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Backpacking: Ecotourism or Overtourism?

An essay by CREST Program & Research Intern Cassie McCabe

When one thinks of a backpacker, there is a certain stereotype that comes to mind: a western millennial who is uber eco-conscious (this generation's hippies). They've got their backpacks, GoPros, a limited budget, and a zest for authentic experiences around the globe. They make a concerted effort to distinguish themselves from their counterparts, the baby boomers, who they perceive as jumping from seaport to seaport enjoying the luxurious side of travel without concern for the potential deleterious effects of their journey. But some might say that baby boomers are pumping thousands of dollars into local economies: shopping, taking tours, and handing out generous tips, whilst the backpackers only spend money on cheap eats, beer, and buses. As someone who has traveled the world pretty extensively as a backpacker, I think there is a much more complicated picture to be painted.



I started my travels at 23 years old, keen to see all the sites I watched on the History Channel as a kid and studied in my Classics undergraduate degree. My first trip was the typical Eurail-pass tour ticking off every major European city. As I was on a limited budget and traveling alone, I woke up early every morning and walked the city, refusing to take tours or even public transportation, ate as cheaply as possible, and debated which museums, castles, and attractions were worth the hefty price tag. In the end, those were few and far between. When I would return to the hostel in the evening, I'd find the other backpackers lounging around, waiting for the party to start, rarely actually experiencing the city. After a day or two, I'd hop on the next train, feeling I'd "seen" the city, totally exasperated by my fellow youths wasting away their travel time

Eight years later, a trip in Southeast Asia solidified my stereotype of backpackers – and this time I can't absolve myself from traveling irresponsibly like my peers. SE Asia means Full, Half, and BlackMoon parties, all used to boost tourism and they are accompanied by a plethora of plastic waste. Plastic is integral to the tourist culture of consumption: alcohol is provided in red Solo cups (or buckets),

straws abound, and Pad Thai comes packaged in disposable containers with plastic cutlery – not to mention the bottles of water used to rehydrate the next day. The consequences are real: Thailand’s Maya beach, made famous in the movie *The Beach*, was closed to the public shortly after my visit and will remain so until 2021, due to environmental degradation. Are backpackers worse than other travelers, racking up atrocious carbon footprints and causing externalities without contributing economically to the countries they visit?



Drinking a bucket in Thailand with 3 straws (the horror)!

According to the data, counter to some perceptions, young travelers do spend money. In 2012, the [World Youth Student and Educational \(WYSE\) Travel Confederation](#) released a report that showed young travelers account for 20 percent of international tourists, spending “\$217 billion of the \$1.088 trillion tourism "spend" worldwide ... an increase that vastly outstripped that of other international travelers . . . making the group an important economic force.” The statistics are based on a survey taken by more than 7,600 young travelers (18 to 30) from more than 100 countries (Mohn, 2014). These numbers are currently listed as 23% and \$308 billion on the WYSE [Facts and Stats](#) webpage.

Backpackers may be on a budget, but they have what most others do not: time. That budget of \$50 a day may seem paltry to vacation-goers who are used to spending a few grand on their week holiday, but when you look at the length of the trip, it adds up. Fifty dollars a day for six months comes to \$9,000, and trips of this length are not uncommon. The WYSE report showed that young travelers trips are lengthening, stating that “the number of trips more than 60 days has increased over the last five years (Mohn, 2014).” During my travels, I have met countless backpackers, who have saved \$10-20K for their prolonged (up to two-year!) trips around the world. It requires working hard and saving, while making personal sacrifices for a significant period of time. One must be able to push aside fears of missing out on a few years of climbing the corporate ladder or saving for a down payment for a home or retirement.

As far as whether backpackers are destructive partiers or vegan hippies practicing yoga and following the Leave No Trace principles whilst they “find themselves” Eat-Pray-Love-style, the jury is out. A friend of mine, Derya Uysal, said “for me, backpacking was always about saving money and I don’t think I ever really thought about the environmental factors/sustainability.” She also noted that “I don’t

know if backpackers have become more environmentally conscious, but I'd say that people of a certain age [millennials] (myself included) have generally become more conscious of the impact they have."

A survey conducted in 2008 examined the behavior of backpacker tourists in relation to the environment and determined that "backpackers do not exhibit particularly ethical tourist behaviour as propounded by the ethical tourism models. A small proportion of respondents did come close to model ethical behaviour, whereas another small group appears to exist at the other end of the scale. In between there is a range of other backpacker groups that one extent or another reflect some model ethical behaviours. A significant proportion of respondents to the survey indicated that they would change their behaviour if tourism providers were more responsible." This is similar to my friend Sheri Arab observations, "from what I have seen, I think it is a mix. You get some backpackers that are doing the sustainable and/or eco-tourism thing, and then you get some that are just destroying local communities and environments for a cheap year of partying." The study found that backpackers are generally more interested in personal experiences and development. Nonetheless, volunteering with local communities and participating in environmental causes and studies did rank third and fourth respectively as motives for the survey's respondents (Murphy, 2010).

I, for one, have changed my traveling ways. I've learned city-hopping is not the best way to travel and have since slowed down drastically, taking a minimum of two weeks per destination, ideally 3-4 weeks. I've increased my budget to enjoy the tours and see the sites, choosing top-rated hostels (with the occasional private room!), upgrading to what some call a 'flashpacker' or 'glampacker.' I now travel with a bamboo cutlery set, a Lifestraw water bottle for when tap water isn't potable, a double-insulated aluminum bottle for when it is, and various forms of reusable bags and containers so I don't have to use single-use plastics.



Enjoying a delicious Passion Fruit smoothie with a Papaya stem straw

My friend, Kathleen Parsons, who puts even my travel record to shame, said she thinks that "backpackers often travel much more environmentally than others - because they are looking for cheaper ways to get around and to travel on a budget." She has noticed that they tend to fly a lot less, taking trains or buses for those longer distances that a typical traveler would fly, and are less likely to

book private tours or rent a car. She too started carrying a LifeStraw filter, and on a recent trip to Nepal said, “we were definitely the only people on the trail doing this. The guides and porters were in awe because they clearly hadn't seen it before either.” I also look for sustainable accommodations such as [El Zopilote Permaculture Farm and Hostel](#), in Ometepe, Nicaragua. I participate in activities such as a workshop with [De La Gente](#) where we got to make bags out of recycled huipil (traditional Guatemalan handmade shirts) with a local woman in her home in a nearby town (outside the main city).



Elvia and I making my bag

While the negative impacts of backpacker tourism are evident, there are positive impacts too, albeit a bit more subtle. My friend, Roseanne West, who I met in SE Asia, questioned her input to the destinations she visited and their local economies, saying “having [had] limited time and money, I also travelled quickly and did not contribute to the places that I went to. Or did I?! Because actually by visiting certain places you are contributing to the economy - [through] tourism.” She understands that events such as the Full Moon Party might be less than beneficial, but she also stayed in various local villages, “where we learnt a lot from each other’s cultures and beliefs, so again contributing? Of course. All visitors were respectful, willing and thankful.”

Traveling may have adverse effects on the environment, from contributing to greenhouse gases, increased resource use (such as water bottles and take out containers), and contributing to the trampling of sensitive ecosystems that we trek to see. However, tourism also leads to opening one’s eyes to the world, which in turn creates stronger connections across cultures. People are more likely to choose to conserve and protect what they have seen and with which they can identify. Just as viewing a panda in a zoo may lead someone to “adopt” a panda through the World Wildlife Fund, traveling sometimes leads to the protection of cultures, historic sites, and nature, through the fees travelers pay visiting them. Backpackers are often young minds setting off to explore the world, and they may just come back totally changed and ready to save it. As Mark Twain famously put it, “travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.”

Works Cited

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Murphy, Laurie, and Eric Brymer. "Backpackers and Sustainable Tourism: Exploring the Potential." *ResearchGate*, January 2010.