



# Beyond Backpacker Tourism

Mobilities and Experiences



Edited by  
Kevin Hannam and Anya Diekmann

## Beyond Backpacker Tourism



**To all of our children, may they all be able to travel**

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## **TOURISM AND CULTURAL CHANGE**

*Series Editors: Professor Mike Robinson, Centre for Tourism and Cultural Change, Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds, UK and Dr Alison Phipps, University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK*

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# Preface

This is the third volume of the on-going research programme on backpacking developed by the Backpacker Research Group (BRG) of the Association for Tourism and Leisure Education (ATLAS). The BRG aims to act as a platform for the discussion and debate between researchers of backpacker travel worldwide. It follows on from the success of the first volume *The Global Nomad* (Richards & Wilson, 2004) and the second volume *Backpacker Tourism* (Hannam & Ateljevic, 2007) and seeks to further shape this area of tourism research.

The idea for this particular book was initiated at a meeting at Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla, India, in March 2008, attended by members of the BRG, including researchers from the UK, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Finland, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, the USA and Malaysia. Drafts of some of the chapters contained in this volume were presented at this three-day meeting and these generated continued discussion and updates on the nature, meaning and significance of backpacker tourism. The meeting also enabled feedback to be given to the contributors of this volume and help to develop the concept of the book. Subsequently, other authors who could not attend the meeting also submitted chapters that were refereed and accepted. At the time of writing, new meetings of the BRG are being planned and further information about ATLAS BRG activities can be found on the internet ([www.atlas-euro.org](http://www.atlas-euro.org)).

Kevin Hannam and Anya Diekmann  
Sunderland and Brussels, July 2009

# Contents

|                                                                                                                                               |     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Contributors . . . . .                                                                                                                        | vii |
| Acknowledgements . . . . .                                                                                                                    | ix  |
| Preface . . . . .                                                                                                                             | xi  |
| 1 From Backpacking to Flashpacking: Developments in<br>Backpacker Tourism Research<br><i>Kevin Hannam and Anya Diekmann</i> . . . . .         | 1   |
| 2 Not Such a Rough or Lonely Planet? Backpacker Tourism:<br>An Academic Journey<br><i>Mark P. Hampton</i> . . . . .                           | 8   |
| 3 Flashpacking in Fiji: Reframing the 'Global Nomad' in a<br>Developing Destination<br><i>Jeff Jarvis and Victoria Peel</i> . . . . .         | 21  |
| 4 The Virtualization of Backpacker Culture: Virtual Mooring,<br>Sustained Interactions and Enhanced Mobilities<br><i>Cody Paris</i> . . . . . | 40  |
| 5 Reconceptualising Lifestyle Travellers: Contemporary<br>'Drifters'<br><i>Scott Cohen</i> . . . . .                                          | 64  |
| 6 Backpacker Hostels: Place and Performance<br><i>Michael O'Regan</i> . . . . .                                                               | 85  |
| 7 Euro-railing: A Mobile-ethnography of Backpacker<br>Train Travel<br><i>James Johnson</i> . . . . .                                          | 102 |
| 8 Budget Backpackers Testing Comfort Zones in<br>Mongolia<br><i>Claudia Bell</i> . . . . .                                                    | 114 |
| 9 Lesbian Backpacker Travel Experiences in New Zealand<br><i>Linda Myers</i> . . . . .                                                        | 126 |
| 10 Backpackers as Volunteer Tourists: Evidence from<br>Tanzania<br><i>Kath Laythorpe</i> . . . . .                                            | 140 |

11 Backpackers in Norway: Landscapes, Ties and Platforms  
*Gareth Butler* ..... 153

12 Town of 1770, Australia – The Creation of a New Backpacker  
Brand  
*Peter Welk* ..... 169

13 A Clash of Cultures or Definitions? Complexity and  
Backpacker Tourism in Residential Communities  
*Robyn Bushell and Kay Anderson* ..... 187

14 Towards Strategic Planning for an Emerging Backpacker  
Tourism Destination: The South African Experience  
*Christian Rogerson* ..... 203

References ..... 221

## Chapter 1

# ***From Backpacking to Flashpacking: Developments in Backpacker Tourism Research***

KEVIN HANNAM and ANYA DIEKMANN

### **Introduction**

The present volume is the third in a series of books that have discussed research into the development of the backpacker tourism market over the last 10 years. From drifters to backpackers, travellers to flashpackers, this introductory chapter will examine the recent research into backpacker tourism. This book, however, is not an exhaustive account of backpacker tourism research, nor is it meant to be. However, we believe that this particular volume adds significantly to the academic literature on backpacker tourism and independent travel more generally by enhancing the theoretical, methodological and geographical research on the subject. As we shall see, some of the key issues are the changing profile of the backpacker market segment, the adoption of new means of travel, the use of new technologies, as well as the creation of new spaces or enclaves.

While it is not the aim of the present collection to provide a comprehensive literature review of the research to date on backpacker tourism (see Richards & Wilson, 2004), this introduction firstly seeks to outline some of the conceptual developments in backpacker tourism since *Backpacker Tourism* was published (Hannam & Ateljevic, 2007a). Secondly, this introduction provides a summary of the contributions in the present collection.

### **Flashpackers, Backpackers and Travellers**

One of the key developments in backpacker tourism, in recent years, has been in terms of the notion of the 'flashpacker'. The so called flashpacker has emerged as a new and key constituent of contemporary travel and exemplifies the changing demographics in western societies

where older age at marriage, older age having children, increased affluence and new technological developments, alongside increased holiday and leisure time have all come together.

The flashpacker has thus been variously defined as the older twenty to thirty-something backpacker, who travels with an expensive backpack or a trolley-type case, stays in a variety of accommodation depending on location, has greater disposable income, visits more 'off the beaten track' locations, carries a laptop, or at least a 'flashdrive' and a mobile phone, but who engages with the mainstream backpacker culture. Or more simply defined on Travelblogs.com (2009) as, backpacking 'with style' or even, backpacking with 'bucks and toys'. It is also seen as 'doable' with children in tow – with one flashpacker couple recently advertising the birth of their 'flashbaby' while on their travels (Flashpackingwife.com).

Indeed, Jarvis and Peel (this volume) cite *The Future Laboratory*, who in 2004 identified 'flashpackers' as older travellers on career breaks who 'can afford to splash out on some of life's luxuries when the going on the road gets tough' (The Future Laboratory, 2004: 13). More recently, this phenomenon has been explicitly highlighted by the backpacker industry, as a major hostel company advertises: 'Looking to treat yourself but, considering the current economic climate, afraid to splash out? With some of the luxury hostels listed you can pamper yourself without breaking the bank...' (Hostelworld.com, 2009).

By contrast, the work by Cohen (this volume) also reminds us of a different phenomenon – the lifestyle tourist who, like the earlier 'drifter', still spends the majority of his or her life indefinitely 'on the road' engaged in the backpacker culture. For both the flashbacker and the lifestyle traveller, however, it has to be recognised that new technologies have transformed the ways in which they travel and engage with their home-place and their social ties, as Paris (this volume) demonstrates. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that the backpacker tourism market is still dominated by many younger and less affluent tourists who spend most of their time in what have become mainstream and even institutionalised backpacker enclaves in 'traditional' destinations.

## Structure of the Volume

The present volume, thus, complements the aforementioned two previous books. It adds new theoretical dimensions in terms of a focus on mobilities and experiences and also broadens the scope of the research geographically. Indeed the present volume includes, alongside the traditional backpacker destinations of Australia, New Zealand and

South Africa, research in lesser known backpacker destinations, such as Norway, Tanzania and Mongolia. The book also engages present research of how backpacker tourism feeds into other forms of tourism, such as volunteer tourism (Chapter 9) and heritage tourism (Chapter 11).

Many of the chapters draw upon ethnographic field research methodologies, such as participant observation and in-depth interviews with travellers or a combination of these methods with documentary sources. However, some chapters use quantitative survey methods to identify specific sub-segments and behaviours of travellers (Chapters 3 and 4). While the first five chapters set the broader conceptual framework, the subsequent chapters deliver mainly empirical profiles with a particular focus on experiences in different countries and continents.

Following this introduction, in Chapter 2, Mark Hampton critically reflects upon his own experiences of being a backpacker himself, as well as researching other backpackers. In so doing, he charts the development of backpacker tourism from the 1980s up to the present with the appearance of 'flashpackers'. In the first section of his chapter, he explores his own experiences of two major trips through Asia as a backpacker and in the second part, he reflects on himself as an academic tourist – who actually gets paid to travel – through the prism of several research trips to South East Asia as a researcher doing fieldwork.

In Chapter 3, Jarvis and Peel focus explicitly upon the flashpacker phenomena, which they define in terms of older backpackers with higher levels of disposable income, travelling on a career break. In their study, they describe how 'upmarket backpacking' has developed through changing demographics and motivations. Furthermore, they seek to examine the ways in which the flashpacker market segment, with their particular travel behaviour and expenditure patterns, may present a niche opportunity for sustainable tourism development in the Fiji Islands. They conclude that policy makers within host destinations such as Fiji need to recognise the emergent diversity within the general backpacker market segment and to find ways of supporting the local industry in addressing the new demands associated with 'flashpacking'.

In Chapter 4, Cody Paris approaches the flashpacker phenomena from another perspective. He looks into how backpacker tourism has harnessed recent innovations in communication technology and, in particular, how online social communities have added a virtual component to the diverse mobilities of backpackers. While the physical mobilities of backpackers are still as important to the backpacking experience, new virtual moorings have developed that allow backpackers to be fully integrated in their multiple networks and also to maintain a

sustained state of co-presence between their backpacker culture and their home culture. Furthermore, Paris argues that the backpacker ideals of independence, freedom and physical travel are all enhanced by the virtual mobility of backpackers. Based upon data from a self-administered online questionnaire, his chapter explores the various roles that communications technologies play before, during and after backpackers travel.

In Chapter 5, Scott Cohen develops an alternative argument to the flashpacker thesis in his examination of contemporary 'lifestyle travellers'. He argues that within the backpacker market, there exist a small proportion of individuals for which travel is not a cyclical break or transition to another life stage. Instead, for these individuals, leisure travel can serve as a way of life that they may pursue indefinitely. Drawing upon lifestyle theories, in this chapter he conceptualises these individuals as 'lifestyle travellers', a less pejorative term than 'drifter' (Cohen, 1972) or 'wanderer' (Vogt, 1976).

The next two chapters highlight the ways in which backpackers utilise important spaces and enclaves in order to create significant experiences. In Chapter 6, O'Regan conceptualises the importance of the backpacker hostel for the framing of backpacker 'performances'. His approach is based on the idea that hostels are historically, discursively, symbolically and materially part of the backpackers lived 'socio-spatial practices'. He examines hostels as a key symbol of backpacker travel itself, where individuals perform and interact, create narratives and build an identity. The 'backpacker hostel' has thus become central to the reproduction and development of backpacking, linking multiple spaces and times together.

James Johnson broadens this analysis in Chapter 7 to include the spaces of travel itself, building upon ideas of mobilities in backpacking research. He focuses on backpackers travelling 'off the beaten track' around central and eastern Europe. He investigates, in particular, the backpacker spaces on train journeys and explores the tactics of backpackers to create and maintain privacy on public trains. Through ethnographic 'thick description', Johnson also notes the backpackers' bodily responses to the feel, speed and conditions on board trains. He concludes that like the space of a backpacker enclave, travel space is also 'dynamic' and there are considerable overlaps in experiencing moments of travel and of dwelling. Using the train to sleep off a hangover or to meet new travel partners provide just two among many examples of how moments of moorings and mobilities inform one another.

Similarly, 'off the beaten track' Claudia Bell in Chapter 8 examines budget backpackers visiting Mongolia. Like Johnson, she also focuses upon embodied experiences and corporeal movement, including the

physical sensuous responses that tourists must adapt to as they travel. Indeed, based on her own ethnographic travel experiences, travel writing as well as travel blogs, Bell highlights the limits of the backpackers' 'comfort zones' in a country like Mongolia, where only very limited tourism development has taken place.

The sexuality of backpackers has largely been ignored in the research until now. Hence, in Chapter 9, Linda Myers explores the motivations for, and personal development through, travel for lesbian backpackers in New Zealand. From her in-depth interviews, two themes emerged from these women's travel experiences in New Zealand, namely, the need to escape the heterosexual world and its social constraints, on the one hand, and the importance of distinct lesbian spaces, on the other hand. She argues that New Zealand was chosen as a destination by the interviewees because it has specific provision for gay women in the form of accommodation and tours, it was a location that offered freedom, peace and safety and it was perceived as being gay friendly.

In Chapter 10, Kath Laythorpe examines how backpackers engage with volunteer tourism – a growing phenomena in the 21st century. This research analyses the motivations, expectations and experiences of considerable numbers of backpacker-volunteers travelling in Tanzania. Through interviews and participant observation, Laythorpe reflects on the advantages the backpacker-volunteers gain from their experiences. She concludes that the opportunity to combine both backpacking and voluntary work in these destinations is becoming increasingly common. Volunteer tourism offers the younger backpacker an institutionalised experience that can be contrasted with the more flexible and less constrained backpacking travel. The volunteer accommodation often provides a suitable enclavic space from which to explore and experience the culture of the area in a way that is often more intense than that of the average backpacker, but with the added safety net of a travel organisation providing reassurance and security.

Chapter 11 by Gareth Butler on Norway is the last chapter that looks at backpackers' experiences. Norway is perhaps an unusual setting in which to study backpackers, however, because of the high costs of travel in Norway, many tourists utilise the backpacker infrastructure such as hostels. Nevertheless, Butler analyses backpackers in Norway in terms of their personal heritage ties, their experiences of the vast, wild Norwegian landscape and their use of Norway as a 'platform' for exploring the rest of Scandinavia.

The next two chapters take a different perspective on the backpacker travel industry by focusing upon the supply management side rather

than on the experiences of the backpackers per se. In Chapter 12, Peter Welk argues that the mainstreaming of backpackers and the mainstreaming of backpacker businesses go hand in hand. For a long time, the management of businesses in the backpacker industry was dominated by lifestyle entrepreneurs, who had been backpacking themselves in the past and saw an opportunity to combine their passion for the traveller scene with making a living. More recently, Welk argues, this pattern has been changing rapidly with many managers of backpacker businesses now 'dropping down' from the corporate world and introducing branding into the previously somewhat anarchistic backpacker business community. He shows how backpacker destinations can be created by corporates and how the original backpacker culture may be replaced by purposeful planning, blurring the distinctions between conventional tourism and backpacker travel. Welk argues that such backpacker destinations are increasingly commercially promoted, as is illustrated in his case study of the Town of 1770 in Australia.

Chapter 13 by Robyn Bushell and Kay Anderson looks again at the backpacker/flashpacker tourism industry in Sydney, Australia, focusing on the increasingly complex definitional and management challenges. Following the authors of the other chapters in this book, they highlight the changing diverse profile of backpackers. They examine Australia's policies of providing travellers with a temporary work visa, who then may reside in one place for several months. As a consequence, residential and backpacker tourist experiences become entangled, leading to some significant cultural clashes as the former regard the latter with some disdain.

Chris Rogerson closes the volume in Chapter 14 with an analysis of the strategic planning of backpacker tourism for an emerging destination in the context of the global backpacker tourism market. Only recently has South Africa recognised the strategic significance to promote this kind of budget tourism in the country. Rogerson highlights the development of backpacker tourism policies, the growth and structure as well as organisation of the emerging backpacker industry, including the appearance of planning initiatives at national and sub-national levels of government through surveys with backpackers and interviews with key stakeholders.

## **Conclusion**

Theoretically, many of the chapters in this volume have engaged with Hannam and Atelvejic's (2007b) call for an engagement with the new mobilities paradigm to provide analyses of backpacker tourist's