

10 SEPTEMBER 2023

# The Observer Magazine



## Me, myself and I

More and more of us want time on our own – so put yourself first with our guide to the unique pleasures of solo travelling and dining.

Plus, nine famous faces on the joy of solitude

What Neanderthals can teach us about the future My life in flatshares It's not over yet... late summer escapes



The Observer

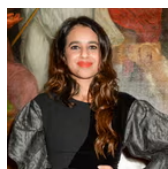
# Single minded: people with public lives on the pleasures of solitude

Joe Lycett likes to get into nature, chef Ravinder Bhogal strolls around her local area, Kirsty Wark heads for a Scottish loch... Nine famous faces reveal how they like to spend time when they're on their own



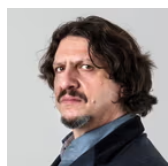
Michael Segalov

Sun 10 Sep 2023 14.00 BST



Photograph: David M Benett/Getty Images

**Ravinder Bhogal, chef** My restaurant is in Marleybone, it's a wonderful neighbourhood. If a day feels too busy, I take time to shop, alone, along Chiltern Street. Daunt Books is a haven, the perfect place to people watch, or ask the team for recommendations. La Fromagerie is the best grocer in the city. Meandering in and out of shops, I have a break and time to think; find myself inspired by someone I bump into. Going solo, I'm on my own time. With nobody hurrying you along, you've time to stop and linger. You can read the first few pages of a book, try something on, have a taste, all at your own pace - you don't get that space when you're in company. *Comfort and Joy* by Ravinder Bhogal is out now, published by Bloomsbury



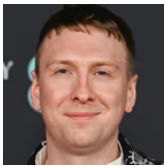
Photograph: Antonio Olmos/The Observer

**Jay Rayner, restaurant critic** It doesn't matter that I've eaten there alone five or 10 times a year for over a decade. They rarely seem to recognise me as a returning customer. Or if they do, they don't let on. The branch of Four Seasons at 12 Gerrard Street in London's Chinatown is not that sort of place. I don't go there for companionship. I go there because I love the Cantonese roast duck with its darkly lacquered skin, and the roast pork belly with crackling like glass and the dry fried green beans with chilli (no rice unless I'm still hungry at the end, which I never am). I take a seat with my back to the wall. I take the latest edition of the *New Yorker*. I eat and I read. Eating alone at Four Seasons is quality time with your own thoughts. And for the staff it's nothing special. Lot of people do it. When you eat alone at Four Seasons you are part of the crowd. I am rarely there for more than 45 minutes, but in that time, I become absorbed in the clamour. No one pays me the slightest bit of attention. Amid the noise, I am alone and at peace. And it's bliss.



Photograph:  
Pascal Le  
Segretain/Getty  
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**Peter Bradshaw, film critic** The cinema I've taken to showing up to on my own is the Everyman Muswell Hill in north London - a wonderfully grand standalone building (Grade II-listed) of the sort that once got converted into a bingo hall or megachurch. It used to be the Odeon when it was a single screen and only the balcony was open. Now it is dark and plush and vaguely Lynchian in a way that's downbeat and discreet. I love to come here and catch up with movies I haven't seen or want to check out again. Going to the cinema is a supposedly guilty pleasure, which is in fact entirely guilt-free; unlike dining alone in a restaurant there is no equivalent of the waiter ostentatiously clearing away the other place setting. Going alone gives you the time and space to think.



Photograph:  
Kate Green/Getty  
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**Joe Lycett, comedian** Birmingham is well known for its grey, poor-man's brutalist architecture (which we actually love, mostly), but less so for its green space. My suburb is so surrounded by wilderness that local legend Laura Mvula wrote *Green Garden* to celebrate it. Any potential assassins will easily find me in one of the three parks within walking distance of my house. I find most creative problems need distraction, quiet and inspiration, but also some form of strange alchemy that happens when I'm alone in suburban Brummie nature. Nothing feels urgent. The mind and body meanders. Eventually, ideas sprout. I remember my parents and grandparents telling me that nature is good for you and thinking "What a bunch of dweebs!" Annoyingly those dweebs were right.



Photograph:  
Graeme  
Robertson/The  
Observer

**Kirsty Wark, presenter** Sometimes I head off alone to Kendoon Loch, south of Carsphairn, on the Moniaive road in Galloway. It's one of the places my father loved to fish, and sometimes I would go, too. It is incredibly peaceful and beautiful, and sometimes the only sound is the call of a peewit. We would often take a tiny camping gas stove and sit with our backs to the old wooden boathouse and fry freshly gutted trout turned in oatmeal, or have what we called a sausage sizzle. After dad died, we planted a rowan tree there and I'm grateful to the other anglers for taking care of it. When I go to the loch now and drink coffee from the flask's plastic cup it always reminds me of him, and no matter the weather, at some point, sunlight will sparkle on the water.



Photograph:  
Ken  
McKay/ITV/Shutterstock

**Simon Reeve, author and presenter** When my head is in the right place I love the chance to travel alone. It's an opportunity to selfishly indulge in my favourite pleasures: people-watching and spending quality time in nature. I like to do something adventurous and sociable, and love the idea of a long-distance walk - pitting myself against the elements, the distance and the solitude. The Camino de Santiago across northern Spain has just the right mix of views, challenge and great food. Plus, companionship when needed, and glorious solitude when not. I filmed part of it a few years back and found myself eating and sleeping in a candle-lit albergue along with other walkers, including a young Italian monk who serenaded two French women on his guitar. It was cheesy, but brilliant. *Simon Reeve To The Ends of the Earth is touring the UK this autumn. More information at [ents24.com](https://www.ents24.com)*



Photograph:  
David M  
Benett/Getty  
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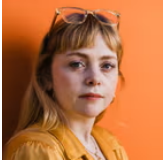
**Samira Ahmed, presenter** I've always loved doing things alone, visiting museums and other centres of culture specifically. It's something about the power of independence, of having the quiet to think and absorb on your own and savour things at your own pace. There's nowhere better than the BFI on Southbank. There are secondhand book stalls on the riverfront to browse, bookshops, too. And inside there's so much to see and explore: video archives in the Mediatheque; entirely absorbing programming. Last year, they had a François Truffaut season. It was his films, and films that inspired him, too. I booked tickets for after work, for days off. I basically saw everything, and was transported to world's I'd have otherwise never found. *Samira presents Front Row and new series of Newswatch on BBC one on Saturday mornings at 7.45am*

**Julia Bradbury, presenter** Solo walks keep me sane. I take one every day and, when I can, I head to Mam Tor in the Peak District, where I first started walking as a child with my dad - one of my most special places. [Walking](#) alone I can escape my thoughts or think through problems: I don't plug in headphones, so I can relish the solo experience. It's my therapy, and an opportunity to observe people and interact on what I call an "eye-smiling basis"; a little nod or hello to strangers in passing. Humans need time in green spaces to thrive - we understand



Photograph: Dave J Hogan/Getty Images

nature's fractal patterns innately; it soothes our minds and refreshes our outlook. I walk backwards for about 20% of my solo walks, which gets me strange looks from people. But it's good for the hips and balance, uses more energy, and helps with anxiety, apparently. *Walk Yourself Happy* by Julia Bradbury is published 14 September (Piatkus, £20)



Photograph: Mark Chilvers/The Observer

**Megan Nolan, author** Mostly I write in my bed after midnight because my brain has a masochistic inability to function during designated work hours, but when I need to leave the house and at least ambiently join the world I go to the Peckham Pelican cafe alone and sit there for six hours until I achieve something. It's a big comfortable space with crumbling sofas and cheap and efficient coffee, the sort you consume to work yourself into a finely tuned productive state of panic. There is always a bunch of beautiful art students talking nonsense, which makes me feel comparatively useful, and when I've finished my work it's usually just rolling into happy hour. *Ordinary Human Failings* by Megan Nolan is published by Jonathan Cape

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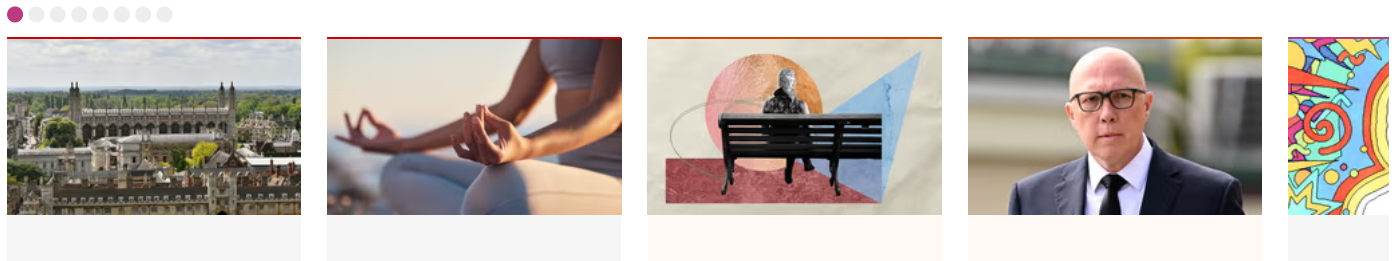
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# Top 15 solo trips in the UK

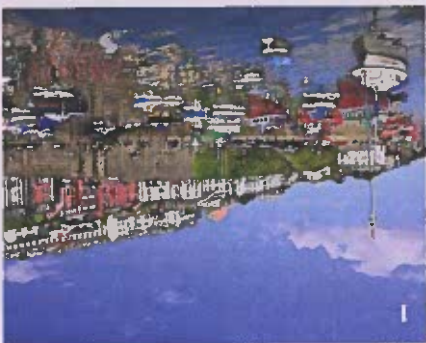
When travelling alone, Annabelle Thorpe gets to be her very best self

There's something wonderfully liberating about travelling alone and the following trips fulfil all the best aspects of being solo. No compromises to be made, no itineraries discussed; get up when you want, eat what you fancy, do nothing or everything, talk to the friendly person next to you at breakfast, or pop in your headphones and ignore them completely. When I'm travelling alone, I become the best version of myself; the most decisive, the most charming, the most curious. I see more, go further, strike up conversations with people I'll never meet again, yet always remember. And even after 25 years of travelling, I still get the same feeling of satisfaction when I'm home – a quiet sense of pleasure that I did it all on my own.

## Coastal

### 1. Brixham, Devon

The Berryhead Hotel – surrounded by six acres of gardens with lovely views across Torbay – is a rare find: a hotel



**2. Wells-next-the-sea, Norfolk**  
Vast skies, tranquil beaches and a delightfully slow pace: the Norfolk coast is a great choice for a solo trip. Book a Cosy Room at the charming Crown Hotel ([www.crownhotelnorfolk.co.uk](http://www.crownhotelnorfolk.co.uk)), where a complimentary cream tea is the perfect excuse for a lazy afternoon with a book in the comfortable lounge. On a non-cream tea day, book one of the 11 tables at the Wells Crab House, where the friendly team serve delicious seafood, including single oysters and tastier portions of everything from crayfish tails to cockles and rollmops ([www.wellscrabhouse.co.uk](http://www.wellscrabhouse.co.uk)).

With single rooms that are actually half the price of doubles (from £88 B&B, [berryheadhotel.com](http://www.berryheadhotel.com)), it's an easy walk into picturesque Brixham, where the town's fishing fleet fuels a clutch of excellent restaurants; pull up a seat at the counter at Simply Fish, a family-owned restaurant where diners pick their choice of seafood from the fresh fish counter ([simplyfishrestaurant.co.uk](http://www.simplyfishrestaurant.co.uk)).

### 3. Camber Sands, East Sussex



Morning yoga classes come free at the lovely Gallivant (from £215, [thegallivant.co.uk](http://www.thegallivant.co.uk)) – a great way to meet fellow guests – along with a weekly programme of classes, encompassing everything from wine-tasting to garden tours. Combine sociability with solo walks along the great swathe of sandy beach at Camber Sands and pop up to the historic town of Rye for supper at the Fig ([thefigrye.com](http://www.thefigrye.com)), with super-friendly staff and a menu of Ottolenghi-esque small plates.

### 4. Tenby, South Wales



Back walking boots for a stay in Tenby, where the Pembrokeshire Coast Path leads out on to spectacular cliff-top scenery, with the town itself – famous for its picturesque harbour with pastel-hued houses – a lovely friendly spot to return to and ideal for a solo foray. Stay at Trefloyno Manor ([trefloyno.com](http://www.trefloyno.com)), five minutes' drive out of town and pop in for a spa treatment at the cute Dovecote spa. Pull up a bar stool at Twelve ([twelvetenby.co.uk](http://www.twelvetenby.co.uk)), where

Time alone