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Backpacker

Chaim Noy

Department of Communication, University of South Florida, Tampa, USA

Backpacking is a form of modern tourism characterized by a particular combination of travel practices and discourses. These include relatively lengthy travel duration, typically longer than annual holidays; use of inexpensive ► [accommodation](#) and ► [transportation](#), with preference for youth hostels, YMCAs, and other local facilities, plus a corresponding preference for local ground transportation (instead of high-end commercial and airborne transportation); intense social interactions and networking through dominant romanticist discourse entailing ► [authenticity](#), ► [novelty](#), and spontaneity, often manifested in contrasting the categories of “backpackers” and “mass tourists”; and discourse of initiation and rite of passage, usually from adolescence to early adulthood. Backpackers have typically been characterized as young adults (around their 20s), originating from Western countries, favoring destinations in the developing countries.

Modern emergence

Adler’s (1985) sociological analysis traces the histories of modern backpacking to two earlier

forms of ► [travel](#), which were extensive and which were followed mostly by adolescents and young adults. The first is the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’ ► [Grand Tour](#), pursued by European aristocracy for ► [education](#) and initiation purposes. The second is tramping associated travel, favored by working class European youths since the Middle Ages. While the former (the more popular type) suggests a “top-down” cultural process of democratization, the latter suggests an “upwardly rather than downwardly mobile cultural tradition” (1985: 337). These convergent travel cultures partly account for contemporary backpacker heterogeneity, including the romanticist travel ideology and practices such as combining work with travel. More recent influences on the experience and popularity of backpacking in the second half of the twentieth century (post-World War II) are the affordability of air travel and the countercultures of the Beat Movement (1950s) and the hippies (1960s). In both cases, travel to Far East destinations (the Beatles in the 1960s), extensive hitchhiking, and a rich travel lore (Ginsberg’ poetry, Kerouac’s novels) were central and inspired the backpackers of the 1970s.

The unique characteristics of backpacking tourism have drawn much ► [attention](#), in both popular imagination and academic scholarship, resulting in a rich empirical and theoretical body of research. Initial reflections were offered by Cohen (1972) who addressed backpackers within the conceptual framework of classification

of tourists' experiences and ► **roles**. In Cohen's initial typologies, which classified tourists according to their adventurousness and phenomenological distancing from one's existential center, a number of categories were suggested (such as "drifter" and "explorer"). These embodied the "noninstitutionalized tourists' roles" (1972: 168–169). Yet with the exponential growth of backpacking in the 1980s (in line with the growth of tourism as a whole), backpackers have come to be seen as a subcategory in modern tourism, with its unique characteristics and a significant degree of heterogeneity.

Studies of backpacking have since focused on such issues as change in travel trends, itineraries, and destinations across time, as well as examining the correspondence between backpackers' travel ideology and ► **discourse** and the actual travel behavior. Noy's (2004, 2007) works show how the trip is framed as a rite of passage, whereby backpackers narrate travel-induced self-transformation stories, or how, despite the romanticist image of a lone traveler, backpackers engage in effect in intense social interactions that sustain a strong sense of community. In light of the romanticist image of the male tourists, attention is paid to women backpackers' experiences and to the neocolonial ideologies embodied in contemporary (Eurocentric) backpacking cultures. Still other research illuminates how lucrative the backpacking market has become, and this is despite the term "budget traveler" (Hampton 2013) and the effects of institutionalization, ► **commercialization**, and "massification" which threaten travelers' romanticist ideology (Noy 2006). These studies de-emphasize boundaries between categories in travel/tourism studies and point at the resonances (rather than discrepancies) between backpacking and other forms of modern travel.

Trends and future developments

Contemporary backpacking trends are characterized by developing global itineraries, by a growing heterogeneity in backpackers' ► **demography**, and by addressing the ► **impact**

they carry on their destinations. With regard to the backpackers' growing heterogeneity, recent research calls ► **attention** to a growing age variability: backpackers' populations nowadays extend to include both younger and considerably older ages (including multigeneration backpacking, such as parents traveling to or with their children). Further, more and more backpackers originate from Asia and South America, rather than from Western countries. The trip itself is expanded culturally and is embodied in repeated trips and in the transformation of backpacking into a longer and extensive endeavor, namely, a ► **lifestyle**.

Another recent ► **development** concerns backpackers' enthusiastic appropriation of new mobile (social) media and their consequences on travel practices and ► **ideology**. Although research is yet to produce a rich description of backpackers' preferences with regard to mobile media, their documented actual use and the ► **adaptation** of new technologies onto the backpacking travel culture suggest that new ► **media** are highly popular with backpackers. It is also clear that the introduction of ► **social media** onto backpackers' communities carries impact on their sense of authenticity and spontaneity, which is essential for the (self-)definition of backpacking tourism. For instance, the persistent question of how the extended trip, which is pursued as a rite of passage that entails a distancing from backpackers' families, will be affected by the availability and ► **accessibility** of the travelers remains to be further explored. The emergence of the term "flashpacker" (Paris 2012), addressing a high-tech and "connected" travel style, where technological savvy backpackers make frequent and creative use of mobile social media, suggests that shifts may be taking place in the trope of the backpacker, as it moves deeper into the twenty-first century.

See also ► **Authenticity**, ► **Budget tourism**, ► **drifter**, ► **experience**, ► **rite of passage**, ► **youth tourism**.

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