

# **The Youth Tourist**

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# The Youth Tourist: Motives, Experiences and Travel Behaviour

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*To my husband, Alessio, with endless gratitude and love*

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Anna Irimiás  
Budapest, Hungary

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# Introduction

*I've come up with a set of rules that describe our reactions to technologies.*

1. *Anything that is in the world when you're born is normal and ordinary and is just the natural part of the way the world works.*
2. *Anything that is invented between when you are fifteen and thirty-five is new and exciting and revolutionary and you can probably get a career in it.*
3. *Anything invented after you are thirty-five is against the natural order of things.*

(Douglas Adams, 1979, *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.)

The world is currently home to the highest number of young people in human history, and youth tourism is viewed as the fastest growing segment of international tourism (UNWTO, 2016). Getting to know young people has never been an easy task. Historically, the young were often seen by their elders as problematic, irresponsible and a cause for concern, while young people frequently complain that gerontocracy limits their ambitions, dreams and passions. These laments, and stereotypes, are still prevalent today. And there is now a huge gap between the generations in terms of information communication technology use. In general, of course, the young today are neither better nor worse than previous generations; they are just different. Discovering how different they really are is no easy task, largely because contemporary young people tend to be more open with their peers than with their parents, not to mention researchers.

Young people are widely described as 'our future'. The concept of 'future', however, is vague. The more distant it is, the more abstractly we perceive it. Arguably, positioning the young in an abstract space/time dimension alienates them from the present. Referring to the young in normative discourses as 'our future' often serves as a way to justify their non-involvement or exclusion from decision-making. Such alienation in space and time also raises some ethical issues. Very often the young – 'the/our future' – are exhorted to resolve problems created in the past and fuelled in the present. Climate change, over-consumption and overtourism are some of these issues directly related to tourism. Politicians, institutions and older generations are highly paternalistic in their dealings with the young. At the same time, as the Secretary General of the United Nations, António Guterres (2019) has pointed out that older people often insist that those who have not yet been born are going to have to solve problems and issues caused by their ancestors.

Normative discourses in academia on the young shape our understanding of youth tourists, seen as tech-savvy, narcissistic and in search of personalised products and services. As experts in discourse analysis have widely evidenced, there is often a – rather negative – subtext lurking beneath the language used in the media and in academia to describe young tourists, and careful analysis of it is therefore always necessary (Carvalho, 2008). Although there have been warnings about the ‘sin of homogenisation’ and the stereotyping of tourists (Pearce, 2011, p.18), current normative discourse on the young continues to reinforce certain stereotypes which are all too easy to fall into, especially when we are trying to quickly and easily identify a consumer segment.

In the 25 years since Neil Carr (1998) pointed out that the young were largely ignored by researchers, a plethora of studies on youth tourism – in part motivated by the increasing importance of the market segment that they represent – has explored young adults’ travel motivations and behaviour. In tourism studies that adopt a market growth approach, young tourists, very often called ‘millennials’ without specifically mentioning an age cohort, are lumped together as consumers with similar attitudes and tourism behaviours. This approach persists, even though both academics and practitioners have long acknowledged significant differences in young tourists’ social status, interests and behaviour (e.g. Khoo-Lattimore & Liang Yang, 2018; Richards, 2015). Our knowledge about young tourists is also very partial because many tourism studies use college students as their sample. Here, I draw on psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett’s (2016) conceptualisation of ‘emerging adulthood’. According to Arnett, late adolescents and young adults should be defined as ‘emerging adults’ on the basis of developmental processes. Five key aspects distinguish emerging adulthood from both puberty (13–17) and fully fledged adulthood (30–45): identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, possibilities. These themes will be explored in this volume. Select case studies from different parts of the world will illustrate the latest research on young people, with a particular focus on young tourists. Travelling alone, having to organise daily activities, going hostelling and encountering many different people are at the core of the latter’s experiences.

*This volume sets out to enable a comprehensive understanding of young tourists by challenging the stereotypes about them and providing an overview of the young in different disciplines. The aim is to map out the structural factors of this heterogeneous segment and thereby stimulate further discussion in the field of tourism.*

While several significant attempts to explore youth tourism have been made (e.g. Cohen, 2011; Selby, 2021), they have studied specific segments such as backpackers or educational tourists. The motivations of youth tourists on study abroad programs differ from those of young festival-goers. Youth tourists on family holidays, on study or work abroad programs, on pilgrimage, at festivals, or participating in media-induced tourism events all need to be specifically identified and described. In Pearce’s (2005, 2022) travel career pattern, tourists’ primary motives, almost invariant across age/life-stages, are novelty, escape/relax and relationships, defined as ‘core motives’. These motives are surrounded by a middle layer (self-development, involvement, self-actualisation and self-enhancement) and an outer layer (social status, nostalgia, romance etc.) which indicate less important

motives. Pearce (2022) points out that it is vital to recognise that human motives change as one's travel experience increases: less-travelled young people usually rate all the motives as equally important. In contrast, experienced travellers rate higher the extrinsic motives, grouped in the middle layer, more highly. In this book, I employ the travel career pattern approach (Pearce, 2005, 2022) to study young people's travel motivations, aspirations, behaviour and experience. This sort of fine-grained analysis is necessary for two reasons: first, it will help to illustrate the rich diversity of youth tourist motivations and behaviours, a heretofore under-researched tourism segment. Second, it will significantly increase our knowledge of youth tourist travel patterns and online and offline travel behaviours, which have been dramatically influenced by the current societal changes. The book offers a nuanced understanding of youth tourist demands and their implications for the market. Last, consideration of future trends in youth tourism will be highlighted while also addressing the implications of current challenges such as climate change.

This volume is divided into four chapters, each enriched with young tourists' personal insights into their experiences. Chapter 1 considers youth populations globally and in the most important tourist source countries. The impact of current societal changes on young people's everyday lives is briefly discussed in order to provide a deeper understanding of how these changes influence their tourism behaviour. A multidisciplinary perspective is adopted to explore the social construct of 'the young' and how blurred the rites of passage between life-stages have become in the last quarter century or so. Generational labels and the ways in which the cohort theory influences research on youth tourism are also discussed.

Chapter 2 focuses on personal and identity development in the context of youth tourism, particularly study and volunteer abroad programs. Emerging adults tend to seek once-in-a-lifetime experiences. Educational, spiritual, volunteer and backpacker journeys are motivated by the desire to escape, discover and learn something new, build relationships and feel autonomous. The benefits of studying abroad are analysed with a focus on intercultural sensitivity and how this competence contributes to self-enhancement. The chapter also explores the changes in many voluntourists' principal motivations: from a wish to 'do good' to the opportunity to display one's voluntourism experiences on social media.

Chapter 3 investigates the societal changes influencing both young people's leisure activities and their tourism behaviour, while recognising that distinctions and contrasts between every day and holiday behaviours are being blurred, just as our online and offline lives are: being connected 24/7 means never being fully anywhere – whether we are – supposedly – at home or on holiday, working or playing. The chapter discusses hedonistic holiday experiences from a broad perspective, and research from the fields of tourism, marketing and sociology provides insights into young tourists' behaviour. The places of tourism experiences, like the desert of the Coachella Valley Music, are read through Foucault's lens on heterotopia, as a real place that reflects a perfected society.

Chapter 4 presents a provocative discussion on the complex relationship between young tourists and social media. The meaning of wanderlust is defined and linked to digital nomads' and 'vanlifers' experiences. Additionally, the chapter

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aims to advance critical thinking about youth tourism in the light of omnipresent digitalisation and ubiquitous connectivity. A young tourist's autoethnographic observation of her FOMO provides a very moving example of how young tourists experience, and reflect upon, their travels.

### **Intended Readership**

This volume is intended as a reference text for the academic market; students are its principal targets. The Covid-19 pandemic has heavily impacted young people's lives and deprived them of their tourist role. Opening up, travelling and being ready to experience 'real life' again – these are all more than simply a 'return to normal life' (whatever that means). A better understanding of youth tourist's motivations and behaviour is valuable to young tourists themselves who are concerned about their own experiences. Policymakers developing youth-oriented initiatives at the regional, national or international level could also gain a better understanding of today's 'youth' by reading this book. Tourism, as will be discussed, is closely intertwined within the spheres of education, employment and social relations. And, in all these areas, it is time to put young people centre stage.

# Chapter 1

## The Youth Tourism Domain

This chapter introduces the reader to the study of youth tourism, both providing a conceptualisation of youth, and highlighting the topic's relevance. It reveals the size and growth of the global market and offers an overview of the history and current trends within youth tourism. It also offers a critical literature review on generation labels and stereotypes, shedding light on the normative discourse around 'the young' and thus also around 'the youth tourist'. Youth-oriented services – the Interrail and hostels – are addresses for the importance these have in shaping youth tourism demand.

### 1.1. Size and Growth of the Global Youth Population

In 2023, the world's population is forecast to reach 8 billion with more than half of all people living in seven countries (Peoples' Republic of China, India, the US, Indonesia, Pakistan, Nigeria and Brazil). Today, 16 per cent of the global population is aged between 15 and 24. According to the calculations of the organisation World Population Prospects (2019), the global youth population is expected to grow to 1.4 billion over the next 40 years. In most countries, population growth and size and age structures are changing in some unprecedented ways. Analysis of World Health Organisation (2021) data suggests that by 2030 one in six individuals globally will be aged 60 or over. Ageing populations in industrialised countries, especially in core countries within the European Union (EU), are determining the policies of the welfare state. From this perspective, the young appear on the political agendas of different countries as the demographic which will be responsible for the well-being of elders. In 2010, 18.4 per cent of the total EU population was aged between 15 and 29, and in 2021, it was only 16.3 per cent. Bulgaria has the lowest rate (14.2 per cent of the total population), while Turkey (not yet a member state) has the highest at 23.0 per cent (see more on [ec.europa.eu/Eurostat](http://ec.europa.eu/Eurostat)). The number of young people in the EU (50 million in 2021) is predicted to decrease by 15 per cent by 2100: for every 100 people of working age, there are expected to be 57 elders.

Normative discourses in the media often depict the youth population as either a resource or a problem. When associated with the new and creative energy that they represent, the young are described positively, when their substance [ab]use, addiction or deviant behaviour is focused on, the connotation is other. The young are often described as the ‘generation of the future’: the two concepts – ‘youth’ and ‘future’ – are usually interwoven with a sense of hope and a faith that young energy will create a new future. A brief overview of population demographics reveals the limitations of defining the young simply by their date of birth. Global population distribution and disparities between life cycles in different countries appear to indicate that working-age populations will increase in countries with low-labour productivity (Mason et al., 2022). If the future is predicated on the young, it is going to manifest most vibrantly where youth populations are biggest, that is, in Central Africa, where, in 2021, over 45 per cent of the population was under 15 (Fig. 1). As mentioned, the young are often associated with creative energy. In which case, at the country level, Nigeria, with its 33 million young adults, or Mexico, with one of the world’s largest youth populations, can look forward to futures shaped by creativity and innovation. However, a large youth population does not automatically correlate with social well-being. In order to compare the countries referred to above, additional data are necessary. Life expectancy at birth and the percentage of the population that is ageing are also significant indicators. For example, in Germany the average life expectancy is 81.72 years, in Mexico it is 75.32 and in Nigeria only 55.12. Perceptions of youth thus differ across cultures: a 65-year-old in Italy is considered middle-aged while a 45-year-old in Gabon is not far off old age.

Normative discourses in policy documents and reports are also interesting. Youth and women – usually considered to be minorities – are often mentioned together. Both certain United Nations (UN Sustainability Development Goals, 2022) and World Economic Forum (2021) reports provide examples of this tendency. Considering young people (and women) as groups of individuals whose rights need to be recognised, acknowledged and institutionally guaranteed offers another perspective from which to study the young. The above reports describe the achievements that have been made but also clearly testify to the many challenges that youth populations face in different parts of the world. Their access to health care, safe and nutritious food, clear water and quality education is still by no means guaranteed, and I am afraid that this will continue to be the case in the decades to come. Currently, more than 30 per cent of young people globally are without safe food and water, health care or any means to access online education. The need to address these issues is now more pressing than ever. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 4 and 8) set out in the Agenda 2030 include ensuring that all young people are able to enjoy quality education and decent work and living conditions. To achieve this, real commitment and concrete action are needed. Many young people globally are involved in tourism, and far more are – to varying extents – affected by it: even the most remote parts of the world are rapidly being drawn into what is an increasingly competitive tourism environment.

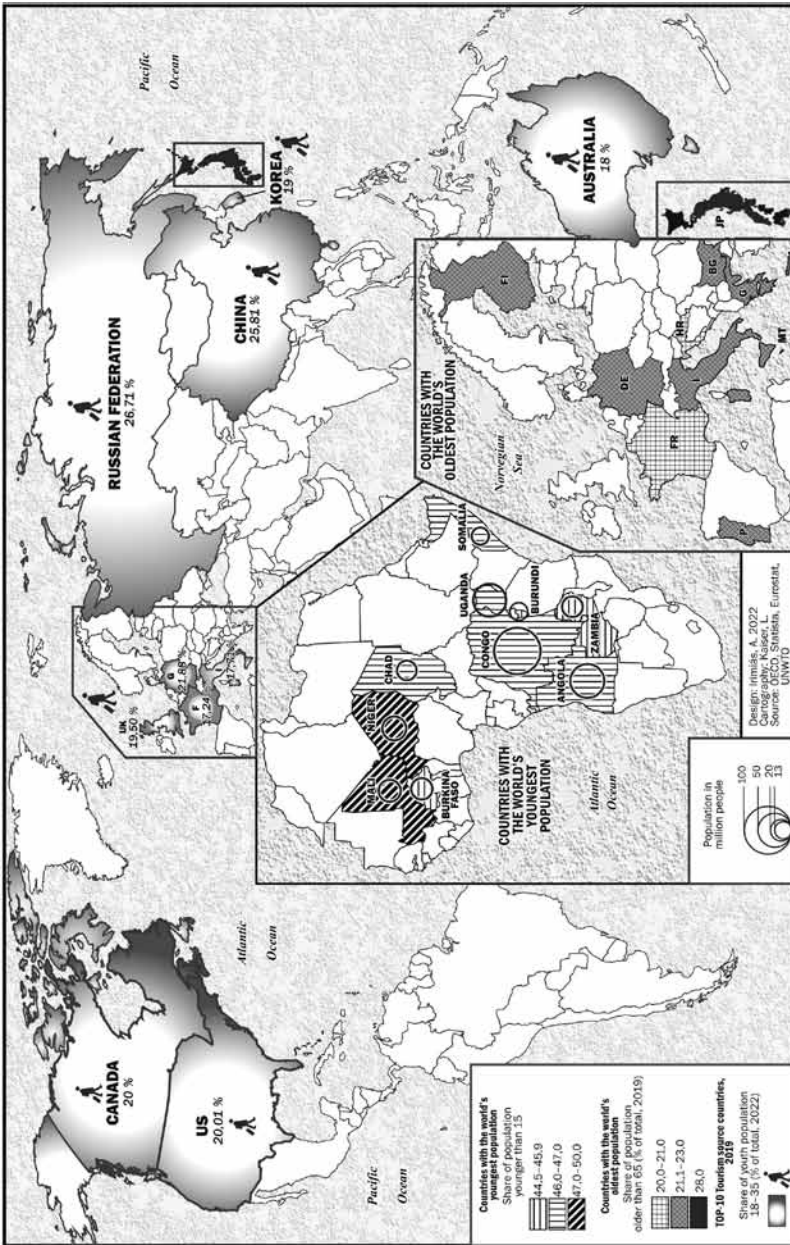


Fig. 1. The Map Shows the Countries With the World's Youngest and Oldest Populations, the 10 Most Important (Pre-pandemic and Pre-Ukraine War) Tourism Source Countries, and the Share of the Latter's Population That Is Under 15.

## 1.2. Youth Populations in Tourism Source Countries

This book focuses on youth tourists. Changes in the global youth population clearly contribute to shaping the tourism market. In tourism, as in all sectors, future trends cannot be forecast without considering demographic change, and the most important tourism source countries have ageing populations (Fig. 1). Moreover, social and economic changes that affect the lives of young adults inevitably influence their travel and tourism behaviour. Starting from the strongest economy in Europe, Germany, here I provide some key figures on the demographic trends in the top three tourism source countries (People's Republic of China, the USA and Germany). These demographic trends are forecast to impact on receiving countries.

While Germany's ageing population is common knowledge, recent data on the country's population trends took many by surprise. In 2021, Germany's youth population was a lower percentage of the overall than it had ever been (Destatis, 2022). In a country of over 80 million inhabitants, 21.88 per cent were aged between 18 and 35, and only 10 per cent, 8.3 million people, were aged between 15 and 24. The US population is also getting older but is forecast to age more slowly than that of the EU. People born between 1981 and 1996, the so-called millennials, currently constitute the largest adult generation (73 million). They are more educated and earn more than previous American generations did at the same age. Hispanics are projected to become the largest ethnic minority by Pew Research Centre (2020). Turning to China, the size and spending power of its young tourists have attracted the attention of tourism service providers and academics. In 2022, the youth population in China accounted for 25.81 per cent of the total population. Currently, China's zero-Covid policy is severely restricting the country's travel market. However, before the pandemic, studies revealed Chinese millennials to be keen to pursue their passions, seeking meaningful and exciting travel experiences, an ideal tourism source market for many destinations.

## 1.3. 'Youth': A Concept That Needs Definition

Age, along with gender and nationality, is one of the demographic descriptors used in tourism studies. The concept of youth appears in very diverse contexts; however, research often assumes that it can be understood univocally: the young are those who belong to a certain age-cohort. Studies in sociology have indicated that it is difficult to find a consensus on what it means to be 'young'. As some research shows, the concept of youth is a social construct. The fact that social scientists, policy-makers, marketers and the media all employ different concepts of youth makes it very hard to know what we are actually defining, and there is an ever-present risk that 'stereotypes, clichés, memes, targets, scapegoats, folk devils, stigma, discourses and signifiers' enter into our descriptions (Threadgold, 2019, p.3).

The standard – Oxford English Dictionary (2022) – definition of youth is: 'the period from puberty till the attainment of full growth, between childhood and adult age'. In order to conceptualise the young, we need to reflect on childhood