

HOW LIBERATION CAN FEED YOUR SOUL

When journalist Jo Usmar decided to swap her Oyster card for a plane ticket to Bangkok, she came back with more than just fond travel memories...

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Great news, you're going to SE Asia..." The airline confirmation email pinged into my inbox

and I bit down on a strangled scream. I'd done it. I'd actually put my money exactly where my full-of-bravado mouth was. I was finally going travelling... For four months... Alone... At 34! What was I thinking?

While it can feel a little scary and disconcerting, liberating ourselves and defying our own expectations and other people's is one of the best things we can do for our mental health.

"When we make a break from convention, we remind ourselves that we have choices and control over our own lives – it's incredibly restorative," says the coaching psychologist Jessica Chivers (talentkeepers.co.uk). "You'd be surprised how much people feel they have no choice and that they have to do certain things. But you do have choices. And as soon as you realise that there's a different choice you can make – whether it's eating pizza for breakfast rather than porridge, or quitting your job and going travelling – it feels incredibly empowering."

WHAT'S THE BEST THAT COULD HAPPEN?

My decision to jack everything in and head off to SE Asia with just a 2009 edition of *Lonely Planet* for company was one I'd wanted to make for years, but I'd always managed to find reasons not to: never finding work again after such a long break and then having to live on a mate's sofa; missing the party of the century and being a social outcast; getting lost in Laos and having to eat my only copy of *Lonely Planet* in order to survive...

I realised, though, that most of my worst-case scenario fantasies were completely insane, and the ones that *might* happen I could cope with. But most importantly, the potential best-case scenario was that I'd have the most amazing time of my life.

"You do have to give due consideration to the implications of the decision you're making," explains Chivers. "It's not about being reckless. Liberation comes from assessing what *might* happen, deciding if you can deal with that, then going for it. It might be that people think it through and then

realise they don't want to do something, but that in itself is an act of liberation; they're simply acknowledging that they have a choice and aren't just accepting the default," adds Chivers.

SMALL ACTS OF LIBERATION

Return tickets to SE Asia all round, then? Actually, liberation isn't only found in massive life-changing acts. Small things, such as saying no to that baby shower you can't

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really be bothered to go to, taking yourself on a mini-break to a new European city or wearing a bright orange blazer into work, will also reinvigorate a passion for life. In fact, stepping away from our own 'normal' is proven to make us more creative and productive as your brain has to snap out of autopilot and consider new ways of thinking and behaving.

"Acts of liberation throw us into the deep end which encourages us to then question everything," says psychotherapist Beverley Hills (hillscounselling.com). "Why live your life according to other people's opinions? Questioning and saying the biggest little word 'no' [as in, 'No, I won't just accept this'], helps us figure out exactly what we want, rather than what's expected of us. It makes us think outside of the box and then look at things from a different perspective. Life doesn't happen in your comfort zone."

Some people will find chasing liberation easier than others. Those more open to new experiences will discover the thought of doing things *their* way exciting as well as slightly frightening. However, those of a more cautious nature shouldn't let their natural inclination to abide by the status quo stop them being more liberated.

"It helps to set challenges and goals to get us out of autopilot," adds Dr Gary Wood, psychological coach and author of *Unlock Your Confidence*. "If we can link these goals to our values – those things we 'stand for' as people – it leads to a sense of fulfilment. It's about being more who we are, rather than going through the motions. The goals don't have to be huge – just frequent and consistent. It's liberation over automation."

Travelling alone turned out to be one of the best decisions that

I've ever made. I saw myself in a totally different way. I discovered that I could be both resourceful and patient (except when it came to guys wearing elephant pants playing 'Wonderwall' badly on their out-of-tune guitars).

I also had to make decisions by myself that would change the course of my life for the next few hours, weeks or months. Shall I scooter around Thailand? Shall I jump on that flight to Cambodia? Shall I join this group in Laos?

What do I want? What do I need? And how do I get it? Now I've come home, I've realised that I still have just as many choices – it's just about acknowledging them. As a revelation, that's pretty liberating.

So, work out what you want and what you need. Your goal may be doing something for yourself rather than with everyone else this weekend. Do you want to have a three-hour nap on Sunday? Of course you do. So do it. Do you want to sign up to a creative writing course? So look into it. Buckle up: it's time to get liberated...

BREAK FROM CONVENTION

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