

A feminine guide to India for phirangis

In a possible first, two travel books advise women on the pleasures and pains of India

Pallavi Srivastava /TNN

India, US-based Slate.com writer Seth Stevenson once said, is the spinach of travel destinations—you may not always (or ever) enjoy it, but it's probably good for you. But, in a country so diverse, many foreign travellers may find their trip remarkably similar to a lunch thali—with all its flavours, including the sourness of yoghurt and sweetness of laddoo. Female tourists, in particular, may probably wonder if all that India will leave them with is a bitter aftertaste.

Hence, the interest in two new travel guides, offering tips, anecdotes, warnings and a cultural perspective to the foreign female tourist to India. Both *Wanderlust* and *Lipstick: For Women Travelling to India* and *A Girls' Guide to India—A Survivor's Handbook* are possibly the first guidebooks targeted only at women, which aim to prepare them for the pleasures and pains of the sub-continent.

The good news—for India and prospective visitors—is that both books offer a detailed and perceptive view for women travellers. Even the most renowned travel guides include only about a single chapter with specific guidelines for women. But with the launch of these books, female tourists now have genuine stories told by two women who have travelled across the country more than once. So is today's India safer and better prepared then for the female tourist?

Yes and no, says Beth Whitman, the 42-year-old Seattle-based author of *Wanderlust*. "India is a challenging country for any foreign traveller and maybe just slightly more so for women," she tells *The Sunday Times*. But she adds that it is possible for women, even foreign women, to travel alone across the country. "It is very doable if the woman takes the time to understand the culture in advance and prepares herself."

Whitman's comments are echoed by Louise Wates, who wrote the *Girls' Guide to India*. Wates, formerly a journalist in Britain, has formatted her book as an AZ of essential topics for female travellers. These include telling women what to put in their backpacks; the intricacies of train travel; and how to navigate the Indian toilet system without public humiliation. "I know so many women who want to go to India, are fascinated with the country, but are too afraid to go," says Wates, who has been visiting India since 1986. An old India hand, she travelled as far north as Leh and far down south to Thiruvananthapuram. "The country never fails to bring out every possible emotion in me," she says.

Both Whitman and Wates wrote their respective books in order to encourage women to travel to India on their own or as part of a group. This is why they offer a cultural perspective of India. As well as some unglamorous but very practical tips. "To prevent sexual harassment, keep your arms folded in front of you in large crowds and on public transportation," says Whitman in *Wanderlust*. "It's easy to watch a Bollywood film and think that India is a country filled with sexily-clad women shimmying and singing their way around the country" but it is best for women to their shoulders and wear long pants or a long skirt.

But India is changing, says Whitman, who first visited 19 years ago. Back then, she spent two months travelling in Goa, Mumbai, Delhi and Varanasi. Her subsequent visits took her much further afield, including Bangalore, Udaipur, Darjeeling, and Kerala. She says Indians seem to have learned how to accommodate tourists better, whether it's at a restaurant, hotel or on public transport. And in possibly the best illustration of India's changing attitude to the female visitor, Whitman adds, "On my first trip to India, I remember being ignored by restaurant waiters and my male traveling companion given all the attention. Now, I feel like I'm on (near) equal ground as men."

WHAT FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS ADVISE

US | Women should observe stringent security precautions, including avoiding using public

transport after dark without the company of known and trustworthy companions; restricting evening entertainment to well known venues; and avoiding walking in isolated areas alone at any time of day. Women should also ensure their hotel room numbers remain confidential... It is preferable to obtain taxis from hotels rather than hailing them on the street.

UK | Female travellers are advised to observe and respect local dress and customs and to take particular care. Be aware that drinks served in bars overseas are often stronger than those in the UK.

Canada | Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada publishes a booklet, *Her Own Way: Advice for the Woman Traveller*, specifically targeted at female travellers.



INDIA UNBOUND: The female tourist has to deal with rude stares and wandering hands