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### **Researching Backpacker Tourism: Changing Narratives**

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## **Researching backpacker tourism: changing narratives.**

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### **Abstract.**

This paper interweaves my own personal narrative as a former backpacker with the way in which the phenomenon, and how it has been researched, has continued to evolve over recent years and so it takes the form of an explicitly reflective academic journey. In this it has some similarities to autoethnography where the writer metaphorically steps into the text. The paper has four main parts covering the last twenty or so years in approximately chronological order. The first part explores my own experiences on two major trips to Asia as a backpacker. The second part discusses the 'academic tourist' through the prism of several research trips to South East Asia as a researcher doing fieldwork (published as Hampton 1998; 2003; 2005, and discussed in Hamzah and Hampton 2007; Hampton and Hamzah, 2008). The third section explores what could be called way markers on the journey, that is, emerging issues as backpacker tourism (and perhaps its nature) changes over time. The paper concludes with reflections on the possible academic journey ahead, and makes some suggestions for further academic research concerning trends towards the massification but also the fragmentation of the backpacker market. Travelling, journeys, mobilities, personal stories and narrative, both grand and immediate: these are the metaphors that run through this paper.

**Keywords:** backpackers; economic development; tourism impacts; Less Developed Countries; India; Indonesia; Malaysia

## **Introduction.**

Much of the literature on backpackers is written from the perspective of the outsider, the researcher, the university-based academic working in the field who immerses themselves in the world of the backpacker. Some work is broadly positivist, but there is an increasing interest in using ethnographic type approaches to understanding backpacker tourism. Some academic writers have noted in passing their own experiences as backpackers themselves, but as with much tourism research, this tends to be 'one shot' type fieldwork, case study-based, and although interesting and giving useful insights, has some limitations. This present paper is an attempt to interweave my own personal narrative as a former backpacker with the way in which the phenomenon, and its study, has continued to evolve over recent years and so it takes the form of an explicitly reflective academic journey. In this it has some similarities to autoethnography where the writer metaphorically steps into the text. However, I am in good company as Hutnyk (2008) noted recently in his blog:

The diary, a memoir, notebooks, letters from the field – the ephemeral residue of the research process of anthropology has increasingly attracted attention, become raw data for cultivation, sifting the soil.

This paper is structured in four parts in a broad movement over time covering the last twenty or so years in approximately chronological order. The first part explores my own experiences of two major trips to Asia as a backpacker. The second part discusses the academic tourist through the prism of several research trips to South East Asia as a researcher doing fieldwork. The third section explores what might be called way markers on the journey, that is, I discuss some emerging issues as backpacker tourism (and perhaps its nature) changes over time; and the final part concludes the paper with some further reflections on the possible journey ahead, and makes some suggestions for further research. Travelling, journeys, mobilities, personal stories and narrative, both grand and immediate: these are the metaphors that run through this paper.

## **With the 'freaks' in India.**

It is March 1984. With an entire year free before going to university, my 19 year old self was setting off to travel alone around India and Nepal on a two month trip. I set

off with an old fashioned, steel-framed and rather heavy green rucksack. At that time the cheapest flight from London to New Delhi (apart from Aeroflot and I had heard some pretty hair-raising stories about them) was with Ariana Afghan Airways and cost £290 (around \$600). In comparison, British Airways were then selling direct flights to India for around £500. I bought the tickets with some trepidation from a 'bucket shop', that is a deep discount travel agency based in London, but they arrived in good in time in a thin white envelope. This was before the terms gap year or backpacker were at all commonplace. In fact within India, the independent travellers were often nicknamed 'freaks' by the locals, especially the aging hippies still then very much in evidence on the beaches of Goa and around the guest houses of Kathmandu (Iyer, 1988). These were, in a sense, the forerunners of the modern backpackers, and broadly conformed to what Cohen (1973) called the 'drifters', the remnants of the overland travellers of the late 1960s and 1970s who had pioneered (extremely) low cost travel to, and around, Asia. Their presence had helped develop new destinations such as Goa, Kathmandu, and Kuta beach, Bali, allowing local entrepreneurs to start opening small-scale accommodation and eating places to meet this growing demand.

The flight to India was an indirect route and took over 20 hours. The first leg was in an old Ilyushin Il-62 aircraft belonging to CSA Czechoslovakian Airlines (a former troop carrier by the look of it) to Prague where we boarded the somewhat battered-looking DC-10 of Ariana Afghan, then on to snowy Moscow, then Tashkent, Kabul (under Russian occupation at the time with heavily-armed soldiers with Kalashnikovs, MiG fighters and bulky Antonov troop transport planes) then finally arriving in the dust, heat and smells of Delhi. Once there, I mostly travelled around by rail including a wonderful steam train journey through Rajasthan, then by coastal steamer from Bombay (now, Mumbai) to Goa, and finally by bus winding up through the Himalayas to Kathmandu.

Even though I'd read up about India beforehand, at that time *Lonely Planet* was little known and I had not come across their seminal *India Survival Kit*. In fact, it was another traveller who highly recommended it, and so I bought my own Indian-printed copy that had pages censored with text blacked out that referred to sensitive issues such as the conflict with Pakistan and the Kashmir problem.

Like many young travellers I religiously kept a diary of my trip, in this case written in a couple of cheap exercise books bought from my local *Woolworths* department store. At present, although you still see backpackers with bent heads concentrating on writing their stories in cheap diaries in traveller cafes in Ho Chi Minh city or elsewhere, you are as likely to see them rapidly typing on a laptop with a wi-fi link to a social networking site, or texting their friends or families back home with the latest news of their adventures. However, below I narrate my own backpacker travel ‘stories’ or ‘reflective ethnography’ from these early diaries.

*Travel stories: I*

*We waited about an hour for the bus & when it finally arrived – wow. It was a stretched VW type minibus - & crammed were at least 25 people! We were squeezed into the boot section & spent the ½ hour ride bent double over baskets of fish, banging our heads on the roof at every bump! What a journey!*

(India Diary 3, 1984)

**Backpacking in Asia: ‘I’m not a tourist, I’m a traveller’.**

We now fast-forward five years. It is now 1989 and next in the chronology after my first degree at university and some time spent working in various jobs, I took the opportunity to return to Asia before my PhD started. This trip through South-East Asia was for over four months spanning the end of 1989 and the start of 1990. This time I travelled with a school friend. Once again air tickets were booked through a London ‘bucket shop’ flying to Asia with another airline, this time it was *Biman Bangladesh* for the trip London-Bangkok via Dhaka. Again, the journey from Europe was slow and indirect. However, this time, due to a change of airline timetable, we needed to spend two days in Dhaka before the final leg to Bangkok. *Biman Bangladesh* contacted us before we left England and asked if we wanted to change our flights given the unexpected stopover in Dhaka. If not, they would put us up in a modest hotel in the city. However, we were only too happy to have a fully-paid stay in the Bangladeshi capital en-route to Thailand.

On the flight in another elderly DC-10, amid the majority of Bangladeshi passengers, there were about a dozen Europeans and around half of us were backpackers heading for Thailand comprising people mostly in our twenties and early thirties and a roughly equal mix of men and women. However, the other Europeans turned out to be a very different type of tourist indeed. They were all men, late middle-aged, and it became clear that they were in fact sex tourists (Opperman, 1999; Ryan and Hall, 2001, White, 2008). Some were dressed in tracksuits, and one even had a shirt open to the chest showing a gold medallion, and they were all heading for the infamous red light areas of Bangkok and Pattaya using the cheapest airline possible. Unfortunately for them, they had not been contacted by the airline about the extra two days enforced Dhaka stopover albeit with a free hotel and meals included. Their reaction was interesting to say the least. This group of British men just sat in the hotel smoking cigarettes and drinking glasses of cold Seven-Up and Coke and bemoaning the fact that Bangladesh was a Muslim country and that alcohol was impossible to get at this hotel. For the rest of us, we could not wait to dump our rucksacks at the hotel and get out exploring the city, first by pedal rickshaw, and later by chartering a small skiff on the river.

Once in South-East Asia, we travelled overland through southern Thailand, Penang (Malaysia) down through Sumatra, Singapore, back via Malaysia and then on to Northern Thailand (Sukathoi, Chang Mai, and the North-East river border with Laos). Later I would think about this route and discuss it with my colleague Amran Hamzah as comprising part of the 'classic' early 1990s backpacker route (Hampton and Hamzah, 2008). Unlike my India trip five years earlier, this time I had bought the *Lonely Planet* guide book - *South-East Asia on a Shoestring* - the so-called 'yellow bible' for backpackers. *Lonely Planet* by then was becoming very well-known as the alternative and trendy travel guide that we backpackers needed to have with us. As before, I kept a travel diary in several exercise books. These two excerpts give a flavour:

### *Travel Stories II*

*. . .as I've been trying to scribble these scattered thoughts, my attention keeps being distracted by the inevitable 'hello meester' or 'where you from?' Here,*

*as in many cafes, urchins come up & pester you about a shoeshine. Difficult with sandals!*

(SE Asia '89-90, Diary 2)

### *Travel Stories III*

*Travel's fun, there's no question, but I hope it doesn't get too serious! If, as I wonder, there's a sub-culture developing, I hope the better qualities like helping others out with info. etc & the good things of the travel mind-set stay uppermost. Otherwise it'll be no different to the tourists (YUK), we all despise & laugh at. 'Same, same but different' – maybe?*

(SE Asia '89-90, Diary 2)

### **'You get paid to go there?' Academic tourism.**

By the mid 1990s I was established in my first lecturing post at a British university and I found that my own interest in backpackers was itself changing. Although I still enjoyed visiting South-East Asia as a backpacker myself whenever I could save up the money to return, I found that I had a growing professional interest in starting to think about what impact backpackers might be having in less developed countries (LDCs). As I began what was to become later formalised in my academic writings as a 'literature review', I was struck by how little academic research existed at that point. What little literature I could find made a rather a short list comprising the seminal work of Cohen (1973, 1982), Loker-Murphy and Pearce (1995), Pearce (1990), Riley (1988) and Rodenburg (1980). There was clearly much work still to do in understanding the backpacker phenomenon. My interest grew in attempting to discover some more about backpackers in the field, and so I applied for some funding from my university to pilot backpacker research. This turned out to be the first of what would eventually become a series of journeys to South-East Asia as an academic tourist researching backpacker tourism.

The funding covered an initial research visit in 1996 to some small well-known backpacker islands off the coast of Lombok in eastern Indonesia. I had decided to focus on one particular island, Gili Trawangan, that had become a 'rest place' for backpackers in the emerging Indonesia route of the 1990s that broadly ran West to

East (Sumatra; Java – with visits to Jakarta, Bogor, Yogyakarta, Mount Bromo; Bali; Lombok; Komodo and sometimes Flores.) I was intrigued by the idea of a ‘rest place’, that is on the extended trip that characterises backpacker travel, of there being destinations that act as holiday sites within the longer holiday and travelling period. Specifically, the main question was the fundamental one: were backpackers of overall economic benefit for the local host community in LDCs? In this my approach was *not exactly* an anthropological approach, nor purely a market-led approach (Wilson and Richards, 2008).<sup>1</sup>

At the time of doing the fieldwork the Gili islands only had backpacker accommodation. Now there are boutique hotels and further construction is still going on at the time of writing (August 2008).

One of the initial challenges I faced was the lack of existing data on tourism in the islands, let alone the backpacker sub-sector. This had two aspects. First, where official data on tourism did exist within Indonesia, it was almost impossible to use for my purposes since tourism data for the Gili islands could not be disaggregated from data collected on the larger nearby island of Lombok, let alone separated from data concerning the whole province that it is located in - West Nusa Tenggara. Secondly, I soon found that even where data might have been useful, the preponderance of under-reporting of rooms, beds etc due to fears of tax revenue collectors meant that that data would be insufficiently reliable to use, so that it became clear that I would need to spend time in the field collecting baseline data myself. I did this using a mixture of semi-structured interviews (backpackers and service providers), questionnaires, participant observation and site mapping. The latter was either on foot in the heat or by bicycle. For example no data existed on even the number of beds on the island. I simply went round counting accommodation units and recording the number. Based on a reasonable assumption of double occupancy I then double-checked my overall

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<sup>1</sup> This aspect would be worth pursuing further, perhaps in light of Hutnyk’s ongoing conversation and blogs (2007, 2008) concerning backpackers, international tourism and academics working in the field. This would perhaps be worth examining alongside Mowforth and Munt’s comments on middle-class tourists and consumption (2003).



estimate of the number of beds with several key respondents who were able to help me triangulate my own estimate.

The main findings were not too surprising given my own prior experience in the region namely that the backpackers were indeed making a key contribution to the local economy. What did surprise me when analysing the interviews (n=33) and the small pilot questionnaire (n=47) was the amount that they were spending. The backpacker expenditure was relatively high being around US \$65-100 per week on food and accommodation. In the local context this was higher than I had imagined and was broadly equivalent to an average Indonesian's monthly salary at that time. However, the study also raised some difficult questions of the increasing role and power of outsiders as resorts progress up the resort cycle. (These findings appeared as Hampton, 1998; and Hampton and Hampton, 2009).

Sitting on the outside deck of the slow ferry from Bali to Lombok we sat opposite a European backpacker who was reading *The Beach* (Garland, 1996). I was struck at time by the ironies of seeing a backpacker on her own journey, reading a novel about imaginary backpackers on their journeys, observed by me on mine. Now, looking back and reflecting some more, there are further layers as I can now question, was I then, at that point still a backpacker myself, a participant too as well as observer, or was I just another academic researcher? There is a layering here, a mix of narratives, realities, mobilities even. Here we start to touch upon the notion of the academic as participant in the story, effectively inside the phenomenon they are studying. This has a long history stretching back to the founders of anthropology such as Evans-Pritchard in the Sudan and Malinowski in the Pacific in the early twentieth century (Moore, 2004).

Within the emerging field of backpacker research this could be explored more deeply, especially given how the presence of the researcher themselves may or may not affect the 'subjects', that is the backpackers. In my own narrative, at that time, I was a European academic who was then not much older than most backpackers that I wanted to approach. The majority of backpackers at that destination and my research site were mainly European or Australasian and, typically as later studies also confirmed, were usually highly educated up to university or college level. As such,

when I approached backpacker respondents to ask them to participate in interviews or questionnaires, the reaction was normally very positive. In fact, sometimes I ended up having long conversations after the interview or questionnaire was completed about the research, about how I ended up doing it, my own experiences as a backpacker etc.

Incidentally, as I write this passage in mid 2008 sitting in yet another hotel, this time in Malaysia, with the wisdom of hindsight it strikes me that this was a missed opportunity to have metaphorically ‘kept the tape rolling’, that is, to have kept on recoding the conversation as additional material. However, in a sense I was lucky to be able to exploit who I happened to be as a researcher and my own travelling experiences, since obviously I had little choice over my own ethnicity, age or gender. It is interesting to consider whether another researcher of different age, ethnic origin, and perhaps gender to some extent, might not have got past the gatekeepers.

### **Researching backpackers: Yogyakarta, Indonesia.**

In 1997 I managed to access some more small-scale funding from the UK government’s higher education funding council (HEFCE) to cover the costs of further field research on backpackers in South-East Asia. For this visit I decided to work on an urban backpacker destination, the area of Sosrowijayan, an established backpacker enclave in the Javanese city of Yogyakarta. Unlike the research on Gili Trawangan, by necessity this fieldwork had different timings mainly due to the need for cover for my university teaching so I needed to do the fieldwork in November which happened to be low season, with less European backpackers around. This was not necessarily a disadvantage for doing fieldwork since although there would be less backpackers around, the accommodation and restaurant owners and other staff would generally have more time to give in-depth interviews to a researcher. In addition, the wider context had also changed since the Lombok fieldwork only 18 months previously. Specifically, international tourism to Indonesia was significantly beginning to slow reflecting the growing Asian economic crisis with worries about Indonesia’s political stability and the poor air quality from the forest fire haze.

During these few weeks fieldwork I stayed in a small hotel on the edge of the backpacker enclave in Yogyakarta that was jointly owned by local and a European – but I recall thinking, was I still a backpacker myself? I did indeed travel with a

rucksack, albeit a more modern internal frame type by then, but rather than using a lower cost airline, I flew from the UK to Asia with large scheduled airline this time and then took an internal flight to Yogyakarta rather than going overland from Jakarta. Another difference was that, unlike the earlier field research that mostly worked with backpackers themselves, I wanted to strengthen my understanding of the local impacts by interviewing the owners in more depth so that I would need some help. Colleagues at one of the established local universities helped me find a research assistant who could also translate the respondents' more complex replies. That too was different. In the earlier fieldwork on the islands, I probably mostly stayed in or close to the imaginary backpacker tourist bubble. Now in Yogyakarta I was working more with Indonesian academic colleagues and my local research assistant. In retrospect I was moving away from being with the backpackers, that is being *a* backpacker, to being more a researcher *of* backpackers.

Regarding results, this time the main findings were that in some fairly fundamental ways hosting backpackers had transformed a previously poor *kampung* into a charming, well-cared for enclave of narrow lanes and small accommodation and eating establishments. The area had been described as reminiscent of old Kyoto in Japan. To my surprise at times I found it an emotional experience and was quite moved hearing the stories, the emerging narratives, of how hosting backpackers had radically transformed some local families' livelihoods. One woman respondent told me with great pride in her voice and manner about how she could now afford to send her children to school and how the *kampung* had changed so much from being a poor, district.

The other point that really struck me when doing the fieldwork was that the local tourism officials were clearly disinterested in backpackers. Over the course of the interviews it became very evident that they were busy planning for the 'modern' redevelopment of the old city and urban *kampung* areas, and that the existing backpacker tourism and small-scale accommodation had no place in this vision of a large-scale redevelopment and the construction of new urban tourism infrastructure. Once back in the UK, the fieldwork was analysed and then written up (Hampton, 2003, 2005).

### **Researching backpackers: Malaysia.**

The chronology now moves to May 2006. Amran Hamzah, now a professor of tourism planning, won a major £50,000 project from the Ministry of Tourism Malaysia to examine the various impacts of backpacker tourism and consider its further potential. The commissioning of this large-scale study was a significant moment in the story of government interest in backpackers<sup>2</sup>, marking the first major interest shown by a LDC in the Asia region (the only other government that I am aware of is South Africa, see Rogerson, 2007). I had helped write the proposal and so became a part of the research team.

Fieldwork took place over summer 2006 in Malaysia and the team visited all the main backpacker centres, plus there were brief research trips to the enclaves in Thailand (Kao San Road) and Vietnam (Ho Chi Minh City). This project was also different as I was not working basically on my own with just one research assistant, but this time I was part of an international research team comprising three academics and two local research assistants. In addition, my family also came on the fieldwork including my son who was then around four years old. It was interesting to observe was that the backpackers, mainly Europeans, ignored him, whereas the local respondents and local team members positively loved him being around which thus further enabled the research.<sup>3</sup>

Findings from this major project have already appeared in the public domain regarding the economic impact of backpackers and planning policy implications (Ministry of Tourism, 2007); the spatial flows and changing geographies of backpacker routes (Hampton and Hamzah, 2008); and the political economy of backpacker tourism in small islands (Hamzah and Hampton, 2007).

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<sup>2</sup> The governments of Australia, and more recently New Zealand, have been unusually proactive in first recognising the importance of backpacker tourism for the local host economies, and second, in developing strategies to encourage this tourism sector.

<sup>3</sup> The issue of doing fieldwork accompanied by your family, especially in tourism, could be usefully explored elsewhere.

My most recent work is for a major two-year project funded by the British Council on the developmental impacts of scuba dive tourism in coastal Malaysia. Backpackers still appear in this new story, but play more of an incidental role. One research site selected was in the Perhentian islands off the east coast of peninsula Malaysia, a well-known backpacker destination since the early 1990s (Hamzah, 1995). It is also a major location where many learn to scuba dive, illustrating how backpacker expenditure is 'lumpy', or highly uneven over their trip with sudden high expenditure. Typically backpackers may live on very daily low budget and try to bargain for most things to save a few dollars here and there, and then spend a large amount on a special experience such as learning to scuba dive in the southern islands of Thailand, or going hot air ballooning in Turkey.

### **Way markers? Milestones in the continuing backpacker journey.**

It has become clear that backpacker tourism has been changing over time since it first emerged from its 'hippy' roots during the 1980s. In this section I will briefly consider some of the new issues, or milestones, in its journey: particularly massification and fragmentation.

Most recently there seems to be a massification process going on in some regions such as South-East Asia, that is, an increasing number of European and Australasian young people who are seen travelling with backpacks. However, I would argue that this alone does not necessarily make them backpackers, and suggest that there may be now be a blurring of boundaries between types of youth tourists seen in such regions. Specifically, from my observations in my most recent research visits in 2006 and 2008, I am beginning to wonder whether the mainstream self-styled 'backpackers' are really any different now from the majority of other youth tourists?

The idea of a backpacker sub-culture expressed through certain markers such dress (wearing local ethnic clothes), soft (bounded) adventures and relative hardship (long tiring overland journeys on crowded local transport etc) and the construction of a backpacker identity seems to be changing. Groups of young tourists with backpacks can now be observed wearing internationally fashionable clothing, travelling by private mini-bus from backpacker enclave to enclave, and sitting in large groups watching the latest film being shown in a backpacker place in the form of a pirated

DVD. In part, some of this is supplier-driven as local entrepreneurs from the early 1990s created a parallel infrastructure to meet the demand filling up mini-vans entirely with young westerners to drive them from Kuta beach up to Ubud, or from Penang to the Cameron Highlands etc.

But, does it matter if there is a massification process going on? At one level it probably does not necessarily matter that much in terms of the tourists themselves. For the local service providers since they are so close to their market they will have adapted to the changes already. In a more conceptual way however, it could be that there may be a remnant of hard core backpackers who appear to inhabit a binary construction versus what could now be called mass backpackers. Spatially, the new areas being opened up by the pioneers such as parts of Vietnam and Cambodia lend themselves to analysis as a constantly moving frontier, or moving edge, as more inquisitive or adventurous individuals are always looking, searching for new places, the process that Garland (1996) skewered in his novel as the search for the 'perfect' beach.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the massification process noted above, I would also suggest that at the same time there are also signs of the increasing fragmentation of the backpacker market. This now includes the 'backpacker plus' (Cochrane, 2005). This is an interesting development and this segment contains tourists who still may travel with a backpack, but who tend to have shorter overall trip durations (that is weeks, rather than months) compared with backpackers as commonly defined. They are often professionals travelling in their annual holidays or sabbaticals, and who have less need to survive on very low budgets and so prefer to stay in slightly more expensive accommodation. The accommodation providers have reacted to this emerging market

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<sup>4</sup> Garland also clearly illustrated the great irony of how once the perfect beach is found it is then changed by the tourists going there (and the locals selling, commoditising it). This captures the very essence of how tourists, just by going there, can fundamentally damage the very place they love. For hard core backpackers, the new destination, the new beach or island, is always just beyond reach. Or if found, it almost inevitably, soon changes.

with small, slightly more up-market guest houses springing up recently in parts of Kuala Lumpur and Penang for example.

Another trend that can be observed of fragmentation is the rise of national or ethnic groups of backpackers that may travel together or meet up using new technology at certain sites or accommodation. In particular, the rapid rise of Israeli backpackers in both India and Thailand has been discussed by Hottola (2005). Associated with this is the relatively new emergence of Asian backpackers who are gradually appearing in the main enclaves and destinations in South-East in particular. As yet, Asian backpackers are still the minority in other backpacker regions such as Latin America, but I would expect that may change in the next few years if certain Asia-Pacific countries continue their rapid economic development.

### **Conclusions.**

Backpackers have been studied by academics broadly since the 1980s<sup>5</sup> with a boom in publications from the late 1990s through to the early twenty-first century onwards.

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<sup>5</sup> This is with the honourable exception of the pioneering work by Eric Cohen who began publishing on the backpackers' ancestors, the hippy drifters, in the 1970s. See Cohen, 1973.

Backpackers have travelled from being a little understood and fairly marginal segment of international tourism, to there being specific journal issues, new books and entire international conferences dedicated to the subject with a new generation of PhD scholars in several countries working on many aspects. However, I would suggest that the literature, although now far wider (comprising both more case studies and newer aspects such as the anthropology and social construction of backpackers) needs a further deepening of analysis. To end this paper, I would like to suggest that the journey of the emerging area of backpacker studies could be further enhanced by examining what could be called three 'spaces' on the journey within the growing study of backpackers across the world: the 'geographical space'; the 'temporal space' and the 'political space'.

I would suggest that the first 'space' worth exploring is what could be called the 'geographical space'. In other words I would argue that there is an overdue need for comparative studies of backpacker tourism across different regions of the world. Until now backpacker research has tended to be clustered in certain areas, with a predominance of work based on South-East Asia and Australasia, and little published on Latin America, Europe and elsewhere. For instance, the useful work of Rogerson (2007) on South Africa's experience of backpacker tourism could be helpfully compared with the larger body of literature about South East Asia, Australasia or Latin America. Specifically, this comparative process of working within a spatial aspect might raise questions, such as are there common themes that can be identified across regions, or are the regional differences too wide? Is historical specificity a key factor or not?

The second space is what could be called the 'temporal space'. Here I mean that there is also a need for longitudinal studies over time rather than the normal 'one-shot' type research that produces useful case studies but tends to be a snapshot of a particular destination in time. By definition such studies tend to lack the longer perspective of how destinations change and evolve over time. Also for the backpackers themselves, there is the important and not well-understood issue of their own travel cycles. Specifically, do they later return to the counties they visited as a backpacker with their young families? If so, where do they tend to now stay, where do they now eat? Do they take their children to eat at the night market stalls or other small places or, do



they tend to stay within the tourist bubble of the international hotels and resorts? Also, perhaps more seriously, it is not at all clear at present whether or not overall the backpacker experience has actually made any real difference to them or their values, lifestyle or other choices, or was it just gap year before they rejoined the normal existence of work and career, starting a family, getting a mortgage for a house etc?

The third space, what I call here 'political space', concerns the thorny issues of power and power relations, that is, in essence the question of who wins and who loses from hosting backpacker tourism particularly in LDCs. These are hard questions to ask, especially since the majority of tourism research tends to be case-study based. Asking such questions in many LDCs can be politically sensitive, and even asking such blunt questions may lead to problems of future access, visas being refused etc for some outside researchers if they are been seen to ask questions that are too pointed for local officials. Such a political economy type approach would spotlight issues such as the local state level versus federal or national level planning tensions apparent in many LDCs concerning backpacker resorts. This could build on the work of Britton (1991) and Scheyvens (2002).

Finally, I would like to end by suggesting three specific research questions that could be usefully explored further concerning enclaves; diffusion of taste; and Asian backpackers. Although some excellent new work is appearing on backpacker enclaves (Lloyd, 2003; Howard, 2007; Brenner and Fricke, 2007) it is unclear what the exact role is of backpackers in the evolution of destinations, and specifically, are there differences between say present backpacker enclaves and other enclavic forms of tourism such as say, ecotourists?

In this paper I have attempted to self-consciously 'put myself back into the picture'. By doing this I have found myself outside my comfort zone as an academic. I have experienced an intriguing tension created between the pull of trying to write this new story; and a pull the other way arising from my training and experience as a social scientist and of being immersed in the ways of being objective and in the need to remove myself from my writings and from the subject itself. In other words, unlike the more conventional papers that I normally write and publish, I have tried here to actively reflect on my own changing experience of the phenomenon of backpacker

tourism, first as a backpacker myself in the days before the term really existed, through the 1990s boom in South-East Asia, to my return as an academic tourist studying backpackers. I have tried to interweave my own experiences with how both the backpacker phenomenon, and the academic study that it has generated, have evolved over time. As a former backpacker, and enthusiastic traveller (backpacker plus? post-backpacker? flashpacker even?) it is my hope that the broader narrative, the journey, continues. Intriguingly, there is some sense that the wheel has now come full circle, since my own story began with a journey to India in the 1980s. However, to end I would like to quote again from a recent post by Hutynk (2008) on his blog that ‘Over twenty years it is common that youthful enthusiasms are tempered by the realisation that one ever knows less and less as knowledge grows.’

### **Acknowledgements**

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