

WISH YOU WEREN'T HERE

More and more, couples are accepting their differences and choosing to travel alone, which isn't as ominous as it sounds

BY JON MARCUS

ALL OF PARIS glowed beneath them on the night Elizabeth Simmons and her husband sat at a table in one of the restaurants at the Eiffel Tower. Leaning forward in the candlelight, she sighed at the romance of it all. He shrugged and said he would rather be in Texas, hog-hunting.

Although their marriage survived, that was the last overseas vacation the couple took together. It's not that they stopped traveling; it's just that they

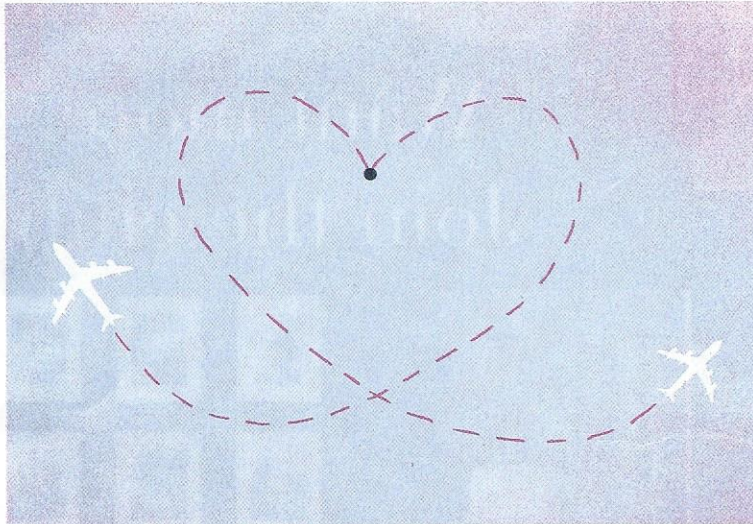
now choose to do it apart. "Going away with my girlfriends is a lot more fun than taking my spouse," says Simmons, who has joined a growing number of travelers vacationing without their partners. It's a boom that's being driven in part by the demands of modern life, but also by a shift in attitudes toward solo travel.

"Twenty years ago, there was the assumption that you wouldn't travel separately if there wasn't something wrong with the marriage," says Marian Marbury, founder of Adventures in Good Company, which organizes vacations for women. "It still makes people raise their eyebrows, but not nearly as much as it used to."

In a recent American Express Travel survey, 11 percent of respondents said they had a spouse-free holiday planned. In 2012, solo bookings at Abercrombie & Kent increased by 19 percent from the year before. When asked why they'd opted to go it alone, 40 percent of A&K customers responded that they and their partners didn't care to visit the same places, with 25 percent saying they wanted to pursue their own interests.

"Not only are our schedules different, our interests are different," says anesthesiologist Reva Raju, who has so far taken four vacations without her husband. "I need to do things—birdwatch, hike," she says. "He likes to take it easy. He enjoys staying at home." Raju says she doesn't care if people gossip about her trips. "My marriage is very secure. He's happy gardening. And when I travel, I don't have to worry: I know there's someone taking care of the house."

Tania Cahill, a pharmaceutical company executive who has taken several solo river cruises with a company called Gutsy Women



Travel, believes separate vacations can point to mutual respect rather than disharmony. "My husband and I have always been accepting of having different interests," she says. "I take care of so many people in my life; this is a week where I just take care of myself. It's my enjoyment, it's my hobby, and it's only eight or 10 days out of the year."

April Masini, a relationship counselor and advice columnist, agrees that separate vacations can be a sign

of strength rather than weakness in a romance. "Even if you've decided your spouse is your soul mate, that doesn't mean you don't need a break," Masini says. "Time apart, in a healthy relationship, can just make it that much stronger."

Meanwhile, for those who prefer to take their me-time in smaller doses, there are outfits like Mountain Madness, which caters to couples who want to take part in separate activities during the day but stay together at night. "People suffer if they don't allow their significant other to get out and do what they love," says owner Mark Gunlogson, adding that he and his wife often travel alone while the other takes care of the kids. "We're happy to say, 'Hey, why don't you go biking?' 'Why don't you go hiking?' And off we go."

The most important thing, says Sunit Sanghrajka, founder of the luxury travel company Alluring Africa, is that devotion to the ideal of togetherness shouldn't result in the abandonment of personal dreams. He recalls one woman who had spent her entire adult life yearning to visit Africa, only to have her husband pooh-pooh the idea every time it came up.

"One day she called and said, 'I'm finally going to do it,'" he says. "How did you convince your husband?" asked Sanghrajka. "I didn't," the woman replied. "He died."

JON MARCUS, a Boston-based writer, once got into a heated argument with himself about whether to go to the beach or stay by the pool.