

Women's travels in Europe

19th-20th centuries

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ABSTRACT

Despite material conditions that made it difficult for women to travel, they took an active part in travelling beginning with the period of the Grand Tour. With the development of modern means of transportation during the nineteenth century, along with transformations in tourism (spas, winter resorts, seaside resorts), women took part in the gentrification of travel and its eventual opening up to the masses. Women travellers also explored various territories quite early on, visiting ones that were, if not forbidden, then at least deemed inhospitable. Moreover, they gradually imposed their way of travelling: a voyage to the Orient or a cruise, the natural setting of the Great North or the desert, among others. During the twentieth century, women seized upon new forms of transportation, beginning with the bike and the automobile, thereby asserting their independence.



Taking the Grand Tour as a point of reference—as it was practiced from the mid-eighteenth century to the 1820s by the English as well as the Russian and German aristocracy—the dominant impression is that travel at the time was a genuine escapade. Slow and uncomfortable means of locomotion, from the mail coach to the *vetturino* or carriage, made the undertaking inhospitable for women, deemed to be more fragile and less resistant. The risk of accidents, illness, or death hung over trips. Christine de Fontanes (1801-1873), the daughter of the writer Louis de Fontanes, experienced all kinds of misadventures when she travelled through Italy in 1835 with a female friend and her cousin, Alphonse de la Barthe-Thermes. A cholera epidemic forced them to leave Tuscany, and left them in doubt as to whether they should escape to Switzerland, wait until Naples, or go to Venice. Due to her failing health, she was forced to spend five months in Milan until March 1836. Diagnosed with “nervous attacks” or “intestinal neuralgia,” the doctors suggested a stay beneath the sun of Florence. But would the trip be too difficult? “This has caused us great anxiety and continual regret,” admitted her cousin. In these “heroic times” of travel, women could hardly imagine setting out on a trip alone. The Irishwoman Lady Mount Cashell (1773-1835), who travelled across the continent beginning in 1801, took along no less than four carriages, a female companion, four domestic servants, and five children along with private tutor and governess onto the boat crossing the English Channel. In November 1802, the countess gave birth to a child in Paris, and had just recovered from childbirth when she took up the road again for Italy, where she once again became pregnant. Family life was thus hardly adapted to travel, which extended over months or even years. Women had to adapt to the rhythm of travel if they wanted to go along, and were generally neither encouraged nor excluded from doing so.

With the rise of rail travel and the shortening of distances from the 1840s onwards, travel tended to become briefer, lasting only a few weeks or even a few days. Travelling “companies” grew smaller. The groups of yesteryear that brought together two or three couples and bachelors from different generations gave way to the isolated couple travelling on their own, except for a domestic servant. This made it possible to discover one’s partner in an intimacy that was unimaginable in the country of origin, sometimes leading to disappointment. The honeymoon, which was invented in England, became a trend, spreading to the European bourgeoisie before expanding to the rest of society in the late nineteenth century. Whereas in the Grand Tour system separation of the sexes was the rule (each attending to different occupations, with his or her own small company), the second half of the century ushered in the time of travel as a couple: partners shared the same room in hotels, dined together in restaurants, and visited museums together. From spa towns to winter or seaside resorts, none of the fashionable territories of bourgeois tourism were closed to women at the time.

The second pattern of feminine mobility that appeared in the mid-nineteenth century was the combination of a number of individual women, whether widowed or unmarried, such as the English writer Elizabeth Strutt (1805-1863) and her friends, who visited Switzerland in 1827, or a daughter and mother travelling together, such as Emily and Helen Lowe, who went to Norway in 1857 and Sicily in 1859. As the public’s attention was always highly attracted by travel narratives, some female travellers enjoyed great celebrity, such as the Austrian Ida Pfeiffer (1797-1858) for her two world tours (1846-1848 and 1851-1855), or the Swede Fredrika Bremer (1801-1865), who visited the United States in 1849 and the Holy Land in 1859. These pioneers personified not so much a subversion of gender norms as a model of accomplishment. Incidentally, they appear in the collective biographies of famous women given to young schoolgirls during the prize ceremonies of the 1900s. Beginning with this generation of female travellers, the purely European horizon seems to have quickly grown too narrow, except when venturing to very peripheral areas, such as the Russia of Olympe Audouard (1832-1890), who left in 1870 for the “land of the boyars.” During the first decades of the twentieth century, women had to go to the peaks of Tibet (Alexandra David-Neel, 1868-1969), the steppes of Central Asia (Ella Maillart, 1903-1997), or the Sahara Desert

(Isabelle Eberhardt, 1877-1904) to earn the title of “adventurer”.

The interwar period was marked by the appearance of new forms of women’s travel, ranging from female journalists who went to lands torn by history—the Englishwoman Rebecca West (1892-1983) in Yugoslavia or the American Martha Gellhorn (1908-1998) during the Spanish Civil War—to women of all backgrounds who went on walks or bicycle rides, a form of transportation that remained very little feminized before 1914. Less frequent but more significant was access to sailing. For example, the archeologist Marthe Oulié (1901-1941) recounts in a book the cruise she took with a number of her female friends in the Aegean Sea aboard the *Perlette* in 1925. Similarly, women’s access to driving cars offered the promise of greater independence and freedom, although it came late to the Europe of the postwar “economic miracle.” In her *La Force des choses*, Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) relates her automobile trips along the roads of France or Italy in the 1950s, accompanied by Sartre (who unlike her did not have a driver’s license) or simply on her own. In her *La Force de l’âge*, however, she also described her efforts to learn how to ride a bike as an adult in the early 1930s, and the freedom she won as a result, riding at her pleasure in the outskirts of Paris, Auvergne, or the South of France...

From the 1950s, travel and tourist visits gradually took on a neo-conformist character. People travelled because that was what one had to do, because social conventions required it. The destinations and especially the expectations of travellers were more “conditioned” than before, due to the increased number of guides and the colour pictures that they disseminated. Whether travel was a remedy for idleness or a way of spending hard-earned free time, it became a distraction, a digression. The educational trip was a thing of the past: the time had long since disappeared when Mme de Genlis (1746-1830) had the two young heroes of her pedagogical fiction, *Adèle et Théodore* (1782), travel around Europe, complete with a series of observations specific to the boy and girl. In the twenty-first century, both sexes appear to be in the same boat: mass tourism offering standardized and all-inclusive “products” sold on practically identical websites, in which the cultural dimension is no more than a foil. However, this does not rule out subtle differences, such as the ongoing publication of recommendations aimed at women travelling alone, whether it be in a group or as a couple, along with specific guides such as the *Single Woman’s Travel Guide* by Jacqueline Simenauer and Doris Walfield, published in 2001: the authors suggest that peace of mind for women is not guaranteed in the same way as it is for men, both in Europe and beyond.

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