

THE BACKPACKER TOURIST

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THE BACKPACKER TOURIST: A CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

BY

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2022

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80262-256-0 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-80262-255-3 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-80262-257-7 (Epub)



Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To my wife Ana for her extraordinary patience, to my son Afonso who thinks I will get rich with this book and to my daughter Maria who came into the world during the writing of this book and who didn't always let me sleep. When they grow up, I hope they can also discover the world with the eyes of a backpacker.

To my wife Carla for her understanding and for always 'being there', and to my daughters Inês and Margarida, for their patience and love, hoping that they have the opportunity to travel and discover the world as a backpacker.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Márcio Ribeiro Martins was born in Murça (1979), Vila Real, Portugal. He has a degree in Geography (University of Porto – FLUP, 2002) and, in 2005, completed the Master in Natural Hazards Management in the same faculty. Since 2002, he has been teaching Geography at different secondary schools around the country, and since 2011, he has been teaching as an Invited Assistant in Instituto Politécnico de Bragança. In 2020, he completed his PhD in Tourism at the University of Aveiro with the thesis ‘The backpacker phenomenon and its spatiotemporal movement patterns in Porto urban destination’. At the moment, he holds the position of Adjunct Professor at Instituto Politécnico de Bragança, and he is a Collaborator Member of the research unit on Governance, Competitiveness and Public Policy, working in the group on Tourism and Development. He is also an author and co-author of several articles in national and international journals. Backpacker tourism and tourist space–time behaviour are his main research topics.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In 2014, I started doing my first academic research on backpacker tourism. Since then, I had the opportunity to publish some scientific articles and finalise my PhD thesis on the spatiotemporal behaviour of backpackers in an urban destination, under the supervision of my co-author Rui Augusto da Costa. This book is the result of six years of ongoing research.

Some years ago, I had the opportunity to start working with my colleague and co-author Márcio Ribeiro Martins, which presented me the backpacker world! During these years, we had the opportunity to work together and to ‘build’ a very good friendship. Research is more than publishing papers ... is to create ties between people!

We will begin by thanking the series editor, professor Richard Sharpley who supported and encouraged our initial proposal suggesting relevant and valuable contributions.

Thanks to all the publishing team, especially to Kousalya Thangarasu for her patience and dedication in overcoming all the delays and difficulties that were emerging and to David Mulvaney for the beautiful book cover.

We also would like to acknowledge the financial support of the research unit on Governance, Competitiveness and Public Policy (UIDB/04058/2020) + (UIDP/04058/2020), funded by national funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, Portugal.

INTRODUCTION: BACKPACKER TOURISM, A CONTEMPORARY OVERVIEW

In this introductory chapter, there will be a brief presentation of backpacker tourism as a form/type of tourism whose visibility and popularity have increased all over the world, with a highlight in the summary on its economic relevance to destinations and some of its main environmental and sociocultural impacts. The main purpose of the book will be presented before a brief summary of all chapters, with a complete and consistent synthesis, emphasizing how contemporary backpacking has evolved.

Tourism is an economic activity that is at the heart of the globalisation process. It has benefitted and continues to benefit from technological developments and the emergence and spread of innovations in telecommunications, transport, marketing and management, among others. Nowadays, tourism is responsible for a significant increase in economic growth in many countries, and according to World Travel & Tourism Council (2021) in 2019, the best year ever for world tourism, travel and tourism accounted for one in four of all new jobs created across the world, 10.6% of all jobs and 10.4% of global GDP, and it represented 7% of world exports and 28% of total service exports (World Tourism Organization, 2020). In 2019, 1,460 million international tourist arrivals were also registered worldwide (World Tourism Organization, 2020) – the highest number ever, and more than 336 million were youth travellers based on the WYSE Travel Confederation (2021) website. These figures illustrate the relevance of young travellers as one of the current trends with great impact on tourism activity and among them are the backpackers, the main subject of this book.

Although it is not an easy task to present the economic impact of backpacker tourism quantitatively due to the lack of systematic collection of statistical

data worldwide (Martins & Costa, 2017), it is possible to directly assess its economic relevance from data collected in countries such as Australia or New Zealand, where the backpacker market is well established and indirectly from information regarding youth tourism. For example, in 2020, Australia registered over 2 million international backpackers (Statista, 2021a) with the cities of Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane accounting for 39.4% of this figure.

Therefore, according to the WYSE Travel Confederation (2016) report, the market value of international youth tourism increased from 190 billion USD in 2009 to 286 billion USD in 2014 and is expected to reach the extraordinary amount of 400 billion USD by 2020. In 2014, youth tourism was responsible for 200 million international trips (Tourism Research and Marketing, 2013) and for generating revenues of 286 billion USD (World Tourism Organization, 2016). Data from the WYSE Travel Confederation (2019) regarding backpackers indicate that they were responsible for 44 million trips in 2017.

It is broadly accepted that young tourists are an important market for the future because they sometimes spend more money than other tourists, are more likely to return to the same destination and are also described as more resilient to potential crises. They spend most of their money in local communities, making an important contribution to other economic activities, and have the ability to attract other visitors to the places they visit (UNWTO, 2016; UNWTO & WYSE Travel Confederation, 2010).

However, this book is about backpacker tourists, a complex and heterogeneous group of travellers, which over the last five decades has been transformed from a marginal phenomenon into a global one. Described as a modern trend, 'backpacker tourism comprises the activities carried out by a complex and heterogeneous group of travellers, consisting predominantly of young people who travel for longer periods than usual and with flexible and informal travel itineraries' (Martins & Costa, 2021a, p. 1).

In the study of backpacker tourism, E. Cohen's (1973) contributions are fundamental and provide the basis for contextualising behaviour in terms of society and change. Constituted in the past by a relatively small group of errant travellers described by E. Cohen (1973) as drifters, over recent decades backpackers have become a powerful tourist segment made up of predominantly young travellers who plan and prepare their own trip, looking for direct cultural contact, novelty, spontaneity and risk all around the globe.

Riley (1988) classifies these tourists as educated, belonging to the European middle class, single, travelling alone and concerned about their small budget, travelling with backpacks on their backs and a small daily budget.

A complex and multifaceted form of tourism (Sørensen, 2003) and the lack of consensus among researchers on the current conceptualisation of

backpackers are still evident today (Dayour, Kimbu, & Park, 2017; Ooi & Laing, 2010), which is why this topic is analysed in Chapter 2. The literature presents a multiplicity of terms concerning the various groups of non-institutionalised tourists; however, it seems to be consensual that backpackers constitute a distinct category in relation to institutionalised tourists (E. Cohen, 1973; Riley, 1988).

Based on research with Israeli backpackers, Uriely, Yonay, and Simchai (2002, p. 536) suggest that backpacking should be regarded as a form rather than a type of tourism. Form-related attributes refer to visible institutional arrangements and practices through which tourists organise their travel; type-related attributes represent tourists' attitudes towards the core values of their own society, their motivations to travel and the meanings they attach to their experiences (p. 521). Therefore, the most distinctive features of backpackers are related to the length of excursion and flexibility of itinerary, the low spending tendency that determines the destinations and to the means of transportation and accommodations usually selected by backpackers – all form-related attributes.

Although these arguments are open to discussion, for Reichenberger and Iaquinto (2022), contemporary backpacking offers experiences related to freedom and existential authenticity, as will be demonstrated in Chapter 5.

Acting as true global nomads (Richards, 2015), the growing number of young people travelling with backpacks has become more diverse, making this phenomenon progressively more complex, as revealed by their different motivations and behaviours, their psychographic and social characteristics and even by some aspects related to their mobility. However, there has been a progressive institutionalisation of backpackers, which has transformed them into the current mainstream version (O'Reilly, 2006).

The literature on backpackers states that these travellers generate important impacts on the destinations they visit (Martins & Costa, 2017). On an economic level, they spend more money than other tourists due to their longer stays, contributing to a significant entry of foreign currency (Becken & Simmons, 2008; M. Hampton, 1998; M. P. Hampton, 2013); they do not buy luxury products but spend more on local goods and services such as catering, transport and accommodation (Gibson & Connell, 2003; Moscardo, Konovalov, Murphy, & McGehee, 2013; Ooi & Laing, 2010), and the firms providing services to backpackers are usually small and their owners are locals (M. Hampton, 1998; Maoz, 2006; Scheyvens, 2002). In some countries, such as Australia, backpacker tourists also constitute an important temporary workforce in the agricultural sector and tourism (Iaquinto, 2015; Moscardo et al., 2013).

Regarding environmental impacts, backpackers are generally recognised as having a smaller environmental footprint due to lower consumption of resources (Ooi & Laing, 2010; Scheyvens, 2002), a preference for travelling in groups, using land transport, public transport and carpooling (Iaquinto, 2015). Backpacker's accommodation also consumes substantially less energy per year and per guest (Becken, Susanne, Frampton, & Simmons, 2001).

At the social and cultural level, their impacts are not very different from those of other tourists, although some studies mention their concern and respect for the local culture and environment (X. Luo, Brown, & Huang, 2015; Rodrigues & Prideaux, 2012).

As suggested above, backpacker tourism has assumed special relevance, evidenced by the growing interest of researchers around the world (Agyeiwaah, Dayour, Otoo, & Goh, 2021; G. Chen, Zhao, Huang, et al., 2019; Dayour, Park, & Kimbu, 2019; Iaquinto & Pratt, 2020; Martín-Cabello, 2014; Rogerson, 2007) and focussed on the heterogeneity and complexity of the phenomenon (Sørensen, 2003) and its economic relevance (M. P. Hampton, 2013). Others have shown interest in the study of motivations (Maouz, 2007; Nok, Suntikul, Agyeiwaah, & Tolkach, 2017; Wang & Chen, 2018) or backpacker identity (Agyeiwaah, Pratt, Iaquinto, & Suntikul, 2020; G. Chen, Zhao, Huang, et al., 2019; Zhang, Morrison, Tucker, & Wu, 2018) in the context of non-Western countries.

Several reasons can be provided to explain the development of backpacker tourism in recent decades: political and economic changes, technological innovation in telecommunications and transport, sociocultural transformations and new marketing strategies, among others. All these arguments have induced overwhelming changes in tourist activity all over the world, and backpacker tourism has been no exception.

Of all these factors, the most important that contributed to the evolution and transformation of the backpacker phenomenon was the emergence of the internet, the establishment of a gigantic network of hostels around the world and the changes in the liberalisation of airspace that led to the emergence of many low-cost airlines in several regions of the world. But the internet was the most disruptive technology that allowed the globalisation of communications between travellers and the appearance of several websites to search for and book accommodation and transport. Through the internet, travellers can communicate regularly with friends and family, get in touch with other travellers, report on their own travel experiences and virtualise the desirable road status, which is such a relevant aspect in the backpacker culture.

Transport is another important component of backpacking. Even if the preference is for overland transport like bus, train or even hitchhiking, air

travel has been crucial to the growth of backpacker tourism, specifically low-cost airlines. A low-cost airline or low-cost carrier (LCC) has this designation because they offer lower fares compared to traditional airlines due to the elimination of many services usually provided during an air trip (Zhou, Wu, Zhou, Li, & McGuire, 2009). By 2020, low-cost airlines had substantial market shares worldwide. On average, in the Asia Pacific region, they accounted for 32.5% of the market, in North America 34.9%, in Europe 44.5% and in Latin America 45% (Mazareanu, 2020). These figures confirm the importance of LCC across the globe in supporting backpackers during their travels.

The establishment of a global network of low-cost accommodations was also crucial to the development of the backpacker market. Campsites, low-cost hotels, couchsurfing and hostels are the most popular modes of accommodation among backpackers. Hostels are budget accommodation, characterised by the existence of several common areas for guests to socialise and the possibility of sharing rooms.

By August 2021, 9,924 hostels were registered on the well-known booking website *hostelworld.com*, spread across 2,321 cities (Hostelworld, 2019), which corresponded to 63.4% of the 15,643 hostels counted worldwide until October 2019 (Statista, 2021b). Of these, 5,829 (37.3%) were in Asian countries and 4,738 (30.3%) in Europe, the two largest international markets (Table 1.1).

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the global hostels market, consisting of sales of hostels and related services, is expected to grow from 4.37 billion USD in 2020 to \$5.2 billion USD in 2021 and is expected to reach 5.99 billion in 2025 at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 4% (Reportlinker, 2021). These findings seem to demonstrate the great resilience of the youth

Table 1.1. Hostels by World Region.

Region	Number of Hostels	%
Asia	5,829	37.3
Europe	4,738	30.3
South America	2,434	15.6
North America	1,454	9.3
Oceania	718	4.6
Africa	470	3.0
Total	15,643	100

Source: Statista (2021b) (own construction).

market, and especially of backpackers, who apparently want to continue travelling despite the associated risks.

The WYSE Travel Confederation's New Horizons Survey of youth and student travellers (WYSE Travel Confederation, 2019) revealed some very interesting data about backpackers and backpacker tourism trends in recent years. Among these are the decreasing proportion of young travellers identifying themselves as backpackers, the increasing proportion of backpackers over the age of 30 and the decreasing trip length. While estimated trips conducted by backpackers only decreased from 45 million to 44 million between 2002 and 2017, the same period saw a sharp reduction in travellers identifying themselves as backpackers, from 30% to 14%.

All this information deserves a more detailed analysis and raises a series of questions: will this trend of decrease in numbers of travellers who identify themselves with backpackers continue in the future? What are the reasons behind this decrease?

The main characteristics of backpackers and their evolution will be discussed in Chapter 2, but the fact that backpackers are no longer a homogeneous group of young travellers might help explain these changes. Today's backpackers cannot only be seen in the image of their predecessors, the drifters of the 1960s and 1970s, often associated with deviant behaviour such as drug use and where drifting was a symptom and an expression of broader alienating forces as explained by E. Cohen (1973). For these reasons, many young people who travel backpacker style do not identify with the backpacker label.

The number and type of activities undertaken by backpackers in the destinations visited have also changed. Between 2002 and 2017, there was a big reduction in visits to clubs and nightclubs while activities like language learning, academic study and 'living like a local' increased (WYSE Travel Confederation, 2019). The ageing trend of backpackers may also explain the changes in the activities undertaken in the destinations visited: less nightlife fun and more intense and authentic cultural experiences. The most important factor is that the freedom and authenticity offered by backpacker-style travel continue to be attractive to many young people who wish to travel around the world and come into contact and explore culturally different societies at their own pace.

This short book focusses on the experiences of backpacker tourists through a complete and consistent synthesis of contemporary backpacking, discussing backpackers' sociodemographic and travel characteristics, and also exploring potential future transformations. It covers the main topics discussed in the scientific literature with a fresh overview and a comprehensive synthesis that

will be ideal for all those, students, educators, practitioners or the general public who want to know more about backpacker tourists.

Grounded in an awareness that the global economic growth of the last 30 years has contributed to the increase of young people travelling around the world backpacker style, leading to a greater diversification of this segment and their experiences while travelling, this book explores the role and experiences of the backpackers over the past 50 years, their characteristics, subsegments, motivations, identity and behaviours.

The chapters are organised by different topics; however, it is important to highlight that all of them complement each other and are not intended to give a reductive, watertight and isolated view of each theme under analysis.

In addition to this introductory chapter, this book is structured in five other chapters that are intended to provide a synthesis and complementary analysis of the evolution of a specific group of travellers known as backpackers.

The purpose of Chapter 2 is to present and discuss some concepts related to backpacker tourism through a historical overview from the last 50 years in order to frame its evolution. As a heterogeneous phenomenon, prominence will be given to the concept of backpacker tourists and the various subsegments that have been identified in the literature with emphasis on the traveller–tourist debate.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to backpackers' socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, education, country of origin, income, occupation) and to the analysis of the progressive institutionalisation of backpacker tourism, supported by the evolution of information and communication technologies (ICT) that has led to the creation of a global network of hostels and low-cost airlines. Also discussed will be the way in which backpackers plan and organise their travels and how this has changed over time, from traditional guidebooks and word of mouth (WoM) until the digital age of internet and electronic word of mouth (eWoM). Online travel agencies are among the most used by younger tourists (Fair & Cutting-Miller, 2014). Therefore, companies that provide services in the tourism sector will have to be aware of these trends, so it is pertinent to better understand the impact of these new technologies on travel planning and travel behaviour in destinations.

Chapter 4 explores backpackers' diversity and heterogeneity. These travellers have been associated with a variety of motivations for travelling, and the diversification of the age and nationality/culture of origin, among others, has contributed to this diversification. Emphasis will be placed on the increasing number of Asian backpackers at a time when backpacking is becoming less a phenomenon that mostly comprises young Westerners.

In Chapter 5, emphasis will be given to backpackers' identity, authenticity, behaviours and backpacker culture through an analysis of the main changes that occurred in a historic and geographic frame (space–time perspective) supported in the literature.

In the Conclusion (Chapter 6), in addition to drawing the main conclusions, a final discussion about future backpacking transformations will be provided, raising a number of important issues that may encourage further debate among academics, students and practitioners.

Fifty years after Cohen's 'drifters', independent travel has become very popular across the globe and in a post-pandemic world, with a focus on economic recovery and the re-establishment of tourism activity. In the following pages, a fresh perspective will be presented on backpackers as one of the most relevant tourism research topics. Considering the economic and social relevance of backpacker tourism, its evolution in the globalised world and the fact that research in this segment is still at an early stage of development, it is hoped that this book as a whole will contribute to critical knowledge and understanding of backpacker tourists' experiences today.