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## A lesson in traveling light and flying solo

By Tara Hayden  
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When Meg Noble Peterson leaves her Maplewood home to scope out an exotic locale, she packs lightly and goes it alone.

The 77-year-old writer and world traveler wouldn't have it any other way.

"There's a liberation in leaving behind the comforts of home," said Peterson during a phone interview from her house in Maplewood. "It's about getting back to simplicity."

Peterson has trekked across the far reaches of Africa and Asia, India and Central America, armed only with a camera, a notebook and a few items of clothing.

She goes for weeks at a time, reaching most of destinations on foot or by hitchhiking. When she's tired, she scouts out a hostel or pitches a tent.

Sound rough?

She claims this is the best way of seeing the sights, "of taking it all in and seeing what life and culture is really like, as opposed to seeing these countries from a hotel balcony or touristy spot."

It's an interesting perspective. Nevertheless, when it comes to matters of international travelling for one, Peterson has written the book, literally.

Throw in tales of self-discovery, backpacking through four continents, climbing base camps and an interesting love affair and you have Peterson's travelling essay/memoir

"Madam, Have You Ever Really Been Happy?"

The book chronicles her journey through Africa and Asia as a single traveller at age 58. She hopes her adventure will inspire women and men of the baby boomer age to get out and see the world, solo.

"There's a freedom to traveling alone," said Peterson. "You get to experience the world as a whole person and see what's really out there."

And age, she said, shouldn't be a deterrent.

"I didn't let the fact that I was a woman approaching 60 deter me from traveling. I had some of the most exhilarating and thrilling experiences of my life."

For Peterson, her journey as a traveller really started in 1987. At the time, Peterson was newly divorced after 33 years of marriage and five children.

The newfound freedom inspired her to travel. Having worked for a non-profit agency where she traveled frequently, Peterson had racked up frequent flier miles. She realized she had enough for a "round-the-world" ticket and cashed in.

"I figured, what the heck. I decided I needed to get away from the same old thing and try a new challenge."

So, she set off alone on an eight-month odyssey across four continents that took her from the crowded streets of Cairo and contentious apartheid in South Africa to India's Taj Mahal and the peaks of the Himalayas.



Meg Noble Peterson, a Maplewood resident, author and international traveller, stops on one of her journeys to pose with the monks of Sakya Monastery in Tibet.

"I've gone to places where planes couldn't go. Places where you had to go on foot and, if you wanted to leave, you either left on foot or on a yak."

Along the way, Peterson kept a journal and recorded her experiences. She wrote the book over a four-year period. In between the process, she wrote a play and several essays.

"Madam" was a genre departure for Peterson, whose career is mostly in writing and arranging books that

pertain to music education. Her work includes 38 books for the Autoharp and classroom instruments, as well as essays that have been published in *The New York Times*, *Newsday* and *The Christian Science Monitor*.

Peterson said her children couldn't be happier with the book, or the fact their mom is an independent world traveller.

"They think it's really neat," said Peterson, noting her children are all travelers as well. In fact, in

2004, she made a pilgrimage to Tibet with one of her daughters.

Her most recent travels were last year, when she visited Norway and Sweden.

The 77-year-old said she plans to set off to another destination soon as soon as she sells her house.

"I'm going to do this as long as I have legs to carry me," she said.

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