

VOGUE

BRITISH

"IT TAKES A
LONG TIME
TO BECOME
YOUNG"

JANE FONDA
COMES OF AGE

RULE
BREAKERS
THE WOMEN LIVING
LIFE THEIR WAY

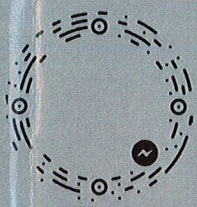
HELEN
MIRREN
MAKE-UP
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HOW TO KEEP
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THE NON-ISSUE

A GROUNDBREAKING CELEBRATION
OF AGELESS STYLE & BEAUTY

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH L'OREAL PARIS



DARE TO BE DIFFERENT

Turning trouble into triumph, embracing independence and embarking on adventures – four women prove it's never too late to break the mould. Interviews by Olivia Marks

JUDE TISDALL THE CO-HOUSING PIONEER

Three years ago, I was listening to my friend tell me about an all-women co-housing project she had heard of. Both in our mid-sixties, we were at that sweet spot in life where the demands of work and family had shifted, and we were starting to imagine how our lives might look as we got older. Enter OWCH (Older Women's Co-Housing). Since 1998, its founding members have been working on building a supportive community – a neighbourhood, if you like – for women over 50. From the kernel of the idea, to finding the land, funding and architect, they had succeeded in the mammoth task of creating 25 flats in a leafy part of north London, complete with beautiful gardens and an orchard. And they had a final home they needed to fill.

I liked the sound of these strong women deciding that they were going to live in a certain way. At 65, divorced and semi-retired from my career in the arts, I've always worked on instinct, so I put in an application. It all happened very quickly – I hadn't even seen the development and its Scandinavian-influenced design when I accepted. Within a month I had sold my house and was preparing to move in.

I was excited and nervous at the same time. I am the type of person who, although sociable and involved, needs time alone. But that turned out to be ideal: this isn't a commune. We have our own one-, two- or three-bedroom flats and common areas; we all have our own lives, work and relationships. I come from a big Irish family, and when I moved to London in the early 1970s, I lived with nine other people in a squat in Peckham – including the man who became my husband. I've got fond memories of those times, but living here is completely different to any way I have lived before.

In the beginning, it felt a bit like being in the first year of a marriage, except you're trying to get used to 24 strong characters from diverse backgrounds. Our youngest member is 52, the oldest 90, and our backgrounds are varied – both economically and culturally. But underlying everything is a respect for how we've chosen to live. I've learned great tolerance and am constantly inspired by my neighbours – especially the two 89-year-olds who recently returned from a road trip from Vancouver to Big Sur. Once a week we have a communal meal; there are yoga classes and film screenings; we celebrate each other's birthdays – but privacy is paramount. We support each other in so many ways, but also respect each other's space. That is key.

Co-housing is common in the Netherlands, Scandinavia and parts of America, but there is still a certain stigma to living in a community of older women in Britain. When I told my family and friends, they didn't get it. "Why would you want to do that?" I was asked time and again. My daughter was concerned, and my brothers didn't understand why I wanted to live with, as they put it, "a load of women". But when one of them visited a while after I moved in, he was bowled over. My 19-year-old granddaughter loves the community vibe and security, and tells me she can't wait to be 50 so she can move in.

I think we have carved a path for others to follow – not just in our age group, but in an intergenerational sense. We feel proud that we have been, to some extent, pioneers. In a world where so many things are in flux, where loneliness is so prevalent, it feels good to be grounded and to belong.

GERRI GALLAGHER THE SOLO TRAVELLER

Nothing makes people more uncomfortable than a single woman eating alone. Which is unfortunate for them, because I love it. I will always remember the dinner I had on the roof of the Taj Lake Palace in Udaipur as one of the most remarkable meals of my life – and there was no one to enjoy it with but myself. While I'm very happy to compromise in all other aspects of my life – as the eldest of seven siblings, I'm used to making room for others – when it comes to travelling, I have to go solo.

I have always been fiercely independent. Even when I was married, I left my husband in San Francisco to take a job in Paris and had a bizarre commuter relationship for three years. (He was a tremendously understanding man.) I was 30, didn't speak French and was the deputy editor of a launch magazine – looking back, it was a pretty ballsy move. But I think after that, it was never an issue for me to do anything on my own.



Moving to France was the most daring thing I've done, though I've had my share of thrills. I've been helisking in Verbier, having never skied off-piste before. It was, unsurprisingly, a completely terrifying experience. But when I got to the bottom of that mountain, I was invincible. It was the most challenging physical undertaking of my entire life, but I recognised in that moment what an adrenaline junkie I am. Which is most likely the reason why, last September, I found myself in a Moroccan hospital with a punctured kidney after deciding to go mountain-biking in the desert.

That experience hasn't stopped me, though. In Cambodia earlier this year, everyone wagged their fingers, warning me: "No bicycles, no jumping off waterfalls – none of it." But when we reached Shinta Mani Wild, where it's possible to zip-line 380m over rivers and waterfalls, there was no way I wasn't going to have a go. So I did – four times. I promise you, it is the most fun you can have in 20 minutes.

Nothing, though, can beat seeing the diversity of Namibia's landscape from the sky, or standing face-to-face with gorillas in Rwanda – a completely life-changing experience. Even after all the years and all the miles travelled, my wanderlust is far from sated. My list of places to visit gets longer, rather than shorter, and might be as mundane as a Danish beach or as far-flung as Bhutan. I still haven't been to Istanbul. I'm endlessly fascinated by the world – and there's no one to stop me seeing it.

Last year, I left my job as associate editor at *Tatler* after 23 years. If anyone had told me that, at 60, I would be single and freelance, I would have asked them what they were smoking. I would be lying if I said it wasn't sometimes lonely, but the one thing I don't do is regret. What's the point? Plus, I know the next bit is going to be my biggest adventure yet. >

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