Lipman: The loneliness of the long-distance traveler

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CAIRO, EGYPT -- For the first time in six months, I am traveling completely solo. Granted, my week-long excursions to Malaysia and Hong Kong were on my own, but it is nothing compared with traveling alone with a 70L backpack strapped to your back.

Throughout my trip, I have loved doing things at my own leisure. I thoroughly enjoyed going on excursions alone and taking side trips by myself to escape the chaos of Bangkok. However, at the end of the day, I've always had someone or somewhere to return to. Since arriving in the Middle East, that has not been the case.

Many people I met on the road over the last six months will only travel alone. They prefer to work on their own schedule, not to have to rely on anyone else and find excitement in the prospect of doing things solo. It works wonders for some, and for a while, I thought it could for me, too. But over the past month traipsing through Israel, Egypt and Jordan, I've learned that I much prefer to have someone to talk to and take pictures with.

I am unsure, though, whether it depends on the region through which you travel.

Southeast Asia, South America and Europe are all incredibly conducive to meeting others working their way around the world. In other regions of the world, hostels and backpacker-populated streets reign supreme in certain districts. International student discounts are on every street corner and the locals of the country are more than willing to help you (or try and rip you off depending on how savvy of a traveler you are).

Over the last week in Cairo, and to an extent while I was in Israel, I have felt a slight difference in the way I am treated as a solo female traveler. Despite wearing more conservative clothing out of respect, I garner unwanted attention like inquiries about boyfriends, religion and the worst of it: hissing noises. Prices for tours and excursions skyrocket because I am alone and hostels are not nearly as accommodating, lacking the usual dorms and common rooms facilitating the traveler connection.

Because of this, the more I see of the Middle East, the fewer backpackers I meet. And it makes sense given the Middle East's reputation as a volatile area that tourists should avoid and especially travelers of a certain gender or religion. Fewer people are willing to risk traveling to these areas, despite the incredible ruins and sites to behold.

Despite the lack of a seasoned touristy feel, I would still encourage travel to the fascinating region.

A traveler can get almost anything they want out of the Middle East and I encourage those interested not to avoid it. There is plenty to offer, from exploring ancient ruins and the Great Pyramids of Giza in Egypt to taking a dip in the Dead Sea in Jordan and exploring the Old City walls of Jerusalem or hiking in the northern countries of the Middle East.

Despite the State Department's warnings to otherwise avoid the small group of countries, I would argue it is safe for tourists and any kind of conflict that could potentially occur is more likely to affect the citizens of the region rather than those visiting the area. While it is true that political freedoms are greatly restricted for millions of people living in the Middle East and armed conflict still occurs, it is generally more isolated and more rare than the mainstream media would have you believe (though the recent flotilla incident between Israel and Turkey would suggest otherwise).

The Middle East is a destination for the more adventurous and curious traveler -- one looking for history and insight to the headlines and stereotypes that plague the area. It is a region unique in that it sprawls three major continents -- Africa, Europe and Asia -- and is the cradle of all ancient civilizations.

Sarah Lipman is documenting her travels around the world. Visit her blog, Passport: The World, at www.stamfordadvocate.com. To read Sarah's blog, go to http://blog.ctnews.com/ lipman.

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