down emergency contraception in an unfamiliar country

→ Getting or being pregnant on your travels increases the risk of malaria, DVT and needing hospital treatment overseas

→ Unsafe sex puts women at risk

of at least 26 kinds of sexually transmitted infections

→ Avoid dehydration – it predisposes you to urinary infections and also to constipation

→ Pack a large, light scarf or shawl – this can be useful for covering bare heads and shoulders in churches and mosques

→ Pack bicarbonate of soda to treat urinary tract infections, or buy it when you get symptoms

→ Eat natural yoghurt to replenish your good bacteria



Shun trousers "Nothing is so suited to Africa exploration as a good thick skirt", according to Mary Kingsley (1862-1900).

Don't pack light Alexine Tinne (1835-1869) set off to find the source of the Nile with 36 trunks carrying, among other things, a Chinese porcelain tea service, a canteen of silver cutlery, an easel and paints, a camera and developing equipment, and an entire library.

Travel on a budget Jamaican merchant Mary Seacole (1805-1881) loved travel but had little money. So she travelled with cases of sharks' teeth and other curios to trade for local crafts – which she sold for profit on her return.

Keep yourself occupied Florence Baker (1841-1916) spent spare moments on African expeditions mending clothes, making preserves and cooking hippopotamus steaks.

Consolidate your wardrobe Isabella Bird (1831-1904) always packed three outfits: voluminous bloomers (so she could easily ride horses), a tweed suit for the cold and, of course, a silk dress.

Take no nonsense from the natives Facing a mutiny of her 300 porters, May French-Sheldon (1847-1936) pulled out her pistol, shot a passing vulture and declared: "Every man who is not on his feet with his load on his head, when I have counted three, I will shoot!" They got on their feet.

Pack an umbrella You never know when, like Mary Kingsley, you might need a brolly: "Once a hippopotamus and I were on an island together, and I wanted one of us to leave. I preferred it should be myself, but the hippo was close to my canoe, and looked like staying, so I made cautious and timorous advances to him and finally scratched him behind the ear with my umbrella and we parted on good terms."

These tips are adapted from Women Travelers: A Century of Trailblazing Adventures, 1850-1950 (Flammarion, £24) by Christel Mouchard.