

# **Tales of a Female Nomad: Living at Large in the World Study Guide**

**Tales of a Female Nomad: Living at Large in the World  
by Rita Golden Gelman**

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# Contents

<a href="#">Tales of a Female Nomad: Living at Large in the World Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1-4.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 5-8.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 9-12.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 13-16.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 17-19.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>



# Plot Summary

Tales of a Female Nomad: Living at Large in the World by Rita Golden Gelman tells the tale of a divorcee who travels around the world at her own whim, relishing her freedom. She immerses herself in other cultures for extended periods of time. Rita has a passion for people.

Rita is living a charmed life at the beginning of the book. Her life is filled with parties and celebrities, but she isn't happy. After talking with a woman on an airplane, she realizes that she wants to travel, but her children aren't old enough to be on their own yet, so she settles for studying various cultures at the university.

Years later, Rita's children are grown, and her marriage is falling apart. She now has the opportunity to travel. At first it's difficult, since she is not used to being on her own, but she learns to survive and thrive. She stays with families who help her learn new languages and cook new foods. Rita develops relationships with people wherever she goes, and she is frequently asked to live in various locations as a family member.

She travels to Mexico and stays in a Zapotec Village and visits the Mayan ruins. Rita learns about politics in Guatemala and Nicaragua. She views different religious groups in Israel and studies animals in their natural habitat while staying in the Galapagos Islands. Rita visits Indonesia, where she attends burial ceremonies, visits an orangutan camp, and finds serenity. She treks through mountains and learns to cook Thai food. She discovers first-hand the difficulties of transportation, especially when it depends on weather.

As she is traveling, Rita still maintains family relationships. She frequently flies back to the United States to visit her parents and children. Rita's mother has Parkinson's disease, so Rita checks in on her on a regular basis. Her daughter, Jan, visits her often while she is in other countries, too. They always enjoy their time together as they experience celebrations and rites of passage in other cultures.

Rita's willingness to help anyone in any way possible opens a world where she mingles with princes and princesses as well as common folk. Just as she was not overwhelmed by her lifestyle at the beginning of the book with all its celebrity status, she is not overwhelmed by the royalty, either. She is more intrigued with personal relationships.

Rita learns about herself and finds a human connection everywhere she goes, even when the natives don't speak the language she does. She finds that she can communicate through song, through ceremonies, and through dress. Living the life of a nomad opens the world to Rita, and she finds it difficult to stay in any one spot for too long.



# Chapters 1-4

## Chapters 1-4 Summary and Analysis

Tales of a Female Nomad: Living at Large in the World by Rita Golden Gelman tells the tale of a divorcee who travels around the world at her own whim, relishing her freedom. She immerses herself in other cultures for extended periods of time. Chapter 1 is titled "The Beginning." This chapter takes the reader back to 1985 where the author, Rita Golden Gelman introduces her life and explains why she feels it needs to change. She has been married for twenty-four years, and has a life that many would envy. It's filled with exciting events and luxuries, such as dining with celebrities. She doesn't feel comfortable in this world.

Around 1980, she was on an airplane and a woman sat next to her, telling Rita about her travels. It made Rita realize all that she was missing. A few months after that, she took a trip to the Galapagos Islands, and this made her decide to add more to her life. She went back to school to study anthropology. Her marriage begins to disintegrate due to personality differences and divergent interests. She suggests that they take a break from each other for a few weeks and perhaps trying a visit to a marriage counselor. Her husband agrees to this, but asks for even more time. He recommends eight weeks. With this long a break from the marriage, Rita decides to go to Mexico.

The traveling is difficult for her at first, because she is unused to being alone, especially for meals. She stays in a hotel before joining a family she is living with while she takes classes to learn Spanish. When she is at the hotel, she gets lonely and is out searching for company. Rita has dinner with two Englishmen and ends up spending the night with one of them, to her great astonishment. As she leaves her hotel to join the family she is living with for a while, she takes a bus ride, and her credit cards are stolen. She hates feeling like a helpless wife when she has to call her husband to cancel the credit cards, which are in his name.

Rita stays with a young couple and their baby while she is attending the school where she learns to speak Spanish. They get along very well. While she is there, she gets a rash all over her body. She is worried that she's contracted the disease from her one night stand. Rita doesn't know if she can trust the doctors there. Later, she finds out that she is having a reaction to her malaria medication. Her skin peels off, and as she begins to get better, she realizes that she is beginning life as a new person. She has new skin, she speaks Spanish, and she tries new things such as eating fried pigskin, even though she has been a health nut for years.

In Chapter 2, "In a Zapotec Village," Rita learns about the Travelers Network. She doesn't have to worry about eating alone anymore. She enjoys the freedom of the groups of people she meets and learns about different places to stay. Rita decides that she must immerse herself in a culture for a month, and using a map blindly, chooses a Zapotec Village that is forty miles north of Oaxaca, where she is now. Since she can't



find a bus to the place, she begins to walk. After many hours of hiking in the heat, a driver gives her a ride to the village.

When she gets there, she tells a group of men that she sees by the stores that she wants to stay in the village for a month. Rita asks to talk to the head of the village. She finds out that he is not in town and will be gone for several days. She has to go back to Oaxaca. While she is there, she takes a quick look around the village, with the men's permission. No one greets her, and the children run away from her. Back three days later, Rita talks to the head of the village. He gives her permission to stay and shows her where she will be living. It's a one-room concrete shed. She walks around the area, trying to get used to it, and attempts to get to know people. No one will have anything to do with her except the men, who drink all day and keep trying to touch her. On her fifth day there, a young woman introduces herself to Rita and befriends her. She gives her some native clothes to wear, and Rita discovers that she is now approachable to the other woman.

She begins to learn the Zapotec language and starts to get to know the women and children. She helps them prepare for a celebration and feels as if she is one of the crowd as she works in the kitchen with the other women. They have accepted her. Right before she is set to leave the village, a young man tells Rita that there is a mountain she must climb. Everyone in the village climbs this mountain at some point in their life. Usually, the trip takes three hours. For Rita, it takes seven, but she does it. When she heads back to her hotel in Oaxaca, she enjoys the luxury the bath and assesses her adventures of the last month. She has learned a lot.

She calls her husband to tell him she is coming home, but he asks for two more months of separation since he has been working the entire time and hasn't had a chance to feel separated yet. She is frightened, realizing that the marriage is really coming to an end. She wonders what her decision to ask for a separation has really cost. She unfolds a map to decide where she is going to go for the next two months, and her hands are shaking.

Chapter 3, "Letting go in Palenque and L.A.," opens with Rita going back on the backpacker trail and mingling with the other travelers. She does this for a week, then realizes that she is running and doesn't even know what she is running from. Many people tell her that Palenque is amazing, so she decides to go there. She visits an ancient Mayan city where she can feel and visualize the ghosts of the ancient culture. That night, she has her first experience with psychedelic mushrooms. Rita feels euphoric and loves the colors and music, but doesn't remember much about the following hours. A few days later, a group of campers swim in a waterfall naked. Rita realizes how much she has changed in the past four months as she joins them.

Rita is heading back to Los Angeles. She calls her husband to tell him she is on her way, and he says that he might not be there to pick her up at the airport. When she gets there, she might have to take the shuttle. This is what happens. Getting off the shuttle, she walks into a house that no longer feels like a real home to her. The marriage is over. Rita moves to an apartment during the five months it takes to go through the legal



proceedings for the divorce. She doesn't feel like talking to people or getting together with friends. She just enjoys observing people. She knows many divorced people become bitter, but she is looking forward to life as a single with excitement. She decides to go back to Central America, but first creates a budget and sets up accounts so that she will be financially sound while she is on the road. Rita is a children's book writer and realizes that she can live off her royalties and any additional books she's going to publish. Before she leaves, a friend tells her that she has to stop running away, but Rita knows she isn't running away. She's running toward the future and is excited about it.

Chapter 4, "Learning How," begins with Rita flying to Guatemala. This time, she decides not to plug into the backpacker network but to settle in and become part of the expatriot community in Antigua. Rita signs up for Spanish classes and moves in with a family that is recommended by the school. A friend in Los Angeles had told her about a French woman named Brigitte who is setting up a house for street kids in Guatemala City. Rita is excited about volunteering to help the cause. They work well together, and she feels as if she fits in. She's excited about working with the youth. When the house is about to open, a coworker tells her that Brigitte doesn't want her working on the project anymore because they feel there are too many gringos in the group. This devastates Rita, since she has worked on a project for over two months. She loved everyone involved, and now she can't work with them.

Rita decides to rent an apartment for six months and integrates herself into the community. She is getting to know the expatriots as well as some indigenous people. Rita is invited to go on a trip to the beach with one of the indigenous families. It's an interesting experience, filled with flat tires, crowded buses, and illness. Back in Antigua, she learns that a children's book she has written has been accepted by Scholastic. Rita decides to take a trip to the United States for a few weeks to visit her children and parents. Her parents want her to get back together with her husband, but she is happy with the direction her life is going. Her children are very accepting and seem to understand that she is happy. Her daughter Jan comes to visit her in Antigua when she comes back, and they have a wonderful time together. After her daughter leaves, Rita meets a man who is working in Nicaragua. She offers him housing in Antigua in exchange for his taking her to Nicaragua when he goes back.



# Chapters 5-8

## Chapters 5-8 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 5, "The End of Political Innocence," Rita learns about fear. El Salvador has had a civil war since 1979, and the Army is trained and supplied for by the United States. She hears horror stories about disappearances of family members and learns what it's like to have to guard conversation. Rita crosses the border to Honduras on her way to Nicaragua. There are soldiers all around. As they drive along, she sees buildings with bullet holes all over the walls. The customs official tries to get her to give him one of her books, but she wants to hold onto it to read to the children in schools. He says he understands. As she heads outside, some children come up to her and asks her to read them a story.

Rita checks into a hotel and meets some of the locals. One takes her to the beach the next day. It gives her a different view of the oppressed country. She spends four days walking around and getting to know the place, but decides that she wants to leave. She and another person from the hotel hire a taxi to take them around the country. At the last minute, a man joins them. They discover that he is a juggler. The taxi driver takes them to different areas, including a home for deaf and dumb children. The children are delighted with the juggling routine, and the trio of travelers enjoys entertaining them.

When the three end their travels, Rita moves in with the taxi driver's mother. She lives with the family for two months. While she's there, she is doing research for a book and decides to visit a war zone village that was attacked three months prior. A woman shows her around the village, pointing damage out to her and talking about the morning of the attack. Rita asks the people, including the children, questions about the Contras, and realizes that she is very fortunate to have the freedom that she does.

In Chapter 6, "Roots," Rita has left Nicaragua and is now back in New York visiting her son, Mitch. After seeing him, she flies to Colorado to visit her daughter. With each child, she talks about the politics in Nicaragua and her adventures. She realizes that they are both concerned about her. Next she's going to Israel, which doesn't bother the children that much. They are familiar with that area, and this makes them more comfortable with the idea of her traveling there.

Rita grew up in a Jewish household during World War II, but the Jewish faith and Jewish traditions don't seem very important to her. She decides to visit the country using the Servas network. The first woman she stays with is quite dictatorial, but they get along fine. She offers her house to Rita for an extended stay. Rita stays one extra day then moves on to a kibbutz. She rents a room for two weeks, where she writes in the morning and tours in the afternoon. Rita decides that she would like to learn more about the Mea She'arim community. She asks a tour guide if she knows anyone who would be willing to take her in, and the guide sets her up with a family.



Women are treated as second-class citizens, and Rita is very unused to this. When she worships with the family, she is drawn into the music, yet finds out that she is not allowed to sing along as a woman since it might tempt a man. She finds it very difficult, if not impossible, to not judge the community. Before she leaves Israel, she visits a Druse village, where she finds a group of Arabic-speaking people. Rita visits a school and discovers that it is filled with mentally handicapped children. She wonders if this is because the community is so inbred. Her hosts take her to visit many people, and everyone opens their house to them. As she is flying back to New York, Rita reflects on her experience. She finds the people she visited full of spirit and hospitable. She is touched by all that they have gone through in the wars as well as the stories that she has heard.

Chapter 7, "True Freedom," finds Rita heading back to the Galapagos Islands. She has been traveling the world for three years now, and she has a contract to write a children's book about the animals on the islands. Jan is excited about the trip and plans to visit Rita while she is there. Rita visits the press officer at the Ecuadorian Embassy in Washington DC to ask how to get her equipment into the country safely. He tells her he will make arrangements and that she can stay in government housing as long as she is there. They take her to the island of San Cristobal, a place she has not been to before. Rita is living in a house with a man named Felipe who is a scientist with a PhD in biology. Together, they explore the island, and he shows her how to negotiate lava. They soon become lovers.

The research for her book is going very well, and she finds herself enjoying being part of the community. When her daughter visits, they decide to take a two-week tour of the island to see the animals in their natural environments. They make reservations on a luxury boat, but the boat breaks down before their trip. They gather a group of other passengers and hire someone to take them on a tour. All goes well, and the passengers get a long very well. However, Rita is upset to learn that they won't be visiting Tower Island because it isn't safe since the boat captain doesn't have the proper navigational equipment.

The captain tells her one evening that she has a call. It is Jose, a captain that she had met before. She had mentioned that she would be on this boat so he knew how to contact her when he was moored near her. He sends a small boat to her boat to take her to his boat for dinner. While they are together, he mentions that he is heading over to The Tower, and he has the proper national navigational equipment on his boat. Rita talks with her captain, and their boat follows the friend's boat so they get to see the animals on the island safely. The rest of the trip is beautiful. When it's time to leave the island, there are some minor complications, but everything works out. Rita heads back to Santa Cruz and decides that she is going to come back and become a Galapagos Island guide after she finishes her book.

In Chapter 8, "The Forests of Borneo," Rita is back at home attending her high school reunion. When she introduces herself, she says she doesn't know where she is going next and asks for suggestions. The only person who responds recommends Indonesia. She goes to the Indonesian consulate in New York to find out the customs and to see if





there is a place for her to stay. The consulate finds families for her, and she chooses which one she wants to live with. She chooses a family consisting of English teachers since she thinks this will help her learn the Indonesian language since she can ask questions.

Rita likes the family and immediately becomes friends with her host's sixteen-year-old sister, Inid, who takes her around to see the sights. She is gradually learning the language just by living in household and decides not to go to an official school to learn the language. To assist herself in learning the language, Rita goes to a college campus to find a library and meets a student who is willing to help her learn how to speak. He wants to learn more English, too, so they trade lessons.

After she has been in the house for two weeks, her host tells her that she's going to meet the head of the neighborhood organization. When she goes to the house, the head of the neighborhood organization asks her to teach some of the children some English, and he instructs of the children to help her learn Indonesian. Rita wants to go live in a village for a while, and she finds out about a burial ceremony in the interior. She's denied permission for staying the entire time, but she is allowed to go to the ceremony. While she is there, she meets Professor Birute Galdikas, a woman she had studied about in her anthropology classes at UCLA. The woman doesn't want to talk with Rita, but tells her that if she stays at a certain hotel when they get back from the inland then she will contact her.

Rita joins the others as they continue with the ceremony and burial that they came to be part of. A sacrificial cow is stabbed repeatedly with spears by the guests, and Rita has a hard time viewing this. She notices that some of the other women are having a hard time, also. She feels the connection between the cultures - to female bonds. She wishes she can stay, especially when she is offered a place to stay for a longer period of time, but politics won't allow it. By the end of the night, she is joining others drinking out of a skull, then she leaves the village.



# Chapters 9-12

## Chapters 9-12 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 9, "The Orangutan Camp," Rita is staying at the hotel that the professor told her to go to. After three days of staying in the expensive hotel, the professor doesn't visit, so Rita goes to her house to meet her. She is sent away, but the professor contacts her at the hotel the next day. Rita offers to write a book with the woman, and she agrees. However, she says that Rita cannot go along with her to the orangutan habitat. Rita argues this point, saying she needs to experience it to write the book, and they negotiate until they are both happy with a deal in which Rita does end up traveling along.

She is overwhelmed by the sights on the trip. Rita learns a lot about orangutans and does all the writing that she can without actually talking to the professor, who is ignoring her requests to meet and talk together. She finally writes a note saying that the book cannot be completed unless the professor spends time with her. They finally meet and she's able to finish the book. The professor has put certain stipulations on the contract, and the book is never published.

In Chapter 10, "Arriving in Bali," Rita is back in New York but heading to Bali. She talks with a doctor from Bali in the terminal and on the plane. They get along well. He asks where she is going and when she tells him, he says that it really isn't a good place for her. Since she is so interested in anthropology, religion, and culture, she would be better off somewhere else. He gives her a paper with the name Tu Aji, on it and tells her to visit that man. She does so and is welcomed into the house of a prince. Rita joins the household, first as a paying guest, then as a family member. She learns about the caste system and about the workings of the government. She becomes very close friends with Tu Aji, who is considered an unofficial scholar of the Kerambitan dynasty. He tells her that he will teach her about their culture from the inside out.

Rita attends a cremation and joins a ceremony for washing the body. She becomes integrated in the community, and develops a daily routine. She learns about the different roles of men and women in the community. Women are treated as second-class citizens. Tu Aji and Rita have many conversations, and he shares the history of his family which she records in a book. One morning he tells her that he has had a heart attack, and he feels that it is a curse put on him because he has been giving away too much family information. They stop writing the book right then.

Chapter 11, "The Trance," begins with the arrival of a letter stating that Jan is coming for a visit. Everyone enjoys having her around. The two Americans are invited to join the families as they offer sacrifices to the gods, thanking them for the treasure the family found in a cave. Rita and Jan learn more about the worship customs as they take part in the ceremony. As they worship, two of the women slip into a trance. They ask for the king to come before them, and they tell him that he is not doing a good job. Rita is



worried that they will get in trouble for that, but is told that it wasn't the women talking, but the spirits talking through the women, so they were all right. Jan and Rita discuss the events the next day, and both are confused as to what they think. However, they both know that they are in a different place spiritually.

After Jan leaves, the family discovers that one of the favorite family members is dying. Rita learns more about the death and grieving process as the old woman passes. She finds that the ceremonies and rituals are comforting and make it easier to let the old woman go to the next world. Several months after the woman dies, Rita finds out that her father has had a heart attack. She hurries back to the United States and sees him in the hospital a few days before he dies. Her experience with the old woman helps her take comfort in his death, and she releases his spirit until they meet again. Rita stays in the United States for several more months. Her mother has Parkinson's and needs someone to live with her. After interviewing many candidates, Rita finds the perfect companion. When she feels as if everything will go along without a problem, she heads back to Bali.

She has been away for three months, and in that time, Tu Aji has bought a refrigerator. No one will use it except for him, by their own choice, but he has developed such a fondness for juice that he keeps in the refrigerator. Rita slips back into her routine and enjoys family moments, even when they seem challenging, such as when her friend offers her some sautéed dragonfly to eat. Although she knows things are fine back in the United States, after four months she heads back to see how her mother is doing for herself.

Chapter 12, "Back in the United States," begins with a visit to Rita's mother, who looks great. She and her companion are enjoying lectures and concerts. The companion has many children and grandchildren who visit, and the house is feeling alive. Rita spends a few months taking care of business and catching up with her children. Before she returns to Bali, she decides to visit a friend in Los Angeles. Through a series of unfortunate events, she misses several telegrams that are informing her of Tu Aji's death and cremation. She finds it very difficult to deal with the death of her friend, especially since all the rituals of the burial are over by the time she gets back. Rita mourns for the family, and is still living with them three months later. It doesn't feel the same without Tu Aji, but she doesn't want to abandon the family.

One day, a German tourist named Michael comes to the area on his way back from leading a tour on the southern rivers of Irian Jaya. Rita decides that she wants to go, and she signs up for a trip several months in the future. She goes back to her daily routines, and makes some new friends. One day, one of Tu Aji's relatives comes to visit her to ask if he can marry her daughter, Jan. When Rita goes back to the United States, she calls her daughter and tells her that a prince wants to marry her. She writes a letter politely declining the marriage. As the chapter ends, Rita's mother's Parkinson's is getting worse. She needs more care. They hire someone else to help the companion. Rita begins to make plans for her next journey because the magic of Bali, her prince, is gone.



# Chapters 13-16

## Chapters 13-16 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 13, "Irian Jaya: the Highlands" begins with Rita's plan to spend three weeks trekking through the highlands before meeting Michael. She is very out of shape, and it's very challenging for her. However, she finds a group of people who are willing to stay with her and help her. Her knowledge of the Indonesian language comes in handy when they are at the airport. Rita finds out why their flights are delayed, and by talking with the customs man, manages to get on one of the first planes out. As they travel through the mountains, the hikers stop in different villages. She and her new friends do not speak the languages of the villagers, but they sing some English songs and listen to others sing songs in their languages. News of their singing seems to go on ahead of them, and everywhere they stop, they have to sing. Rita appreciates the communication between the cultures. After she has finished trekking through the mountains, she still is two weeks before she is to meet Michael. She goes to a village by public transportation and shares some food with the malnourished children.

When she gets back from the village, Rita still has one more week before meeting Michael so she heads to the airport and takes a flight from the Missionary Aviation Fellowship terminal. She flies out to a village and immerses herself in its culture. She attends classes in a school, then tries to arrange a flight out. There have been problems with the heavy fog. She's not sure she can make it. The people in the town say that they are going to pray for her, and the next morning, her flight is able to get through. When the pilots come to pick her up, they say that they understand that the people in the village had prayed for her. Rita sends a book that she has written titled, "Why Can't I Fly?" as a thank you and receives a note back thanking her for the book. The note says that God loves her. She is happy that God loves her but she's even happier that her book is in Irian Jaya.

Chapter 14, "Irian Jaya: The Asmat Lands," begins with Rita making it to Wamena on time. She is ready to take the formal tour that she signed up for with Michael. There are two other men on the tour named Hans and Horst. Rita has an immediate lack of appreciation for Hans. The small group heads out on a twenty foot dugout canoe with a forty horsepower motor. They sleep in schools and community houses at night and visit numerous villages. Rita finds that the tour lacks the magic of other trips since they don't stay anywhere long, and there are no joyous moments linking the cultures such as the singing she experienced up in the mountains. She is saddened observes the children in the villages who are very malnourished. In one village, a woman asks them for help with her listless baby. They don't have medicine but offer to take the woman and child to another place where she can find a doctor. The child dies along the way.

Rita is more interested in visiting some of the villages that are off the beaten path. She particularly wants to visit one that no missionaries have been to before. They travel over large trees to get to one such village, and she finds an openness among the natives. A



child is scared of her at first since she is so different from his mother, but Rita brings out some bubbles, and soon everyone is smiling and laughing, even though they don't know each other's language.

The small group prepares to visit another village several days later, but Hans cuts himself, and the tribesmen don't want them in their village. Rita warned Hans to keep the wound clean. He won't let anyone look at it, and he bathes in a dirty river. Several days later, he contracts a severe infection. They have to end their trip three days early. The group travels at night and gets lost. During the night, Rita reflects on her experience. She is particularly grateful that they went to that very remote village where she felt so welcomed.

Chapter 15, "On to Mas," begins with Rita back in Bali. There are now telephones in the remote area, but not where she lives. Tu Man is now in charge, and he rejects Rita's offer to pay for a telephone. She realizes that it's time for her to leave, and goes to visit her friend Dayu, whose family runs an art gallery. They give her a beautiful place to stay, and they have a telephone so Rita can keep in touch with her family regarding her mother's health. While she is living there, Rita teaches anybody who is interested in learning how to speak English. She also helps edit stories that go on the art pieces in the museum. Rita loves learning about the history of the area and their folklore and religion. She also loves being surrounded by all the incredible art.

Rita sees some incredible sculpting potential in one of the workers and gives him tools so he can practice the trade. When she gives him the gifts, she says that she wants his first piece of art in exchange for the gift and he agrees. Rita leaves Bali to go to the United States for five months. When she comes back to Bali, she gets connected to the Internet through the phone lines. Now she can stay in touch with her children through e-mail. The worker hands her his first piece of sculpture, and it's exquisite. He made it out of a hunk of wood that was set aside as firewood. Rita begins feeling like she should interfere in his life, although she knows that this is not part of the culture. She also knows her mother is slipping fast. She decides to go back to the United States to live for a while. While she is there, her son Mitch becomes engaged, and Rita loves her future daughter-in-law. Her mother is sleeping more and more, and Rita gets the idea that maybe her mother is holding on to life because she is there visiting. She decides to return to Bali, and ten days later, her mother dies. Rita heads back to the United States to take care of the funeral arrangements and other legalities. She also attends her son's wedding. After that, she goes back to Bali. She feels as if there isn't much that she can contribute to the culture anymore. People are too busy to study English, and they have completed the work she was doing on the stories. She takes a trip to Lombok for a scuba diving course. Rita is delighted with what she sees underwater. After class, she is invited to join the women of the village out in the street. She is supposed to wear traditional clothing. Rita does this, but has no idea what she is doing. She finds out that she is part of a procession that is going through the streets, and her shoes are very thin. It hurts her to walk.

Rita meets some people that are staying in a nearby bungalow. She spends a lot of time with them. Her new friends, Lars and Nirin, are foodies, and they spend a lot of time



enjoying each other's company and trying new foods. Rita continues her scuba diving classes and realizes that she is having problems. She does not pass the advanced course, and she completely agrees with the instructor's decision to fail her. Over the next few days, she does some diving for fun and develops more confidence. She takes the assessment dive and earns her Advanced Diver Card. After she takes the diving course, Rita decides that it is time to leave Bali. This makes everyone sad, but they understand. During her last day there, she asks to go fishing for eels. It's a wonderful experience. As she heads for the airport, friends and neighbors wave her off. She knows Bali will always be part of her, and it's a place where she has found serenity.

Chapter 16, "Vancouver and Seattle," begins in 1997, after Rita has left Bali. She first arrived there in 1988, and many things have happened while she was gone. She determines that she wants to spend more time near her children, but doesn't necessarily want to live with them. She decides to move to Vancouver, which is three hours from her children in Seattle.

Rita finds a beautiful house and quickly makes friends with the neighbors. Her children frequently come to visit her, and she gets to know the locals in the area. She plans to stay there for three months, and her children suggest that she move to Seattle when her time is up. Rita is happy about that, and finds an apartment near them. From the day she moves in, she makes friends with the neighbors in the upstairs apartment. She furnishes her house with items from the Goodwill and realizes that for the first time ever, she is living on her own in the United States. Not wanting to burden her children, Rita develops her own network of friends. Her house is open to many visitors, and one day she gets a call from Lars and Nirin, who are planning to be in the area. They stay in her apartment, and they cook wonderful meals together. The guests throw her a dinner party for her birthday and decorate the place so it looks fancy.

Several weeks after they visit, Rita goes out to buy a rain parka. After she has paid for public transportation and shopped for her rain parka, she realizes that she has forgotten to bring her wallet. She has no money. No one will give her any change at the store. One kind man on the line donates enough money for her to take the bus back home. She thinks about how much the kind gesture meant to her. While she is living in Seattle, Rita hears about the economic disaster hitting southeast Asia. She is concerned about her friends in Indonesia and decides to go back and visit them to see that they are all right. She doesn't appreciate the caste system or how women are treated as second-class citizens there, but her heart aches to go back.



# Chapters 17-19

## Chapters 17-19 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 17, "New Zealand Via Bali," Rita goes back to check on her friends to make sure that they are financially all right. She finds a different world than the one that she left. Her time there is bittersweet. She enjoys seeing everybody, but she sees how hard their life has become. In the past, she was unable to give them any gifts without their returning something to her. Now they are a bit more accepting, but she has to be careful how she offers gifts so she doesn't hurt their pride.

When she leaves Bali, Rita heads off to New Zealand. A friend of a friend is meeting her, and she is able to purchase their old car. It takes some adjustment to learn how to drive on the left side of the road. Rita is looking for a place to stay for six months, but is having a hard time finding it. She attends a concert that welcomes newcomers, and makes new friends. Through her new contacts, she is able to visit a school where they are teaching in Maori. While she enjoys the people that she is meeting in the town, she can't find any place that she really wants to live. At a new friend's suggestion, she looks in Coromandel and finds the perfect home to rent for six months. Rita rents the house from a woman who is also a writer and realizes that she is taking over the woman's life as well. She becomes part of the woman's book club, takes care of a cat for the woman, and tends to the garden. She also becomes friends with some of the woman's friends. Rita gets to meet the townspeople and fits in easily. She visits the school and volunteers there regularly so the children get to know her. When Rita moves there, she is drawn to the location because she heard about the arts. She doesn't meet any real artists for a while, but eventually meets some and enjoys spending time with the actors, potters, musicians and other artists and writers.

When she has been there for a bit, she develops a daily rhythm. Rita has fun learning about the different nuances of language. Her children, including her daughter-in-law, come to visit her, and they all have a very enjoyable time. They take time to tour the country. After they are gone, Rita visits a farm and stops at an island where she meets a man who lives alone, sometimes going for two years without ever leaving the island. She doesn't think she can ever live like that. After she is in New Zealand for six months, Rita takes a trip to the United States. She does some business and now has a writing deadline. She knows that it's time to write seriously. Back in New Zealand, she works very hard at her writing, but occasionally takes breaks. On one such break, she decides to visit a mussel farm. Soon she begins to feel restless again.

As Chapter 18, "In Thailand Speaking Food," begins, Rita has been in New Zealand for nine months. She decides to take a vacation to Thailand. She has always loved food and is especially drawn to Thai cuisine. She wants to go to a place where she can speak the language and wants to learn how to cook Thai food. She stays with a friend of a friend and begins to learn about the culture in the area.



It's very difficult to communicate sometimes. Rita manages to figure out that one man in the household is heading up a campaign to keep a power plant out of the area. She begins to eat some of the meals with family, and they enjoy her appreciation of their food, even the hot, spicy food. The family members take her to see a temple getting built, and when they get back to the bungalows, she takes a rest. Later, Rita is called to help in the kitchen. She is excited to be part of the communal process, and they make savory entrées that have her mouth watering. When the preparation is almost done, she discovers that they are making the food to sell at the night market. She doesn't get to eat any of it. Rita is asked if she can give English lessons to one of the children, and she agrees. The next day she visits the market and learns about the different products and spices for sale. That afternoon, she helps cook again. Rita begins the English lessons and shares some of the children's books that she has written. The lessons go well. The day after that, she helps a group of women make food for a ceremony. It's a busy area with people talking, chopping, grinding, and peeling. They all share the work. Rita discovers a dish called ho mok, which she calls some of the best food that she is ever eaten.

In Chapter 19, "A Journey Still in Process," Rita's visa is about to expire. She donates her car to a school so they can auction it off. She and the former car owner request that the money raised from the sale of the car go toward purchasing books. Rita goes to Seattle to visit her daughter, on to Atlanta to visit her son and daughter-in-law, and then on to New York where she sublets an apartment so she can work on her book. She reflects on all her journeys and all she has learned. As she writes the book, she slips into her own world where she reconnects with all the people that she has met in the past fifteen years. True to form, she can't crush the insatiable urge to go out and meet people all over the world. This is shown in the last few paragraphs of the book, where she invites readers to her web page and to communicate with her through a particular e-mail address. She ends the book with an invitation for readers contact her.





# Characters

## Rita Golden Gelman

Rita Golden Gelman is a woman who has an insatiable urge to travel. When the book begins, she is a mother and wife who is dissatisfied with her glitzy life. Her relationship with her children stays firm, but her marriage crumbles. Even as it is falling apart, she takes off to explore new lands. Rita isn't interested in taking common tours and just looking at pretty views. She wants to get out there and experience different cultures.

She is a big woman, but doesn't let her size hold her back. She traipses through swamps and treks over mountains. Very open and very trusting, Rita faces her fears directly and overcomes insecurities as she learns new languages, tries new foods, and interacts with people in different lands. She's a children's book writer, which helps her work from the road. Since her children are grown up, she has the freedom to come and go at will.

## Jan

Jan is Rita's daughter. She is a writer for social events. Like her mother, she has a keen interest in travel. This is shown by the numerous times she joins her mother on trips around the globe. She doesn't just spend a day or two, but generally spends several weeks touring around with her mother and living with the native people.

Jan seems to enjoy being with people in other cultures, but she is not one that is swayed by glamour. She is very respectful to the people that she meets, and handles tricky situations with ease (along with her mother), such as when a prince proposes to her.

Rita is special to Jan, and that is shown in the ways that Jan constantly keeps in touch with her mother. They regularly travel to see each other, and Jan requests that her mother move closer to her. When Rita lives in cultures that Jan is not familiar with, she is concerned about her mother's safety.

## Mitch

Mitch is Rita's son, an award-winning writer of whom she is very proud.

## Lionel

Lionel is one of two Englishmen who have dinner with Rita, and he becomes her first one-night-stand.



## **Pili**

Pili is a twenty-one-year-old mother who invites Rita into her house when she is learning Spanish in Cuernavaca.

## **Raul**

Raul is Pili's husband.

## **The Traveler's Network**

The travelers network is a group of people who are on the road long-term. They enjoy keeping costs down and traveling with others, frequently backpacking and camping or staying in hostels.

## **Juanita**

Juanita is the first person to befriend Rita in the Zapotec village.

## **Brigitte**

Brigitte is a French woman who Rita works with in Guatemala City.

## **Marie**

Marie is an indigenous woman that Rita meets, and who invites Rita to join her family on a memorable beach vacation.

## **MargotMarco**

Marco is a cab driver that Rita meets in Nicaragua. She ends up living with his family during her stay.

## **Felipe**

Felipe is a man that stays in the same house as Rita in the Galapagos Islands. The two become lovers during her visit.



## **Soehardjono (Jono)**

Jono is a man working in the Indonesian Consulate in New York. He helps connect Rita with families where she can stay as a guest.

## **Professor Birute Galdikas**

Professor Birute Galdikas is a woman that Rita knows from her physical anthropology classes at UCLA. She meets her in Indonesia, and the two agree to work on a book together.

## **Tu Aji**

Tu Aji is a prince who is considered to be an unofficial scholar of the Kerambitan dynasty. He and Rita become very close, and Rita is accepted into his family.

## **Amparo**

Amparo is the woman hired to take care of Rita's mother back in the United States.

## **Frances Golden**

Rita's mother is a woman who is interested in culture. She suffers from Parkinson's disease, and Rita is regularly leaving countries to fly to the United States to check on her mother.

## **Frances Golden**

Albert Golden is Rita's father.

## **Hans**

Hans is a man that was part of the only organized tour that Rita took. His unwillingness to look to others shortened their trip and almost caused his own death.

## **Michael**

Michael is the guide on the only official tour Rita takes in this book.



## **Dayu Mayuni**

Dayu Mayuni is the wife in a family that Rita considers her second family in Bali. She offers Rita a beautiful place to stay and runs a museum filled with exquisite sculpture.

## **Lars**

Lars is a chef from Sweden who Rita meets while she is in Lombok. They get along perfectly, and enjoy spending time with each other.

## **Nirin**

Nirin is a doctor who is traveling with Lars. She enjoys food as much as Rita and Lars, and they all get along very well.



## Objects/Places

### Los Angeles

Los Angeles is a place that Rita lived before she began traveling the world.

### Mexico City

Mexico City is the first place that Rita traveled to when she was separated from her husband.

### Oaxaca

Oaxaca is the second place that Rita travels to, before leaving for the Zapotec Village.

### Zapotec Village

When Rita decides to stay somewhere long-term, the first place she goes to is a Zapotec village forty miles outside of Oaxaca.

### Palenque

Palenque is a place that Rita decides to visit because everyone says that it is amazing. She is overwhelmed with the beauty of the jungle and the Mayan ruins.

### Venice, California

Venice, California is the place where Rita lives while the divorce legalities are taken care of. She does not feel at home and is eager to hit the road again.

### Managua

Managua is the town in Nicaragua that Rita settles in.

### Israel

Rita stays in a youth hostel in Tel Aviv as she plans the rest of her trip in Israel. While she is in Israel, she stays in a kibbutz, stays with people in Mea She'arim, and visits a Druse village.



## **San Cristobal**

San Cristobal is an island in the Galapagos Islands where Rita travels after she has been to Israel.

## **Waltham, Massachusetts**

Waltham, Massachusetts is the place that Rita goes to attend a high school reunion. It is here that she gets her next travel idea of going to Indonesia.

## **Indonesia**

Yogyakarta is the place in Indonesia that Rita goes to in order to learn the language and learn about the culture. While she is there, she also takes a trip to see a burial ceremony in Borneo, and lives in an orangutan camp called Camp Leakey while she is writing a book.

## **New York**

Rita travels to New York several times to visit her children and for business meetings with her publishers.

## **Bali**

Rita goes to visit Bali and ends up living with a prince and his family. She is very happy there in a place called Kirambitan.

## **Irian Jaya**

Irian Jaya is located in New Guinea. Rita goes here to trek through the mountains. She stays for several days at a remote village in the mountains called Holuwon.

## **Lombok**

Lombok is a place where Rita goes to learn how to scuba dive. She goes there with her friends to celebrate the end of Ramadan, a Muslim holiday.

## **Asmat**

Rita travels through the Asmat lands on her tour with Michael. It's her first official organized tour.



## **Fairfield Beach**

When Rita goes back to the United States to stay near her ailing mother, she stays in Fairfield Beach. She lives there for almost an entire year.

## **Belcarra, Vancouver**

Rita settles in Vancouver for three months to be near her children without living right on top of them.

## **Seattle**

Rita's children live in Seattle, and they ask their mother to stay near them, so she moves to an apartment near her children.

## **New Zealand**

When Rita visits New Zealand, she doesn't find any place to live at first, but finally finds a home in Coromandel.

## **Thailand**

Rita goes on vacation to Ban Krud in Thailand. She wants to learn to cook their traditional food, and learns great lessons.



# Themes

## Travel

One of the main themes of this book is living a nomadic life. It's the title as well as the premise of the book. Throughout the pages of the book, Rita travels to many different locations, experiencing many different types of adventures. Most of these adventures are good, and all of the adventures come with a lesson.

Rita learns what it is like to live in a war-torn country, she experiences the beauty of the jungle, and enjoys underwater vistas. She learns to speak other languages and try new foods. Everywhere she goes, Rita learns how to relate to others and takes part in daily household chores as well as special ceremonies and celebrations.

The world is large, and it is small. Rita finds this out as she is taken off the beaten path to visit places that take her back in time. She goes other places and meets people she has met from distant locations. Every new location has its own story and its own people. Each culture should be observed and every person should be respected, in Rita's opinion.

Everywhere she turns, Rita makes friends. She knows how to appreciate a culture without interfering. Right from the start, she makes travel plans spur-of-the-moment, frequently going to a place on the advice of a stranger. The strategy rarely fails her, and when she struggles, she comes out stronger. Keeping her mind open and her suitcase light, Rita is ready to pick up and go when an opportunity presents itself.

## Sisterhood

Sisterhood is another strong theme in this novel. Traveling the world is exciting, but what makes it very unusual for Rita, is that she is traveling the world alone, as a female. She meets women from many other different cultures. Some are selling homemade items on the streets, some are taking care of babies in the back woods of the jungle, some are second, third, and fourth wives. While she doesn't always agree with the way the woman live or are treated, she always finds a common bond in the sisterhood.

There several two areas in which Rita especially feels the bond of sisterhood. One is in the matter of dress. She discovers throughout her travels that the woman are not really ready to accept her until she looks like them. Once she dons the traditional garb in a village, the women are much more likely to approach her and try to communicate with her.

Another place that they find a common bond is in the kitchen. Whenever she is helping women repair food by cutting, chopping, sautéing, and stirring, Rita connects with them at a different level. She becomes part of the chatter and part of the community. In her travels, Rita also finds a common sisterhood bond in emotions and relations. She sees





this when faced with suffering children, and observes the common reaction in the sacrificial ceremony.

Rita reaches out to women. She feels a special closeness to them, whether they are trying to learn what it might be like to be as free as she is at a high school reunion, or whether she is traveling through the mountains with other women singing songs in native villages. The sense of sisterhood is strong globally.

## Freedom

The theme of freedom is shown many times throughout this novel. At first, the freedom originates from a bad situation. Rita's marriage is disintegrating, so she spends some time traveling alone for a few months. Her initial foray into freedom is scary, since she is in a different country by herself. As she faces different situations, and learns to take care of herself, she becomes a stronger woman and is able to relish her freedom. When the divorce papers finally come through, instead of cowering in getting worried about her future, she is ready to rush forward and embrace the freedom.

When Rita visits places of political unrest, she is reminded of the gift she has of living in the United States where she has the freedom to travel at will. Rita uses the freedom of her travels to experience new things such as letting her mind go free to really experience the spiritualism in different countries and trying psychedelic mushrooms. Sometimes her sense of freedom causes difficulties, such as when she is in countries that treat women as second-class citizens. This is very challenging for her to deal with, and she knows she can't change it.

One of Rita's greatest assets is a natural ability to be free to trust people. This is contrary to what most individuals are taught. Because she trusts people, she is offered numerous opportunities and housing accommodations that enhance her nomadic lifestyle. Rita believes strongly in serendipity, and the freedom she feels allows her to grab the chances to try new things as they come her way.



# Style

## Perspective

Rita Golden Gelman considers herself to be a modern-day nomad. She loves to travel around, meet people and learn about different cultures. One thing that's different about her traveling is that she really immerses herself in a culture by staying with the people that she visits for long periods of time.

This book is a compilation of fifteen years of travel. Rita writes about her experiences at the end of the fifteen years. She changes some of the names and take some liberty with the chronology. Some of the chapters come from different books that she has written, such as her Nicaragua experience.

"Tales of a Female Nomad" is a reflection, not only of the adventures and the different people that she met, but also of the lessons learned. Many chapters end with contemplation over what has happened to Rita, and how it affects her. Rita has a unique appreciation for nearly everyone she meets. She is nonjudgmental for the most part, and the times where she does judge, she points it out as if it's a negative trait that she just can't control based on a unique situations.

The book shows how Rita makes a decision to travel to various locations. It shows her strategies for meeting members of a culture, and learning how to live with them. Fitting into a community, especially one that speaks a different language, is challenging, and this book shows how Rita does it repetitively.

## Tone

The tone of this book is subjective. "Tales of a Female Nomad" is very one-sided, written in first person and shows the world as Rita views it. There are many occasions in which she comes across as a hero, and many negative stories are presented in the book are other people's fault. Because it is first person, the reader gets a clear view of what it's like to look at another culture from the perspective of a middle-aged woman from the United States.

Rita uses her experiences with the other cultures to introduce readers to new concepts, foods, and ideas. As she describes different languages and foods, she does it in a lighthearted, anecdotal way that doesn't overwhelm the reader. New words and concepts are integrated into the text in a natural flow. Rita comes across as optimistic and adventurous.

Her optimism is so strong throughout the book that when she is dealing with negative situations, it's difficult to truly assess the difficulties in the situations. For example, in her chapter dealing with the oppression of the political situation in Nicaragua, she does highlight a visit to a town where they discuss an attack seriously, and the reader begins



to identify with the harshness of war. However, this is a brief section of the book, and most of the chapter is about a happy journey where she and her comrades travel around and entertain people by juggling. Instead of thinking of the impact of politics in the country as the chapter suggests, the reader is left with the sense of fun and lightness that comes from amusing anecdotes revolving around a taxi driver who is always late and entertaining travels.

## Structure

"Tales of a Female Nomad" has a preface followed by nineteen chapters. It's also broken up into sections based on the different countries. Each chapter has a title that shows what the focus is. For example, in the section entitled Mexico, there are three chapters. The first one, entitled "The Beginning," focuses on Rita's initial travels and why she went to different places. The next chapter, "In a Zapotec Village," highlights her time in the Zapotec Village while the third chapter, "Letting go in Palenque and L.A." focuses on the time after she has left the Zapotec Village. The next section is Guatemala.

At the beginning of each chapter, Rita expresses where she is mentally and/or physically. This is a great help to readers who have to put the book down for a while. When picking it back up, even a few days later, readers can jump right back into the story. Throughout the chapters, Rita relates events and anecdotes that stood out to her in her fifteen years of travel. Since she is looking back on the events, yet she is writing in present tense, she often adds notes in parenthesis stating what will happen in the future, or noting what she later learned about the instance.

Most of the chapters in the book ends with a brief analysis of what has happened in Rita's traveling experiences. She analyzes the good and the bad and determines where she is going to go next in location and action. At the very end of the book, in the last page, the author extends an invitation to readers to connect with her online through her website and e-mail. Nine years after the book was published, the website is alive and active, and Rita's stories continue.



## Quotes

"I move throughout the world without a plan, guided by instinct, connecting through trust, and constantly watching for serendipitous opportunities."

Preface, p. vii

"When I returned from the Galapagos, that long-dormant fire of adventure had been rekindled and the glamour of my life turned gray."

Chap. 1, p. 4

"I am symbolically peeling away the person I have become and releasing the woman who has been trapped inside all these years."

Chap. 1, p. 15

"My experience of chicharron is a different kind of affirmation. It suggests that I have let go of the old and given myself permission to move on."

Chap. 1, p. 16

"Juanita's lesson would serve me well for the rest of my life: connection requires participation."

Chap. 2, p. 31

"I have always dreamed of owning nothing but the step I could carry on my back."

Chap. 3, pp. 37-38

"But I'm not running away. I'm running toward ... toward adventure, toward discovery, toward diversity."

Chap. 3, pp. 37-38

"My experience of the tropical rainforest was like stepping into another dimension of life on earth."

Chap. 9, p. 135

"As a guest in this culture, my role is to observe, not to judge."

Chap. 10, p. 152

"But as I think about it, I realize that I do have communities; I create them wherever I live."

Chap. 11, p. 173

"I always get annoyed at myself for not planning ahead, but I almost never do."

Chap. 17, p. 258

"People often ask me how I have managed to have so many interesting people-experiences in my nomadic wanderings. It's because I trust; I always have."

Chap. 17, p. 265



"My life is constantly enriched because I trust people."  
Chap. 17, p. 265

"The fear of sounding foolish is the insidious enemy of learning a foreign language."  
Chap. 18, p. 287

"One of the most important things I have learned in the last fifteen years is how to enjoy  
and savor the present."  
Chap. 19, p. 302



## Topics for Discussion

What prevented Rita from traveling at the beginning of the book?

What were some of the obstacles she had to overcome once she began traveling on her own?

Why is it different for a woman to travel on her own as opposed to a man, and how did she overcome this obstacle?

What lessons did Rita learn about politics and freedom when she was in Nicaragua?

What did she learn about spiritualism throughout the book?

What impact did her travels have on her family?

What was Rita's key to success as a Nomad?