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BACKPACKER ETHNOGRAPHY

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Abstract: This paper presents an ethnographic study of the travel culture of international backpackers. Their sociodemographic characteristics are described, the contours of a concept of tourism culture are delineated, and on that basis, that of backpackers is outlined, with particular focus on the key phenomenon of road status. The analysis of backpacker tourism as a culture furthers the comprehension of change within the phenomenon. Examples of factors of change include the guidebooks, the short-term backpackers, and in particular the internet. This study demonstrates the merit of a dynamic concept of culture where culture takes place whenever activated by social circumstances. **Keywords:** backpackers, budget travelers, travel culture, concepts of culture, ethnography. © 2003 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Résumé: Ethnographie des routards. Cet article présente une étude ethnographique de la culture du tourisme international des routards. On y décrit leurs caractéristiques sociodémographiques, on y expose les grandes lignes d'un concept de la culture du tourisme et, par suite, on brosse un tableau du tourisme des routards en se portant surtout sur le phénomène clé du prestige de la route. L'analyse du tourisme des routards favorise la compréhension du changement dans ce phénomène. Quelques exemples des facteurs de changement sont les guides touristiques, les routards à court terme et surtout l'internet. Cette étude démontre le mérite d'un concept dynamique d'une culture qui est activé par des circonstances sociales. **Mots-clés:** routards, touristes à budget limité, culture du tourisme, concepts de culture, ethnographie. © 2003 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

> To me, Khao San Road has got nothing to do with the real Thailand. It's shops and hotels and restaurants and loads of people calling themselves travelers but being ripped off all the same. But it's got whatever you need and some great food, and it's a good place to meet other travelers. I always hang out in Khao San Road when I'm in Bangkok (Timothy from Germany).

The Khao San Road area in Bangkok is probably the epidome of the backpacker ghetto. South East Asia is the most popular region for international backpackers; Bangkok is their main gateway to the region; and when there, most head for the Khao San Road. The development is spectacular: from two guesthouses in the early 80s, there

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are now several hundred in the area (Cummings and Martin 2001:231) along with restaurants, travel agents, internet cafes, bookshops, and more. Thus, the Khao San Road area strikingly illustrates the world-wide growth of backpacker tourism during the past two decades.

Even so, few figures document this growth, although it is estimated that backpackers account for 8% of international tourists to Australia (Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995), for the phenomenon escapes the categories of conventional tourism statistics. Nevertheless, in lieu of quantitative confirmation, various qualitative factors expose its development, including a growing number of backpacker guidebooks, a growing service infrastructure at home and abroad, accessories shops, travel advertising, webpages and, of course, the sheer visibility of backpacker tourism at the popular destinations.

The development is noted in the research literature. In 1972, Cohen depicted the drifters of the 60s who shunned the tourism sector in their quest for immersion in the host societies (1972:175–77). However, as early as 1973, Cohen described the *Vermassung* (growing mass consumption) of drifter-tourism and how it supported the rise of an alternative service infrastructure, a development also observed by Turner and Ash (1975). The institutionalization of backpacker infrastructure, destinations, and routes is further described by Cohen (1982), Pryer (1997) and Riley (1988).

However, the institutionalization has not been accompanied by homogeneity among the users of the backpacker facilities. On the contrary, this mode of tourism seems more composite and multifaceted than ever. Even casual observation at favorite locations such as Khao San Road confirms this. In this small area one can observe the interactions and groupings of disparate characters such as well-educated young Westerners on extended leave from affluent society, high school graduates on gap year travels, Israelis fresh out of military service, university students on holiday or sabbatical leave, young Japanese in rite-of-passage attire, ordinary holidaymakers, (ex-) volunteers from various organizations, and the like. The heterogeneity is manifest, whether viewed in terms of nationality, age, purpose, motivation, organization of trip, or life cycle standing.

Scholars have commented on aspects of this heterogeneity (Loker-Murphy 1996; Murphy 2001; Ross 1997b; Scheyvens 2002; Sørensen 1999), and Uriely, Yonay and Simchai (2002) convincingly question the notion of backpacking as a distinct and homogeneous category. Indeed, the variation and fractionation make it all but impossible to subsume all the above-mentioned individuals and groupings under one uniform category, for it would be so broad as to be devoid of significance. Nevertheless, if questioned, most of these individuals will generally acknowledge that they are backpackers or (budget) travelers, and even those who do not accept such labels still relate or react to them. The ex- or implicit recognition of the notions carries a significance that reaches beyond an implicit dissociation from a tourist stereotype. For with varying degree and intensity, these individuals connect to a shared frame of reference whether this is a matter of identity, philosophy, sense of belonging, or sentiments of shared values, and their

partitioned and fractioned interaction produces meaning, which influences norms, values, conduct, and other elements of the social being.

This complex—the human systems of meaning and difference (Clifford 1997:3) and the organization of diversity (rather than the replication of uniformity) which produces structures of meaning (Hannerz 1990: 237)—is at the core of recent advances in the conceptualization of culture. Therefore, it would seem profitable to utilize a concept of culture in the understanding of backpacker tourism, whereby backpacker culture is not only seen as the culture of people categorized as backpackers but is also recognized as essential in the continuous re-creation of the category of the backpacker.

The academic interest in backpacker tourism is growing. An increasing number of publications focuses on the phenomenon (Cohen 1973; Desforges 1998; Hutnyk 1992; Loker-Murphy 1996; Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995; Meijer 1989; Murphy 2001; Pryer 1997; Riley 1988; Ross 1993, 1997b; Scheyvens 2002; Teas 1988; Uriely, Yonay and Simchai 2002; Vogt 1976). Furthermore, several publications, while not fully dedicated to the topic, thoroughly report on its various facets (Cohen 1982, 1989b; Errington and Gewertz 1989; Firth and Hing 1999; Hampton 1998; Murphy 1999; Phipps 1999; Ross 1997a; Schwartz 1991; Sørensen 1999). Moreover, a number of publications more than briefly touch upon backpacker tourism (Bhattacharyya 1997; Cohen 1989a; Smith 1994; Turner and Ash 1975; Uriely and Reichel 2000; Wilson 1997).

The writings cover various matters, such as marketing, accommodation, perception, motivation, guidebooks, terrorism, impact, and development. In varying degrees, the writings touch upon norms, behavior, and interaction among backpackers, thus contributing to a growing understanding of the sociocultural aspects of backpacker tourism on the road. Even so, an assessment of citations in the above publications reveals a high degree of dependence on a few sources on backpackers' social interaction and culture. Cohen (1973), Teas (1988) and Vogt (1976) are often cited. Most frequently cited is Riley (1988), to date the most comprehensive introduction to backpackers whose travel duration exceeds one year. The time factor disqualifies most present-day backpackers, and the ability to represent all backpackers by means of Riley's findings is thus doubtful. Nevertheless, her findings are often cited as if they represent backpackers in general, rather than a hardcore sub-segment.

Since then, little has been published in the way of holistic sociocultural studies of backpackers, despite the massive growth in the intervening years. Scheyvens (2002:150) calls for detailed research on characteristics of contemporary backpackers, and clearly the assessment above identifies a gap in the academic coverage of their social interaction and road culture, both in terms of time since the latest introductory studies and in terms of comprehensive studies of this transnational community.

This paper addresses this gap by means of an ethnographic study of the travel culture of international backpacker tourism. The study

presents demographic and social characteristics of those studied. This points to the need to employ a concept of culture in order to further the analysis of the phenomenon. The preconditions for and contours of such a concept are delineated, and on that basis, an ethnographic account of the travel culture of international backpackers is outlined. This perspective furthers the comprehension of both structures and changes in this phenomenon, some of which are briefly touched upon in order to refine the account. They include guidebooks, short-term backpackers, and in particular the Internet.

Among themselves, the preferred term is traveler (Desforges 1998; Errington and Gewertz 1989; Riley 1988) and less frequently backpacker. However, since the former term often is used generically and is fraught with connotations, the latter is used here.

BACKPACKER TRAVEL CULTURE

The study is based on ethnographic fieldwork. Since 1990, the author has logged 23 months of participant observation among backpackers. Eight spells of fieldwork, spanning from two to seven months, have covered East Africa, India, the Middle East, North Africa, and South-East Asia, while Europe was included in numerous brief forays into the backpacker scene. This still leaves major regions uncovered, in particular Latin America and Australia. Other studies partly remedy this. Australia is well studied (Firth and Hing 1999; Loker-Murphy 1996; Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995; Murphy 1999, 2001; Ross 1993, 1997a, 1997b), whereas the Americas are almost uncharted. Information on regions not explored by the author has been gleaned from various other sources (guidebooks, backpackers, travel writings, etc.), but the study cannot claim global scope of primary data.

In ethnographic fieldwork, the emphasis is on exploring the nature of social or cultural phenomena, rather than aspiring to test hypotheses about them (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994:248). The validity of ethnographic fieldwork is founded on the interaction with the subjects studied and the social and cultural insight gained by this approach. Typically, the ethnographic subject is delimited either by location, or by cohesive continuous social interaction within a clearly defined group with a limited changeover of individuals.

Backpackers fit neither of the two demarcations. Instead of prolonged social interaction within a stable group, whether mobile or settled, they are characterized by impromptu social interaction within a group of erratic composition with unceasing extensive changeover of individuals. Methodologically, this makes it impossible to adhere to the conventional ethnographic fieldwork framework of prolonged social interaction with and observation of a given set of informants. The un-territorialization of the backpacker community means that, instead of prolonged interaction with the few, fieldwork has had to be structured around impromptu interaction with the many. This made fieldwork more dependent on interviews and other types of intensive information extraction than would the case in a classic ethnographic fieldwork.

So far, fieldwork has resulted in 134 formal, semi-structured interviews, lasting from 45 minutes to three hours, and 22 semi-formal discussion sessions with between one and seven backpackers, lasting from one to two-and-a-half hours. To these must be added hundreds of semi-formal and informal interviews in the shape of extended conversations. Interviews were secured at accommodation facilities, restaurants, bars, and the like at both the popular and the more peripheral destinations, during transport, or while on excursions (safaris, trekking, etc.). In most cases, potential informants' affiliation to the backpacker community was immediately discernible, either by appearance, behavior, or associates. In a few cases, initial questioning was necessary to verify a person as a potential informant.

In all cases of formal interviews and in almost all cases of extended conversations, the author was deliberately forthright about the ongoing research and about his double role as both backpacker and researcher. While initially this stance was a matter of research ethics, it also produced research benefits, since the realization that they were being studied often triggered interesting reflections and deliberations from the informants. Many expressed interest in the research and during or after the interview, asked about the results so far. On such occasions, some preliminary findings or interpretations were shared with them. This in turn would cause comments from the informant, some leading to lively debates. In many cases, the most interesting data came to light after the interview officially had ended.

The interviews and extended conversations constitute the tangible substance of the fieldwork material. However, equally important for the comprehension of backpacker tourism culture are the countless observations and interactions while traveling among backpackers and participating in their road culture.

Identifying Backpackers

Both popularly and in the research literature, backpackers are most often characterized as self-organized pleasure tourists on a prolonged multiple-destination journey with a flexible itinerary, extended beyond that which it is usually possible to fit into a cyclical holiday pattern. However, this description serves as a guideline only and cannot be used to objectively distinguish backpackers from other tourists, for only few match all the parameters throughout the trip.

For one thing, some now set out with a "starter kit", for instance consisting of air-tickets, airport pick-up, transfer, and initial accommodation in a gateway city. Combined with the fact that most backpackers purchase organized excursions, safaris, treks, and the like during the journey, this leaves the self-organization somewhat debatable. Some trips include working spells (Riley 1988; Uriely and Reichel 2000), which make the pleasure parameter equally debatable. The time parameter is also open to interpretation, since the idea of a prolonged journey is highly individual. The only shared feature is that of 'traveling', the flexible multiple-destination itinerary. Even this is continuously discussed among backpackers.

Thus, backpackers cannot be defined by means of unambiguous criteria. Pearce argues that they are best defined in social rather than economic or demographic terms, and points to criteria such as a preference for budget accommodation, an emphasis on meeting other backpackers, and independent flexible travel plans (cited in Ross 1997a). If viewed as a *social category,* the term backpacker offers analytical qualities to supplement the predominantly descriptive use of the term in the literature. For although many do not meet the descriptive characteristics, these nevertheless describe how backpackers tend to view themselves: they form the outline of a travel ideology. The category makes sense from the insider's point of view. Being both an individual perception and a socially constructed identity, "backpacker" is more a social construct than a definition. As such, it is an obvious object for ethnographic inquiry.

Demographic and Social Basics

Although more and more nationalities are represented, backpackers are still predominantly of Western origin. The vast majority come from North America, Australia, New Zealand, and Western Europe. Most Europeans are from Northern Europe, while Mediterranean Europe is underrepresented, as is the United States when taking the population size into account. Israeli backpackers can also be found in large numbers. Additionally, the number of Japanese backpackers seems to be growing.

Several studies report on gender distribution (Loker-Murphy 1996; Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995; Murphy 2001; Riley 1988; Ross 1997a), but results vary. Australian data suggest an even male/female split, while the author's data from the developing world suggest a 60/40 male preponderance ratio, perhaps slightly higher in certain regions.

The vast majority of the backpackers are 18–33 years of age. The impression is that most belong to a 22–27 age group, with more in the above-27 than in the below-22 group. This fits nicely with the parallel impression that many, if not most, have completed an education and worked a couple of years before embarking on their first backpacker trip. However, this picture might be changing. Field observations over a decade indicate that it is becoming more widespread to go to distant regions at an earlier age. Nonetheless, backpackers display an educational level equal to or above the general level in their country of origin. A large share holds academic degrees. Additionally, in the case of younger ones with no education, it is often a matter of not yet; most intend to commence or complete studies after traveling.

Contemporary backpackers do not fit the description of drifters, deviants and escapees depicted in a few publications from the 70s (Cohen 1972, 1973; ten Have 1974). In general, they are (future) pillars of society, on temporary leave from affluence, but with clear and unwavering intentions to return to "normal" life. The steadfastness is evident in terms of intended traveling time: almost all have a fixed return date, typically defined by their flight ticket. Even those who declare themselves unrestrained will, if prodded sufficiently, almost

invariably display a fixed latest return date. Usual length of journey is between two-and-a-half and 18 months; very few journeys last longer. In fact, not many exceed 12 months, and an interval of four to eight months accounts for most journeys. The lower limit of two-and-a-half months also marks a socially defined boundary between "true" back-packers and those who travel like them but are able to fit it into a work/holiday pattern.

Temporarily, however, normal life is suspended. Many backpackers are at a crossroads in life: recently graduated, married or divorced, between jobs; such explanations are frequent when they are asked why they travel (Riley 1988). Hence, much backpacker tourism belongs to transitional periods of a lifecycle. However, whereas this can lead to the conclusion that the transitional situation has caused the travel (Graburn 1989; Riley 1988), this author finds that the reverse causality applies. In-depth interviews revealed that, while the transitional situation was true, it was usually the other way around: travel wishes had made the person quit the job, caused the breakup, or the like. Mark from Britain explained it this way:

> It's a question of now or never. Since graduating from University a couple of years ago I've made good money, so I can afford to travel. I thought that if ever then now, because ten years from now I may be tied up with wife, kids, mortgage and all the rest of it. And who knows if there will be anything special to see ten years from now. The differences between places or cultures disappear rapidly, they all become more or less like us. If you want to see anything different from our Western countries you have to do it quickly before it all vanishes.

The "Vanishing Worlds" in Mark's statement reverberate with the impressions of urgency found in much tourism advertising. However, this pull factor is matched by the push factor of urgency to go beyond normality before it is too late. Mark is illustrative of the fact that usually the transitional period is self-inflicted, brought about by the desire to travel. In fact, this is more logical, since traveling usually is a planned venture. Few have the necessary economic means to allow them to rapidly realize decisions of prolonged trips.

Thus, many backpacker journeys can be described as self-imposed transitional periods, and for many, self-imposed rites of passage. Such an understanding of backpacker tourism is well in line with contemporary scholarly views on rituals and rites of passage in modern societies (Hughes-Freeland and Crain 1998; Rosaldo, Lavie and Narayan 1993; Turner 1982, 1992). However, it would be erroneous to suggest that self-imposed rites of passage are the only explanation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to pursue a thorough contemplation of the rite of passage facet of backpacker tourism. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that, although the notion of self-imposed rites of passage is illuminating as regards backpackers, many are not covered by such a description. Besides, even for those who are covered, the question remains why they chose to let the rite of passage take the shape of a backpacker journey instead of something else.

While on the go, backpackers engage in a variety of social and recreational activities. The diversity in preferences supports Loker-Murphy's (1996) observation that they are not homogeneous in terms of tourism motivation. The prevalence of some activities reflects the dominance of youthful age groups, but the activities are not much different from what can be found within other tourist segments.

If asked about companions, the great majority of backpackers will answer that they travel alone or with one person (spouse, friend). In the strict sense of companion throughout the trip, it is correct that most backpackers travel alone or together with one person. However, this apparently simple truth hides the fact that, in reality, a majority of them spend most of their time in the company of other backpackers, at favored places, and in impromptu groups formed along the road (Loker-Murphy 1996; Murphy 2001; Riley 1988). It is quite common to strike up a friendship with backpackers encountered on the road, travel together for a few days or weeks, split, and team up with others again. Friendships are created rapidly and travel groups are formed and dissolved almost instantly. However, the behavior connected to this social interaction is not unregulated. It is circumscribed by the norms and values of the backpacker travel culture.

Conceptions of Culture and Ephemeral Backpackers

While the term culture is commonly used in tourism research, it is interesting to note how rarely such a concept is employed in the study of tourists and their behavior. Concepts of tourist culture are seldom found in the research literature, and when used at all (Adler 1985; Foster 1986; Nash 1979), the term most often appears descriptively. Hardly ever is it employed to analyze, explain, or interpret aspects of touristic behavior.

It seems reasonable to suggest that not all such behaviors can be explained by norms and values brought along from home, or by the liminal dimension of tourism (Lett 1983; Wagner 1977). In some cases, it is possible to identify social structures, norms, and values which are founded in the interactions among tourists. In such cases, a concept of culture may be applicable, provided that the social interaction among the tourists produces *meaning*, which in turn again affects norms, values, conduct, and social behavior.

As regards backpackers, such a concept of tourist culture provides a relevant framework, not least given the fact that many spend most of their time together with fellow backpackers. These are continuously replaced throughout the journey, yet the replacements share the same touristic characteristics: an emphasis on self-organization and nomadism, and plans flexible and subject to rapid change.

There is a double bind in this. On the one hand, the one thing that backpackers have in common is their travel mode, and being strangers in unfamiliar places, fellow backpackers are the most familiar strangers. On the other hand, the travel mode is also the *only* thing that they share with certainty. Hence, conversations are much centered on travel. Murphy finds that travel matters are the most important topic

among backpackers in Australia (2001:55–57), and this author believes it to be the case whenever backpackers congregate. Travel matters are socially and practically important since they constitute the only certain shared subject for conversation.

The fact that backpackers interact so much and maintain a conversational focus on the subject of travel matters means that norms, conduct, hierarchies, and other aspects which are often analyzed by means of a concept of culture, may emerge, take root, and be transmitted from experienced backpackers to newcomers, even without fixed and permanent societal institutions to facilitate the intergenerational transmission. To view backpackers' social relations in this way is covered by earlier concepts of culture, where it is perceived as social structures of unification and subsumption, and where the individual human is viewed as a representative of and bearer of a certain culture.

However, norms, conduct, values, etc. among backpackers are continuously negotiated, challenged, manipulated, and upheld or changed through social interaction. The opportunity for this is enhanced by the combination of, on the one hand, the continuous replacement of backpackers within the community, and on the other, a near absence of institutions that can hold and transfer meaning over time. Whereas earlier concepts of culture fail to comprehend such aspects, they are embraced by recent theoretical advances (Appadurai 1996; Clifford 1997; Fox 1991; Hannerz 1996; Olwig and Hastrup 1997), in which culture, rather than fixed structures of unification and subsumption, is conceived of as negotiable, manipulable, and changeable systems. Consequently, the individual is ascribed an active role, as someone who *produces culture* rather than just representing it.

A concept of culture may improve the insight in settings where intra-tourist social interaction is a marked characteristic. Such tourist cultures can often be located in and delimited by means of the geographical scene for the interaction (for example, in a secluded resort). However, they need not be delimited by location: the enforced social interaction within fixed groups on cruises or on organized tours provides mobile settings for tourist cultures to unfold. The two examples parallel common anthropological conceptions of culture where it is either "located" (the village, the territory) or "bounded" (a non-settled group, such as nomads). In both cases the culture is 'placed', by means of location or group.

A backpacker culture, however, falls outside these two. Neither a fixed place nor fixed group delimits it: this culture is neither located nor bounded. Hence, in order to comprehend backpackers by means of a concept of culture, it is necessary to move beyond the "placing of cultures", and instead let the conception allow culture to "take place" wherever that place is physically localized. In other words, culture must be allowed to "travel" (Clifford 1997). Customarily, the concept of road culture is empirically founded and descriptively used, namely to describe the culture of individuals belonging to a certain category (Adler 1985; Mukerji 1978; Riley 1988). In comparison, the concept of backpacker travel culture employed in this study allows for the culture continuously to create and re-create the backpacker as category.

Road Status

The importance of road status among backpackers is highlighted in several studies (Errington and Gewertz 1989; Pryer 1997; Riley 1988; Teas 1988), and a concept of travel culture furthers the understanding of the phenomenon and its significance. Road status is obtained in many ways: paying "local prices", getting the best deal, traveling off the beaten track, long-term travel, diseases, dangerous experiences, and more. In total, it comprises hardship, experience, competence, cheap travel, along with the ability to communicate it properly.

An example of how road status is communicated is the worn equipment and clothes that many backpackers display. This makes them appear somewhat shabby to the outsider, while among themselves the worn look asserts experience and endurance, since presumably it is caused by travel wear. Therefore, clothes and equipment, which back home would have been discarded, are often mended and used. The reflections of Jane from Australia typify the ambivalence of simultaneous acceptance and critique of this status parameter:

> There is a funny contrast between travelers' shabby clothes and their perpetual use of showers. I was sitting in the backyard of a lodge chatting to a Kiwi [New Zealand] girl when an American guy came out of the shower wearing the most ragged T-shirt I've ever seen. I said to the Kiwi girl: "Why doesn't he throw that rag away, it's not worth washing one more time." But she said "Oh no, he's very proud of that shirt. They've been through a lot together!" And then we couldn't help giggling, because in a way it is so ridiculous. But here I am, trying to repair one of my own T-shirts and if it were back home I'd throw it away immediately. I guess the [proverb] "fine feathers make fine birds" applies to travelers as well although it's upside down.

The worn look may even be artificially created. Backpackers have confided to the author how they intentionally smeared their backpack, roughened their shoes and scuffed their other equipment shortly after commencing traveling, so as not to appear to be untraveled.

The worn equipment also signals frugality, and thus ties in with the most important road status factor; that of the ability to travel inexpensively. This factor explains why backpackers are preoccupied with budgeting, often excessively so, and certainly to a degree that goes beyond the need to budget when traveling long-term. Most possess credit cards and are better off money-wise than their appearance implies. However, the ability to travel inexpensively signals road competence; it signals that one knows the way around and knows how to acquire things and services at non-inflated prices. Thus, to ask: "how much did you pay," which in many Western settings is considered rude, is perfectly legitimate among backpackers, for the exchange of information about prices is not only a practical matter, it is also an exchange of road status.

While the intention is often explained as a matter of not paying more than "locals", what really matters is not to pay more than other backpackers (Riley 1988). The following brief conversation between the author and two new arrivals at a popular hotel illustrates the point:

> Informant: "Excuse me, can you tell us how much you pay here?"
> Author: "I pay 200 baht for a single, including breakfast. How much do you pay?"
> Informant: "We pay 250 for a double, also with breakfast, so I guess it's okay. We arrived yesterday, and I just want to make sure we don't pay too much".

The above was the first contact between the author and the backpacker couple, yet the "how much did you pay" question opened the social interaction.

A peculiar consequence of this one-upmanship is that it is common to lie about prices (Teas 1988). Almost all backpackers questioned about this admitted to understating prices paid when passing on information. Not only is this behavior expected, it is even accepted—within limits. The limit to how much manipulation of prices is accepted, before it impinges upon road status, is when the information is so implausible that other backpackers feel compelled openly to question the narrator's veracity. When this happens, the playful social setting of status exchange collapses. Manipulations must be handled dexterously, and since this dexterity signifies the socially accomplished backpacker, it is in itself a status factor.

The deliberate scuffing of equipment and the understating of prices are examples of how the one-upmanship of status exchange is influenced by manipulating information. Similar manipulation can be found regarding all aspects of road status: a bout of diarrhea is upgraded to dysentery, the strenuousness of a bus journey is exaggerated, black market exchange rates are inflated, and the peripherality of a place is embroidered on. Likewise, status exchange can be manipulated by shifting to another set of status parameters (for example, from money to health) where one might have a better chance of obtaining peer recognition. Status parameters may even be challenged, for instance by questioning whether spending a whole day bargaining for the sake of two dollars really is worth the effort. Such a challenge is often accompanied by attempts to refine the parameters in question, or to introduce new ones.

Not all backpackers are equally preoccupied by road status. Typically, it is particularly important for those on their first trip, whereas repeaters exhibit a more relaxed attitude. Moreover, road status must be communicated deftly, since a too overt preoccupation with the subject is improper. Furthermore, it is not a stable affair. Not only is it very volatile, but it also has to be continuously reestablished through conversation and status exchange, since no fixed mechanism can convey the individual's road status and no continuous social relations can confirm and transmit previous ascertainments of it. It has to be communicated in every social encounter with a hitherto unknown backpacker. It is precisely because of this that road status is important. This continuous exchange is the key method by means of which the numerous brief encounters with other backpackers are systematized and embedded with meaning.

Therefore, road status is not permanent. It must be communicated

continuously, both in terms of asserting it, and in terms of defending the validity of its parameters. The effect is that, even though status exchange produces instant hierarchies, this must be described as "*hierarchization*" as process rather than hierarchy as structure. Not only are the hierarchies extremely volatile and transient, changing with subject and exchange partners; in a way, it is also hierarchies without anyone "on the bottom rung". For although status exchange is a challenge, simultaneously it also confirms a shared identity, "us backpackers", distinct from both "locals" and "tourists". Therefore, road status also serves as social glue, in that the status exchange serves as a mutual recognition of someone with worthy norms and values. The hierarchization process produces shared cultural identity.

Trails of Travel Culture

When questioned, most backpackers readily accept that traveling contains elements of tourism, or is a mode of tourism. These findings are contrary to Riley's, who found that all long-term travelers emphatically rejected the tourist label (1988:322). The differences may be explained by the fact that her informants had traveled for more than a year. Another explanation can be found in the growth and institutionalization of backpacker tourism since Riley's study in the mid 80s. It has become increasingly difficult to sustain the image that traveling and tourism are separate and different undertakings.

However, a closer look reveals that the differences between Riley's and the author's findings may be a matter of degree. For, while acknowledging a tourism dimension in their travel, most backpackers nevertheless maintain a distinction between travelers and tourists. They often position themselves as representatives of a better mode of tourism, thereby sustaining a distinction between a backpacker "us" and a tourist "other". Backpackers typically argue that they arrange things themselves, whereas tourists are led or herded, and that, unlike the tourist, they are able to get off the beaten track, find the unspoilt places, and get a down-to-earth feel for the area (Desforges 1998).

In this way, this culture reinforces the importance that backpackers place on nomadism, self-organization, and self-reliance. Therefore, it is hardly suprising that not all travel methods convey equal status and that overland trips convey more status than flying. The popular overland routes connect the favored destinations to form the main trails, and many backpackers spend most of their time along these trails. Here, hotels, restaurants, and other services are found. The popularity of the main trails is reinforced by recommendations in the guidebooks, which almost every backpacker carries. Additionally, "the grapevine" (Murphy 2001), the exchange of information and tales among backpackers, which in itself reconstitutes their social construction as identity, reinforces the popularity of certain routes.

Yet many backpackers spend some time off the main trails. This pattern is culturally reinforced, since travel off the typical routes, experience of hardships, and perhaps discovering new places can be converted into road status by sharing the information with others back at

the main trails. The discovery of new places means that the trails are not static. Others may decide to use the information and if enough come along, lodgings and restaurants catering for the backpacker purse may open, a service infrastructure comes into being, and a new trail is established. Most often this does not happen, but on the other hand it is usually this way that new backpacker trails and destinations come into being. Obviously, changes of trails are also influenced by other factors: political changes, civil unrest, terrorism, or wars may close them or deter their use; conversely, restoration of peace, infrastructure improvement, or policy changes may (re)open backpacker trails.

However, the areas visited off the main trails need not be without tourism development. In fact, and despite an ideology of "getting beyond tourism", average backpackers are more likely to reject than select areas which are uncharted in their terms. Most who travel off the main trails do not head for the totally unknown but stay within or near the locations described in their guidebooks. The author has frequently heard backpackers argue, when discussing plans, that "We can't go there, it's not in the book".

Alternative Guidebooks

> You know, Richard, one of these days I'm going to find one of those Lonely Planet writers and I'm going to ask him, what's so fucking lonely about the Khao San Road (Garland 1997:194)?

The alternative guidebooks serve an important function in the backpacker culture, as the only fixed structure with the ability to hold and transfer information and culture from one cohort to the next. Previously, users of such guidebooks were almost exclusively backpackers but, in recent years, the range of users and titles has expanded massively. However, many of these publications still exude a distinction similar to the one that backpackers display towards the tourist. It does not take much textual analysis to realize that the alternative books thereby guide and support backpackers' perception of identity, by more or less subtly confirming a distinction between them and the "ordinary" tourist.

The growth of backpacker tourism and the alternative guidebook publishing success share a common history. The importance of the latter for the growth of the former can hardly be exaggerated. The emergence of alternative guidebooks helped open wider horizons, in particular for backpacker tourism in developing countries, and for the many who, without a guidebook, might not have taken the leap into the developing world.

Of the alternative guidebooks, those from Lonely Planet arguably are the most used, probably have the widest geographical coverage, and undoubtedly are the most criticized. However, the critique is not so much caused by the actual publications and their content as by the symbolic position that these guidebooks occupy in popular debate.

Because of its global coverage and popularity, Lonely Planet symbolizes a certain style of guidebooks and users. In the Western tourism debate, in which an alleged self-righteousness of backpackers has been the target of much critique and derision (Scheyvens 2002), Lonely Planet has come to symbolize the backpackers, their activities, norms, and values.

Whether or not the critique is justifiable, the influence of Lonely Planet is incontestably important. Nevertheless, even in certain circles among backpackers, guidebooks are much scorned and seen as a symbol of the lesser traveler, as is vividly described in the novel *The Beach* (Garland 1997). Tellingly, the above quote is from a chapter titled "Bible bashing". Moreover, while most backpackers use a guidebook, many also participate in varying degrees of bible bashing, ranging from pointing out flaws and faults, to claiming non-user status. Ironically, bible bashing thereby enters the sphere of road status and becomes yet another parameter in the exchange of road status, as well as a revealing cultural self-critique.

The Internet

The Internet has had a notable impact upon backpacker tourism. On the world-wide-web, information and opinion about tickets, routes, destinations, and more is available on numerous home pages, as are views on this type of tourism and its consequences. The impact of pre-travel internet use upon actual backpacker tourism may be modest, but on the road it is profound.

Internet cafes abound at backpacker destinations and the importance of this aviailability is evident in the latest guidebook editions, where internet access and prices are treated evermore thoroughly. Backpackers use the Internet for tourism information and for news sites from back home. Additionally, some use it to check bank accounts, file tax returns, and similar practical matters. But above all, backpackers use it for email communication.

Most backpackers use a free email address and check for messages daily whenever possible. Email has replaced letters and surpassed the telephone as the means of contact with friends and relatives back home. In 2000, post office staff at a popular backpacker destination informed the author that, since 1997, *poste restante* mail had all but disappeared.

The Internet also facilitates communication between backpackers. Email addresses are frequently exchanged with other backpackers encountered on the road. Some of the addresses may never be activated, but others are, and communications are continued while traveling. In some cases, itineraries are adjusted to allow meeting again. Communication is also continued between pre-arranged travel partners who plan to meet at a later date. In both cases, the coming of the Internet has caused a near-revolution of scheduling flexibility. Previously, meetings with other persons were either coincidental, as when encountering other backpackers again along the same route, or planned in advance, as when joining someone at a prearranged time and place. Compared to this, the Internet enables a running contact,

which enables continuous adjustment of itineraries. This includes more flexible options for travel partners to temporarily separate and later reunite.

Many backpackers manage fluid social networks via the Internet, consisting of people at home, traveling friends from back home, backpackers encountered on the road, and the occasional "local" friends. New email addresses are registered; some are activated and maintained in use, others wither away. While evidence is scant, it would seem that many ex-backpackers maintain this virtual travel network for some time after end of trip, albeit slowly fading. In this way, the Internet, while not necessarily eliminating ex-backpackers' problems with readjustment to normal life back home (Riley 1988:325), nevertheless has reframed the conditions for readjustment, by changing the distinction between home and away. One can maintain part of one's backpacker identity, even when not traveling, by communicating with those still on the road or recently returned home.

The impact of the Internet reaches beyond practical matters in other ways. The technical changes have affected the way in which the whole backpacker experience is framed by the communication with "back home". The ceremony-like steps that backpackers previously had to perform to obtain the desired communication via traditional techniques (for example, visiting a post office box to collect *poste restante* mail and send letters), in themselves confirmed the limited access to such communication, thereby confirming a distinction between "here" and "back home", and underlining the liminal "out of time and place" (Turner 1970, 1982; Wagner 1977) character of the backpacker experience.

In comparison, the recurrent communication with the home environment that the Internet enables confirms the connection, rather than the distinction, between "here" and "back home", between the present backpacker situation and the non-backpacking normality. In this way, the impact of the Internet may reach far beyond technical matters of communication. It is likely to impact on conceptions of distance, and to impart a change in the comprehension and framing of the type of liminoid experience which backpacker tourism typifies.

Short-term Backpackers

A final example of change, in which practical, institutional, and cultural aspects of backpacker tourism interact, is short-term backpackers. These are individuals who travel backpacker-like, but within the time limits of cyclical holiday patterns. They behave as ordinary backpackers: they interact socially with other backpackers, stay at the same places and travel along the same trails, even though they naturally cover less ground during a trip.

Short-term backpackers are not a new phenomenon. However, recent fieldwork data and information from specialized travel agents indicate a strong growth of this segment, possibly stronger than that of backpacker tourism in general. This may partly be explained by declining prices on long-haul air tickets. Obviously, this is important

for the growth of backpacker tourism in general, but it is particularly important in the case of short-termers. Since a return ticket takes up a larger share of the total cost of the trip for them, reduced prices on air travel result in greater reduction of their per day cost of trip.

Yet fieldwork data indicate that other factors need to be considered when investigating the growth of short-term backpacker tourism. In particular, it is noteworthy that many have previous experience. They know how the system works, and are able to switch rapidly into backpacker mode. Moreover, many explained to the author that they deliberately sought this mode, partly thanks to the social interaction among backpackers, partly thanks to a perceived higher degree of independence and flexibility, which previous backpacker experience had taught them to value highly.

The short-termers subgroup indicates a growth potential of backpacker tourism; it also acts as a reminder of how the backpacker experience may influence the individual's future patterns of tourism demand and consumption. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that a spin-off of the growth of backpacker tourism in recent years may be the creation of a similarly large growth potential for short-term backpacker tourism in the coming years.

CONCLUSION

> If I had to define my belief in travel it's that if you've been some place and stayed in the local Hilton, you've probably not been there (sorry Conrad). Tourists stay in Hiltons, travelers don't. [They] want to see the country at ground level, to breathe it, experience it—live it. This usually requires two things the tourist can't provide—more time and less money (Wheeler et al 1992:35).

This paper has presented an ethnographic outline of the travel culture of international backpackers tourism. It has been argued that the analytical use of a concept of culture advances comprehension of the backpacker phenomenon. Such a concept furthers the understanding of a phenomenon that, on the one hand, is so vast and diverse as to be beyond subsumption under a distinct description, yet, on the other hand, does display widespread affinities, behavioral similarities, social interaction that produces systems of meaning, and a connection to a fluid shared frame of reference.

This approach extricates the analysis from some of the problems that a strict definition of backpackers would involve. If they were to be identified by means of a rigid definition, it would either eliminate many individuals who view themselves as such, or necessitate a definition so far-reaching as to be devoid of explanatory prowess. Instead of defining them by means of fixed criteria, the cultural angle enables the backpacker to be viewed as a socially construed category, involving both self-perception and peer recognition. The main dimension of peer recognition is the social interaction with other backpackers, through which the backpacker identity is concomitantly formed.

Road status was identified as a key phenomenon for the comprehension of backpacker tourism culture, and although more complex than striving to live up to the ideology, the culture nevertheless is beholden to values as represented in the quote above. Taken from an older edition of a backpacker icon, the Lonely Planet *South East Asia on a Shoestring*, the excerpt presents an accentuated and condensed example of backpacker travel ideology.

At the same time, the fact that it is necessary to turn to a decade-old edition also signifies the ongoing changes in backpacker tourism. The un-territorialized "us travelers" community, which Wheeler et al implicitly addressed, does not exist anymore (if it ever did). While maintaining values of distinction that supported a sense of community, the guidebooks have simultaneously facilitated the rapid expansion of the market, and this growth has made the backpacker environment too large to be sensed as a unified community. This is certainly the case at popular locations, where the environment is so large as to necessitate individual partitioning, whereas social interaction is more forthcoming and less discriminating in less popular locations with less choice of interaction partners.

As a more modern change, lately the Internet and email have allowed the individual backpacker to invoke a personal virtual community to supplement face-to-face interactions. This enables a more selective choice of partners, which again facilitates partitioning. With the Internet, new dimensions have become part of the evolution of backpacker tourism; this has not halted its institutionalization, nor has it necessarily been accelerated. Rather, the Internet has changed the direction of the institutionalization. Whereas this process commonly is taken to imply standardization, uniformity, inflexibility, and predictability, the Internet has by contrast occasioned an institutionalization that includes increased scheduling and planning flexibility as well as communication ease. Yet institutionalization it is, since the Internet has eased the access to and consumption of backpacker tourism, and since the medium in itself rapidly has established an institutional presence among backpackers.

Beyond this, the Internet also demonstrates the changeability of backpacker travel culture, and concurrently shows that, while the technological development has progressed with breakneck speed, the sociocultural effects are to be viewed in terms of evolution rather than revolution. Participant observation over a dozen years confirms that, despite its development, the backpacker culture is still recognizable, with or without the Internet. However, this paper has only briefly touched upon this medium and its impact. Further research on backpackers-online is definitely needed, both regarding use patterns, online culture, and the impact of online communities on backpacker consumption patterns.

Given the heterogeneity of backpackers, further research is also needed on more specific subsegments. While many can be easily delineated, this paper has touched upon the short-term backpackers. This subsegment is particularly interesting since it exemplifies the continued growth and institutionalization of backpacker tourism, while

simultaneously embodying the de-differentiation between backpacker practices and associated modes of tourism. The short-term backpackers and their interaction with other backpackers demonstrate the elasticity, capaciousness, and adaptability of the phenomenon, yet at the same time also demonstrate the need for a concept of culture in order to fathom the simultaneous elasticity and constraint in the social construction of the backpacker. More generally, the study of backpackers demonstrates the merit of a dynamic concept of culture whereby the individual both represents and produces a culture, and where it does not necessarily need to be placed by linking it to a location or fixed group but primarily can be viewed as "taking place" whenever activated by social circumstances.

However, despite these useful refinements, it must be recognized that the concept of culture, being both vague and fuzzy, is an innately flawed construction. Clifford voiced the problem when stating that "Culture is a deeply compromized idea I cannot yet do without" (1988:10). In recent years Clifford and others have contributed to the revitalization of the concept of culture by insisting on a de-territorialization of its propensities, thereby allowing culture(s) to travel. Yet it is interesting to note that, despite the cognation between travel and tourism, the revitalization of the concept of culture has not been much inspired by insights from the tourism study. Allusions and anecdotal exposés apart, the revitalization has largely ignored this domain, and the theoretical and conceptual advances have not been challenged and tested by means of the tourism phenomenon.

Therefore, the future involvement of tourism research in the overall development of the concept of tourism culture will prove valuable for social science in general, and for the tourism research domain in particular. Perhaps more than any other within social science, this domain is confronted with the necessity to comprehend matters of placelessness, ephemeral presence, spatial movement and the like. Further conceptual development is thus essential for an improved understanding of matters to do with tourism as culture, culture in tourism, culture of backpackers, and of course, tourism cultures. ∎

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