

# ...go backpacking with your daughter

She had battled breast cancer and a brain aneurysm, but 52-year-old *Alison van der Lande* was terrified of joining her daughter on a wild trip through Central America. She reveals how the experience set her free

I needed an adventure. For the past couple of decades I have been a wife, a mother and a worker — I got used to putting everyone else first. I hadn't done "me" in an awful long time. I always wanted to do more travelling, but invariably found a reason not to.

My 23-year-old daughter, Daisy, booked flights for a big trip round Central America after university. I thought, I wish I could go, so why don't I? Well, I work, I have my own handbag company. I have one son who is 20 and another who is 22; I have a husband; I have a house in Hampshire. But why don't I? I've always wanted to do it. I had a brain aneurysm five years ago; I survived that. I had breast cancer three years ago; I survived that. I have worked for a long time. I'm tired. I'm stressed. Why can't I do it? Why don't I do it? I can do it, I should do it!

Daisy eventually sent me a text saying: "Mum, either book it or stop talking about it."

I asked my husband and he said: "For God's sake, book it."

Illness makes you sit up and think about your priorities — what you love, what you value, how life is for living. I needed to start saying yes again. And I know it's a cliché, but I needed time to figure out who I was again. So I bought the flights.

I don't know why I found a three-week holiday so nerve-racking. But somehow it became a big deal. Mothers definitely feel more guilt about leaving than fathers. I felt selfish. For 20 years, it was all about the children and my job, and now it was all about me. I borrowed my son's backpack

and packed light. I was terrified. I knew Daisy was going to be in Guatemala to meet me, so I don't know why I was being so ridiculous. I said goodbye to my husband at the airport, went through security, walked straight to a bar, sat down, ordered a gin and tonic — and burst into tears. I was totally overwhelmed. I had forgotten who I was, and what I was about. Going on this adventure was a release.

I left all my fears and anxieties in England. I only checked my emails every other day and trusted people at home to look after my business. Daisy and I started in Guatemala and travelled north through Belize and Mexico. It was Daisy's trip and I was the one trotting around after her. She made the decisions about hostels, buses, towns. We paid for things evenly out of our kitty. It was a different dynamic from at home, where I'm the mother and she's the daughter.

Initially, I was very self-conscious about my age. I'm sure people in hostels were a bit shocked to be sharing a mixed dorm with a 52-year-old woman, but everyone was so friendly. You meet so many people and have so many fantastic conversations. There's such camaraderie between travellers. I had forgotten what that was like.

**Daisy insisted that we swam with whale sharks. I was freaking out. I had to be pushed in by the captain**

Everyone was also fascinated by the fact we were mother and daughter. They couldn't quite get their head around it. It was so lovely to see Daisy meet new people. I was able to see her as a person in her own right, not just as my daughter. It made me very proud. As a person, I like her a lot.

When we were in Tulum, Mexico, we stayed in the most wonderful hostel, with bright white linen sheets and fresh mango for breakfast. It was £7 for both of us. The hostel had bikes, so we cycled all day, through the back streets, no helmets, weaving in and out of cars. It was very freeing. One day, we went for 20 miles.

I don't have the best body — I have a mummy tummy — but it was too humid even to wear a sarong, so it came off and went in the basket. Because of my breast cancer, I have one bosom that is quite a different size. It affects my confidence on a daily basis. At home I would never, ever go around in just flip-flops and a bikini for the whole world to see, let alone cycle 20 miles. But really, who cares? Everyone is all different shapes and has different wibbly bits. I was alive and it was totally liberating.

On another day, Daisy insisted that we swam with whale sharks. They are the biggest fish in the ocean, 30ft long with mouths over 3ft wide. Enormous. We motored for two hours on a boat, out into the middle of the ocean. I sat on the edge of the boat in my bikini, snorkel in, flippers on.

But I was freaking out. I had to be pushed in by the captain. I went underwater and the first thing



**MOTHER OF ALL ADVENTURES** Clockwise from top left: visiting the Mayan ruins at Tikal, Guatemala, dressed for the rainforest; life on the open road; the perfect coffee stop, on Lake Atitlan, Guatemala; boarding a "chicken bus"; at a hostel in Caye Caulker, Belize; have tuk-tuk, will travel

I saw was a whale shark swimming straight towards me, mouth open. Terrifying! The guide grabbed my hand and we started swimming parallel to one for what felt like hours. It was the most emotionally breathtaking, beautiful moment. I never thought I would be brave enough to do that.

No day or night was normal. One evening in Belize, we went for a drink at a local bar. There was the most amazing salsa music playing and the only people on the dancefloor were two ladies, chatting and drinking beer. They were moving in such a rhythmic, amazing way — so goddamn sexy.

I went over and asked them to teach me to dance. My daughter raised her eyebrows, embarrassed, saying, "Muum!" The women thought it was hilarious, teaching this middle-aged British lady to dance. One by one, people joined us on the dancefloor, and suddenly their friends were buying us beers and we had the most wonderful night. After initially finding me a bit embarrassing, I think my daughter began to see a different side to me. That was lovely.

One night in a hostel bar, these two Guatemalan guys sent over drinks and started chatting to us — much to Daisy's horror. She's gorgeous and people adore her, but I think they were more interested in me. She just said: "Oh my God, I'm having to protect you from these men." We politely declined, but it was very flattering. On the surface, people at home think I'm perfectly confident, but sometimes I'm a jelly-wobble underneath. It gave me a bit of confidence. I thought, "There's life in the old devil yet!"

Daisy and I sobbed at the airport when we said our goodbyes. When I got on the plane, it was wham, bam, straight back to reality. But in a way it was wonderful. I got home and nothing had changed. My dog was ecstatic to see me; the weeds had grown; my husband had done the food shop.

One of the most important things I learnt from backpacking was how to do nothing. Now I try to be less hard on myself and give myself more time off. I was reminded of how lucky I am, having a home, family, food, health. Five years ago, a doctor said to me: "We've saved your life, now enjoy it." So that's what I did. I think I've got my mojo back ■

**Interview by Megan Agnew**

YOU CAN GO YOUR OWN WAY

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