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Backpacker Tourism

Chaim Noy
School of Communication, Bar Ilan University,
Ramat Gan, Israel

Definition

Backpacker tourism is a form of modern tourism characterized by a combination of travel practices and discourses. These include lengthy travel duration (typically longer than annual holidays); flexible and individually planned itineraries; budget accommodation (with a preference for youth hostels and YMCAs); budget transportation (with a preference for local ground transportation modes); frequent social interactions and networking (usually in backpackers' enclaves); romanticist discourse or travel ethos stressing 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 historically been characterized as young adults from Western countries, favoring faraway destinations in developing countries.

Modern Emergence

Sociological analysis traces modern backpacking to at least two earlier forms of travel, which were pursued mostly by European adolescents and young adults: the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries' Grand Tour, pursued by aristocracy for purposes of education and initiation, and tramping associated travel, favored by working-class youths since the Middle Ages. While the former entails a sociocultural process of democratization, the latter suggests an "upwardly rather than downwardly mobile cultural tradition" (Adler 1985: 337). These convergent youth travel traditions account in part for contemporary backpacker heterogeneity, including travel ideology/ethos and practices such as combining work with travel.

More recent influences on the growth and spread of backpacking in the second half of the twentieth century (post-WWII) include the affordability of air travel and the countercultures of the Beat Movement (1950s) and the hippies (1960s). In both cases, travel to destinations in Asia (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 special characteristics of backpacking tourism have drawn much attention, both popular and academic, producing ample empirical and conceptual work. An initial framework typologized backpackers (and tourists more generally) according to adventurousness and

phenomenological distance from one's existential center, suggesting such categories as "drifter" and "explorer" – both revolving around "non-institutionalized tourists' roles" (Cohen 1972: 168–169). Yet, with the exponential growth of backpacking since the 1980s (in line with the expansion of international tourism), it is seen as an increasingly diversified and heterogeneous subcategory of tourism (O'Regan 2021).

Studies of backpacking have since focused on such characteristics as social interaction, change in travel trends and destinations across time, institutionalization, and the correspondence between backpackers' ideology and actual travel behavior. Findings suggest that the trip is framed as a rite of passage, whereby backpackers narrate travel-induced self-transformation stories, which are realized in terms of sociocultural capital in both home and global backpacking cultures (Noy 2004). In light of the romanticist image of the male tourists, attention is turning to growingly different types of backpackers (gender, nationality, etc. – see O'Regan 2021), and to the neocolonial ideologies embodied in Eurocentric backpacking cultures. Still other research illuminates how lucrative the backpacking market has become, despite the term "budget traveler," and the effects of institutionalization, commercialization, and mediatization which threaten travelers' romanticist ideology (Cohen 2018).

Future Developments

Contemporary backpacking trends are characterized by a growing heterogeneity in backpackers' demography, by further shifts in global itineraries, and by addressing the impact on destinations. Research is characterized by theoretical sophistication, intersectionality, and re-conceptualization of earlier theorizing. Heterogeneity in socio-demographic backpackers' variables includes a growing age variability (younger and considerably older ages, and multigeneration backpacking), and a growing variability in countries and cultures of origin and destination. Centrally at stake is East Asia, and specifically China, as both a leading backpacking destination and a source of

backpacking cultures with their distinct travel characteristics (Zhang et al. 2017). Gendered patterns and experiences too are receiving more research attention, intersecting with cultural backgrounds. These and other developments challenge researchers' conceptualizations not only of backpacking at the present, but also of adequacy of future (and past) theorizing (Dayour et al. 2017).

Another recent development concerns the consequences online social media and mobile communication have on backpacking. Although research is yet to produce a rich description of backpackers' preferences with regard to these, the documented actual use and the adaptation of new technologies onto backpacking travel cultures suggest that new media are highly popular with backpackers (Molz and Paris 2015). It is also clear that the introduction of social and spatio-mobile media into backpackers' communities carries impact on their socio-spatial sense of authenticity and spontaneity, which is essential for the (self-)definition of backpacking. The persistent question of how the extended trip, which is pursued as a rite of passage that entails distancing from backpackers' families, will be affected by the availability and accessibility of the travelers (a state of constant global connectedness) remains to be further explored. That technologically 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 online and offline spheres of the twenty-first century.

Lastly, the effects of regional, state, and global COVID-19 restrictions and regulations on backpacking await to be witnessed and examined. These will present intersections with the specific characteristics of backpacking tourism, such as age, frequent social interactions in enclaves between the backpackers themselves and between local service providers, gender, and the multi-destination nature of the long-haul trip.

See Also

▶ Alcohol and Drug Tourism
▶ Budget Tourism

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