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TRENDSPOTTING

MORE WOMEN ARE BOOKING IT

BY JON MARCUS | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

The first time Colleen Cox left her husband at home in Lynn and traveled by herself, to Namibia's Skeleton Coast, she was surprised to find that in her tour group of 12, she was one of nine women.

It was their revenge, some of the women joked: after successful professional lives, being able to travel independently and experience such exotic destinations as this foggy stretch of African shore without men.

Cox couldn't help but ponder something else, on that trip and on others she has taken since in groups that also often turn out to consist primarily of women.

"What I say to myself is, I wonder why more guys aren't doing this," she said. "I don't get it."

As obvious as it may have been to Cox and her companions, the extent to which women have come to outnumber men in leisure travel has otherwise been as little noticed as it is dramatic.

Nearly two-thirds of travelers today are women, reports the George Washington University School of Business. Women also comprise 54 percent of coveted affluent travelers with annual incomes of \$250,000 or more, up from 42 percent in 2010, according to the travel and hospitality marketing firm MMGY Global.

Many of these women travel solo or exclusively with other women. More than 11 percent of adult leisure travelers are women on their own, the US Travel Association says. AAA reports that one in four have joined other women

on "girlfriend getaways," bachelorette trips, or mother-daughter getaways, with 39 percent planning to do so at least once in the next three years.

These women travelers aren't just retired empty nesters like Cox, who is 65 and a former schoolteacher with grown children. They're from all generations.

Younger women are staying single longer — longest of all in Massachusetts, where they don't get married until they're 29, on average, later than in any other state, according to the Census Bureau. (Only in the District of Columbia are women older at the time they marry.) There are 28 million single women 35 and older in America, the Census Bureau says. Women also live longer than and therefore outnumber men at the other end of the age spectrum: in retirement, when many people travel.

An estimated 32 million single women traveled at least once in the last year, about a third of them five times or more, according to the Travel Industry Association.

But demographics aren't the only thing behind this trend, travel insiders say. Men, it seems, prefer to stick around on Mars while women head off to Venus.

"There are more and more women who are independent, who have lucrative careers or never got into a marriage, and more and more of them are

traveling,” said April Merenda, president of Gutsy Women Travel, which caters to this market. “Then you have women who are married but their husbands don’t share their interests or don’t share their vacation schedules, or quite frankly she just needs to get away alone.”

Women also have become accustomed to traveling by taking business trips, said Jennifer Tombaugh, president of the global tour operator Tauck, which has seen the number of single women travelers among its customers double since 2012. Many have banked miles that way, and gotten experience traveling alone. And social media lets them connect with like-minded traveling companions online.

Women want some time to relax among other women once in a while, too, said Carol Dimopoulos, president of Perillo Tours, 70 percent of whose customers are women. “They’ve realized that they need to be with their own tribe. They don’t want to have that dynamic with men. No matter how much you love your husband, spouse, son, it just doesn’t provide the space to have that solitude.”

Millennial women have given even greater momentum to this trend, said Ann Fishman, who has taught generational marketing at New York University and is the author of *Marketing to the Millennial Woman*.

“This is not a timid generation,” she said. “They have traveled the world with their families, or on study abroad. These are young women who are very empowered, very self-confident, and probably know somebody in the country where they’re going.”

Meanwhile, baby boomers “have reached a point in their lives when they want to explore and learn about themselves and

take in all the things they feel they may have missed,” said Joe Cali, president of Overseas Adventure Travel, whose customers include many people in this category — 67 percent of them female. “I hear women say, ‘My husband has no interest in traveling at this point, because he traveled when he was working,’ so they’re traveling alone or with their girlfriends.”

Or you could just blame Julia Roberts. Many travel providers say that women they serve have been encouraged to travel by the book and movie “Eat, Pray, Love,” about a woman’s trip around the world after her divorce, and “Under the Tuscan Sun,” in which an American woman spontaneously moves to Tuscany.

The way women travel is also different from the way men do. Women like adventure travel, and to be immersed in foreign cultures, experts say. They are attracted to community service projects abroad.

“You’re the gatherers and we’re the explorers,” said Merenda. “When you look at a woman on a trip, she’s talking to the innkeeper, she’s chatting with people from the local community. We like to talk, we like to mingle, we like to explore.”

Men, by comparison, famously don’t even like to ask directions.

While many of the men in Cox’s life gravitate toward cruises or golf vacations, she said, “women like adventure travel. Maybe women, because they’ve had the maternal experience — this may be corny — don’t have a problem going right over to a woman somewhere that they’re visiting and saying, ‘Can I see you cook? Can I go inside the school?’”

The travel industry is scrambling to adapt to all of this. After all, as Fishman put it,

"When you have a market that's composed of 40 million women, believe me, every business is going to change to accommodate them."

The number of travel providers catering exclusively to women has more than tripled in the last six years, according to Marybeth Bond, author of National Geographic's *Girlfriends Getaways* series.

"It's changing the face of travel," said Dimopoulos.

The first-ever Women in Travel & Tourism International annual national conference was organized in Las Vegas in the spring by a new group of women travelers called Wanderful. PADI, the Professional Association of Diving Instructors, just held its second international Women's Dive Day.

Hotels in Europe and a few in the United States have set aside female-only floors with special amenities and all-female staffs. The InterContinental Hotels Group's Hotel Indigo brand was launched with larger bathrooms, more colorful design, and other women-focused changes. The Kimpton and Wyndham chains have special programs for single female travelers. Kimpton's Women in Touch program, for example ("You wear a lot of hats — and trust us, you look incredible in all of them"), offers hand-held clothing steamers, makeup remover, and free tote bags with yoga equipment.

Palace Resorts boasts high-end hair product lines in the rooms, along with such things as hair irons. "That's one less thing to throw in your bag," said Kathy Halpern, vice president of sales and marketing. These are the touches that speak to women, and to men at

the end of the day, too."

Hilton is also trying to speak to men. Perhaps the best evidence of how lopsided the gender mismatch has become is that the company's Homewood Suites and Home2 Suites have enlisted American Grit mentor Noah Galloway to prod more men to become "Travel MANagers" — husbands, boyfriends, or fathers who plan and book trips. Even when they're bringing along their spouses, kids, or partners, women do at least 70 percent of travel planning, a Roper Organization survey found.

But the biggest shift being driven by the wave of solo women travelers is cheaper single supplements. Cruise ship companies and tour operators are lowering the cost of traveling alone. That, in turn, they say, is drawing more single women.

"One of the reasons we're seeing the increase in particular in women traveling solo is because we make it easy for them," said Chris Skilling, worldwide product manager for VBT, formerly Vermont Bicycle Tours, which has lowered the price of single rooms on long trips and made them free on some of its guided walking excursions.

Since her first trip to Namibia, Cox has gone alone to Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Morocco, and has booked another solo trip to India.

"I'd like to see more men do it," said Cox, whose husband plans to join her on an African safari in the fall. "They should. How sad that they don't take advantage of it."

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