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FROM DRIFTER TO GAP YEAR TOURIST
Mainstreaming Backpacker Travel

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Abstract: Long-haul, long-term independent travel—here backpacking—has become increasingly common over the last few decades. Once considered a marginal activity undertaken by society's drop-outs, it has gradually entered the tourism mainstream. Based on interview and internet material and ethnographic field research, this article considers where this growth in interest has come from, and how transformations in the perception of backpacking have taken place. Focusing on the travel imagination, it examines socioeconomic and cultural ''incitements to travel''. As backpacking has become more mainstream its ''alternative'' standing has diminished, but it continues to be a potentially status-enhancing activity. **Keywords:** backpacking, independent travel, imagination, social capital. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Résumé: De vagabond à touriste intérimaire: la normalisation des voyages sac au dos. Les voyages indépendants à longue distance et à long terme—ici les voyages sac au dos—sont devenus plus communs depuis quelques dizaines d'années. Ces voyages, autrefois considérés comme une activité entreprise par des gens en marge de la société, deviennent un courant important du tourisme. Basé sur des interviews, des sources d'internet et des recherches sur le terrain, cet article examine les origines de la croissance d'intérêt et les transformations des perceptions des randonnées sac au dos. Axé sur l'imagination du voyage, l'article examine « l'incitation » socioéconomique et culturelle au voyage. En devenant plus commun, le voyage sac au dos a moins de standing alternatif, mais il continue à accorder un certain prestige. **Mots-clés:** randonnée sac au dos, voyage indépendant, imagination, prestige. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, long-term independent travel has grown in popularity. Once a marginal and unusual activity undertaken by hippies and adventurous drop-outs, it has now become a widely accepted rite of passage for young people. Associating it with ideals of freedom, personal development, and fulfillment, many see a period of travel as an enjoyable part of their education, or as a period of fun and independence before taking on the roles of responsible adulthood. This paper will consider where this growth in interest

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has come from, and how such a transformation in perception has taken place.

As more and more people partake of the backpacker image and travel in this mode, a common structure of consumption has formed: the backpacker is now an easily recognizable stereotype. From a researcher's perspective, however, it can be difficult to clearly distinguish this from other types of tourism. As Sorensen has highlighted, the backpacker is more a socially constructed identity than a clearly defined category (2003:852). It is as much about self-definition as it is about conformity to a set description.

Although loosely recognizable as a group, backpackers are not as homogenous as they may at first appear. As tourism more generally has tended towards post-Fordist niche marketing, this market has also developed into a number of niches. Their tourism imagination has spread, filtering out and being picked up by more people with different backgrounds, expectations, and experiences. As more are incited to travel, distinctions between different types of backpackers may become more apparent. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify three broad characteristics that would be recognizable to most self-defined backpackers. The two most obvious relate to what Uriely, Yonay and Simchai (2002) call form-related attributes: length of time on the road (counted in months rather than weeks, sometimes extending for a period of years) and mode of travel (transport and subsistence on a very low budget). The most important characteristic, however, is orientation towards the task of travel (a type-related attribute, in Uriely et al's terminology). Put simply, they embrace serendipity: low levels of advance planning, no fixed timetable, and an openness to change of plan or itinerary. The balance between serendipity and planning varies a great deal, even for the same individual during the course of a trip, as the person's mood, health, and desires change. All the same, serendipity and openness are strongly held ideals.

It might be overstating the case to suggest that backpackers have a shared worldview, since the primary thing that they all have in common is travel—hence the endless discussion about it wherever they meet. Still, there are enough commonalities in broad terms to suggest the formation of at least a nascent imagined community. Some of the commonly expressed views that appear over and over again in backpacker discourse include orientalist/colonial tropes (discussed in more detail below); the sense of having more in common with fellow travelers of different nationalities than with many fellow nationals; a sense of freedom gained during travel, from home responsibilities but also from constraints on personal behavior; the development of a feeling of common humanity, often expressed in stories about the ''kindness of strangers'' or the similarities between people all over the world; the urge to see the world ''because it's there''; the belief that travel can lead to self-development and self-knowledge; and finally, the realization for many that the ''big trip'' has not helped to get it out of their system, but has rather planted a seed of desire for more.

As a general rule backpackers, dislike being called ''tourists'', usually reserving this epithet for package tourists only. This is in spite of the

fact that at least some forms of backpacking now bear more than a passing resemblance to conventional tourism (Welk 2004). They are more likely to call themselves travelers, or simply backpackers (O'Reilly 2005). Richards and Wilson suggest that younger people are more willing to accept the backpacker label, while older ones are more likely to opt for traveler. They also found that the former term is used more frequently in areas where the development of the backpacker industry is strongest, for example in Southeast Asia and Australasia (2003:9–10).

The term backpacker is relatively recent. Riley (1988) settled on ''international long-term budget travelers,'' an accurate but rather awkward description. Cohen (1973) coined the term drifters, but this has not caught on and is no longer strictly accurate, although the image of the drifter described by Cohen remains an ideal among backpackers themselves. From the late 90s, ''backpacker'' starts to appear in both academic and popular literature. It is important to note that the term has rather negative connotations in some contexts, particularly on the well-trodden routes in Southeast Asia and in parts of Australia. In spite of its limitations, however, it is useful shorthand for long-term international low-budget travelers, as long as it is kept in mind that not all people accept the label and when they do they may not define it in precisely the same way.

Backpacking has been made possible by economic and political developments brought about by globalization, and in turn it is contributing to the cultural changes that are said to characterize the postmodern era. Effectively capturing the link between tourism and globalization, Meethan suggests, it is best conceptualized as ''a global process of commodification and consumption involving flows of people, capital, images, and cultures'' (2001:4). Tourism may seem a fatuous or even indulgent manifestation of the new global order, which might partly explain why it is often derided even by those who purport to study it. Yet its significance lies in its unique position to shed light on multiple facets of the globalization process simultaneously, economic, political, and cultural.

Long-term, long-haul travel has taken many forms over the last few centuries, some of which could be said to be direct or indirect precursors to tourism in general and backpacking in particular. Before discussing the recent phenomenal growth, this paper briefly examines some of these earlier forms and traces shifts in perception about backpacking. It attempts to piece together the various aspects of the backpacker travel imagination by looking at the key factors involved in this growth, focusing especially on ''incitements to travel'', that is, the idea of backpacking in the popular imagination (Appadurai 1996) and how individuals might become motivated to take part.

MAINSTREAMING BACKPACKER TOURISM

Traveling for months or even years at a time, backpackers are a diverse group of individuals. They range from young people taking a

year out before further study or work (often called ''gap years'' in the United Kingdom), to people in their 20s and 30s seizing an opportunity to travel long-term. Looking for adventure or the experience of a lifetime, they usually see the trip as a one-off opportunity. In fact, these often whet the appetite for more, becoming the start of a much longer ''travel career'' that can span a lifetime (Richards and Wilson 2003). Although there is a dearth of reliable quantitative data on backpackers as a group, some rough generalizations can be made. Primarily though not exclusively middle class and white, a large proportion come from northern European countries, especially the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Scandinavia. Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Israel are also significant backpacker-producing countries (and in the case of the first three, receiving-countries as well). There are relatively fewer North American backpackers, with Canada producing a much higher proportion relative to population than the United States.

While trips are almost by definition independently organized, the degree of prior planning and organization has come to vary as this form of travel becomes more common. The drifter ideal is one of little or no advance planning, allowing word of mouth and serendipity to influence the itinerary. Spontaneity and ''going with the flow'' are highly valued, even if not always put into practice. This spontaneity is probably most evident in the lack of pre-booked accommodation and flexibility about where time is spent during the weeks and months between scheduled flights. On the ''pre-organized'' end of the prior planning continuum are gap year travelers who volunteer or join organized projects, perhaps going independently for a short time at the end of their period abroad. Somewhere in the middle are working backpackers, such as those in Australia who structure their trips around seasonal work (Cooper, O'Mahoney and Erfurt 2004). At the other extreme are those who arrange virtually nothing in advance, sometimes not even onward or return flights.

Study Methods

The analysis in this paper is based on extensive fieldwork and material posted onto backpacker-oriented Internet sites. The fieldwork involved eleven months of backpacking on a number of circuits, including eastern and southern Africa, India, Southeast Asia, Central America, Australia, and New Zealand. Individual journeys lasted between 5 and 14 weeks, and most took place between June 2000 and January 2002. Although the research was ethnographic in nature with participant observation at its core, the atypical circumstances called for a greater reliance on interviews than might otherwise be the case in anthropological work. The field in this case was not delineated by geographic location, and there was no possibility of continuous, indepth social interaction with the same individuals or groups over a long period of time. Sorensen (2003) discusses similar difficulties, and similar methods have been used here to adapt anthropology's primary methodology to the study of backpackers. In addition to participant observation, methods included countless informal and semiformal discussions with

individuals and groups of backpackers, semistructured formal interviews, and the monitoring of and participation in discussion groups on backpacker related websites.

The main Internet sites used are the discussion forums on BootsnAll.com and ''The Thorntree'' on the Lonely Planet website. Discussions on these sites are organized according to subject, and topics are usually initiated by forum members. The sites were monitored for a number of years, particularly BootsnAll.com. During a period of more intensive involvement over three months in 2003, relevant discussions were found in the archives and active threads followed as they unfolded. During this time the researcher initiated a number of discussions, some directly aimed at eliciting relevant material, although these tended to be less successful than more indirect questions about current topics. BootsnAll.com also carries stories and travelogues written by amateur writers.

Thirty interviews were conducted on the road. Most of these were audio-recorded. A further 20 were with those who had returned from their trips more than a year before. These took place in England in the first half of 2003, and were conducted over the telephone or in person. Most of these were not recorded, but transcribed onto computer while they took place. The first set relate to actual experience as it was unfolding for the interviewee, while the second set relates to reflections on travel and related memories, focusing on its impact on their lives. The two are intimately related, as the latter often contribute to further travel plans (Harrison 2003:5). Reflections are also an important part of incorporating the experience into one's identity while traveling and upon the return home (O'Reilly 2005).

The 30 interviews from the road were evenly split between men and women, reflecting a roughly even gender distribution in most regions. Although Sorensen (2003:852) finds a slightly higher male/female ratio in the developing world, this was not the case in this study. Among the interviewees, 18 were British, three from other European countries, three Canadians, and two each from the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Their average age was 26.4, with the youngest 18 and the eldest 40. Levels of educational attainment were relatively high, with 15 university graduates (some with postgraduate qualifications), six having either been accepted or recently dropped out of university, two with post-secondary qualifications, ten with A levels or equivalent and three with General Certificate of Secondary Education or equivalent as their highest qualification. This profile is similar to that found by other researchers (Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995; Riley 1988; Sorensen 2003).

The 20 interviews with backpackers who had returned from their first journey more than a year previously (and for most it was much longer than that) included 14 men and six women. The gender discrepancy might be due to a higher proportion of women backpackers in recent years, which has been suggested anecdotally by experienced travelers. It is also possibly a result of the snowball sampling method used to locate these interviewees. Fifteen were British, two American, and

one each from Japan, Canada, and Australia. Again, the imbalance is probably due to sampling methods that favored networks of former backpackers currently based in the United Kingdom. Most of the non-British informants were contacted via backpacking internet sites. Their average age was 36.75, with the youngest 25 and the eldest 53. Again levels of educational attainment were high, and all but one (unemployed at time of interview) had middle class occupations.

From Drifter to Gap Year Tourist

The roots of backpacking can be traced historically to other modes of travel, starting with early European exploration. Modern tourism may seem to bear little actual resemblance to the rather more serious business of exploration that ushered in the period of European expansion and colonial domination, but powerful and pervasive tropes developed during that period continue to hold sway. Some of these relate to perceptions of the ''Other'', with projections reflecting individual needs and often a sense of dissatisfaction with home cultures. These tropes and fantasies include the ''natural'' native who has never set eyes on a white person; a nostalgic and naïve view of the ''traditional'' life found outside the West, untouched by modernity but now rapidly disappearing; and the simple, ''happy'' native who gets by with very little and appears not to mind living in poverty—a corollary being that their culture or religious beliefs somehow inure them to suffering, which is a particularly popular belief among travelers in India, and to a somewhat lesser extent, Africa. Other key tropes relate to the self-perception of the tourist: the brave, intrepid explorer; the association of physical movement across vast distances with adventure, excitement, and daring deeds; and the lone individual pitting himself (the ideal is generally a ''he'') against the forces of nature, savage ''Others'', and his own physical and psychological limits.

Orientalist fantasies are deeply ingrained in the travel imagination. These projections reveal more about the tourists than they do about the culture and living conditions of the people sought out. For example, trips to purportedly ''primitive'' or untouched tribal villages have become de rigueur on many backpacker itineraries (Cohen 1989; see also a selection of ''Africa travel stories'' on BootsnAll.com/africa). The following excerpts are from a story posted onto BootsnAll.com by American backpacker Kelly Sobczak, describing her efforts to visit the Mursi of Ethiopia:

> His yelling woke me up. As I slowly opened my eyes, I saw him standing over me. He was naked and hopping mad. The fact that he had a Kalashnikov slung over one shoulder and not a single strand of hair on his entire body just added to the bizarre scene. Was I dreaming? And his woman was not much better, in her animal skin ''dress'' which exposed a withered left breast. ... I had ventured to the Gamo-Gofa region in southern Ethiopia with hopes of seeing some of the colorful local tribes. ... That afternoon, day four of our nine-day odyssey, we had driven through Mago National Park for

> hours with the hope of spotting members of the Mursi tribe, one of the most sought-after tribes by the tourists who come to Gamo-Gofa. . . . The women, with their spherical lip plates, are the main attraction. They have the reputation of being aggressive, touchy, and downright mean; yet it is the Mursi who everyone wants to see (2001).

The story goes on to relate how the tourists had traveled through rough terrain in an attempt to find the remote tribe. The Mursi couple wanted to be paid to have their photos taken by the tourists, though the author complains that the woman was not sporting a lip plate. She relates the negotiations over payment in detail, describing the Mursi as ''ranting and raving'' and repeatedly referring to them as ''savages'' (in quotation marks). Elsewhere on the site (<www.bootsn-all.com/bio/ksobczak.shtml>) Sobczak says she has no desire to return to Ethiopia, and implies that her trip there was an ordeal. Yet the tone of her story suggests adventure and the achievement of an important goal. Turton (2004), an anthropologist, provides a contrasting view of this sort of encounter between tourists and Mursi.

Fortunately not all backpackers hold such extremely stereotypical views. Yet watered down versions of these ideas can be heard from even the most apparently liberal ones. Some approach the quest for ''authentic'' Others with a degree of postmodern irony, but for many there is a genuine desire to experience what they consider a more exotic or more ''real'' way of life. Even as they subscribe to orientalist stereotypes, many backpackers consider themselves liberals and identify with political causes such as anti-racism and the anti-globalization movement. It can be difficult to understand the apparent contradiction. Harrison (2003) has also noted the enthusiastic naivety of even well-informed tourists, and relates this to the strategies of innocence used since colonial times to distance themselves from the uglier and more crassly commercial side of colonial domination (or in this case, of the often negative impacts of tourism).

Backpacking might also be linked to the Grand Tour of the 17th and 18th centuries, particularly its focus on gaining an education: the collecting of desirable attributes through exposure to classical culture. It can be seen as the modern equivalent in certain senses. Even those who are not aware of the history of the Grand Tour commonly make reference to the educational nature of travel. Whether or not this is a primary motivation for making the journey, it is an appealing reason to offer up to friends, family, and future employers. Proponents of the historical Grand Tour considered certain experiences to be educational and character forming, making for a more cultured individual. This belief persists in the educational view of long-term travel, but with a somewhat different orientation. As Giddens (1991) has described, the reflexive project of modernity includes a reflexive self-identity. Backpacking today is often presented in terms of the need to ''find myself'' or the development of a stronger sense of self and identity (O'Reilly 2005).

Adler (1985) suggests that ''tramping'' (the labor-related travel of the lower classes) might also be a historic antecedent. This was a sort

of working man's grand tour, an institutionalized and respected pattern of travel that peaked in the 19th century and thereafter shifted from employment-related travel to something more like pure tourism. She makes a convincing argument, especially considering that today many backpackers combine their travels with a period of work abroad, whether to top up funds or to gain experience for their future careers. Although work is not as central to most forms as it was to tramping, this is clearly a thread that links the two forms.

Cohen (1972, 1973) writes about the phenomenon of ''drifter'' tourism of the 60s and 70s. Sometimes referred to as ''hippie'' travel in places like India, it is perhaps a more direct precursor of at least some of today's backpacker travel. Although tourism has changed a great deal since then, the ideal typical backpacker of today closely resembles the model set down by the hippie travelers of the 60s and 70s. Of the four types of international tourist originally described by Cohen (1972), the drifter has least contact with the tourism industry, has no fixed itinerary or timetable, travels on a more limited budget, and is more of a risk-taker, all of which remain important aspects of backpacker ideology. Cohen (2004) has recently argued that today's backpackers differ significantly from the original drifters. He highlights a gap between the ideology of backpacking and its actual practice, which he considers to be more like ordinary tourism than most backpackers would like to admit.

Drifter travel continued into the 70s, but appears to have declined with the end of the hippie era. The renewed hostilities of the Cold War in the 80s, including proxy ''hot'' conflicts in many regions of the world, made overland travel along the traditional routes through Asia too dangerous. Coupled with economic recession and heavy unemployment in many Western countries, conditions were not conducive to the expansion of this type of tourism. Nevertheless, throughout the 80s the phenomenon of long-term international budget tourism gradually began to grow, with regions such as Southeast Asia, especially Thailand, becoming increasingly popular. Riley argues that by this time the characterization of long-term budget travelers as hedonistic and anarchistic drifters was no longer accurate. Rather, ''the average traveler prefers to travel alone, is educated, European, middle-class, single, obsessively concerned with budgeting his/her money, and at a juncture in life'' (1988:313).

Although the field research presented in this paper was carried out at least 15 years after Riley's, her description of budget travelers might just as well have been written to characterize a significant segment of backpackers currently on the road. Since then, the rise in people taking a year off between studying and work has also swollen the backpacker market. It is difficult to quantify this growth because of the lack of statistics kept specifically on backpacker tourism in most regions. The main exception to this rule is Australia, which does keep track of the number of backpackers visiting the country (Loker-Murphy 1996; Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995; Murphy 1999, 2000). New Zealand also keeps more limited statistics. Richards and Wilson's

(2003) survey suggests that youth travel has definitely grown over the past couple decades. It is becoming increasingly apparent that backpacking is a significant and popular form of tourism.

Backpacking today is suffering from parallel changes in status and public opinion as the Grand Tour did in its later years. In the same way that the Grand Tour appeared to be an excuse for a life of leisure and entertainment free from the responsibilities of home for at least some young travelers, today's backpackers are often maligned for their decadent lifestyle and the apparent extension of adolescent irresponsibility. Over time the Grand Tour became more popular and available to the middle classes, and its status diminished (Towner 1985). Similarly, as backpacking has become more common and accessible to a wider range of people, its status as an alternative lifestyle or unusually daring activity has diminished. In the case of the latter, however, the decline is due less to class snobbery than taste snobbery (Bourdieu 1986). Purists believe that it is now too easy, a sort of ''backpacker light'' more akin to mass tourism than the genuine travel it once was in an idealized, not-so-distant past. According to Cohen (2004), this may well be true.

The more experienced tend to deride or poke fun at the newly arrived backpackers, a favorite pastime and part of the road status game described by Sorensen (2003). The fact that this form of travel has become easier relatively speaking and bears less of a social stigma—and can even be seen as status enhancing—may have attracted people who in the past would not have considered such an undertaking. Nevertheless, for today's backpackers it is no less of an adventure and no less potentially fulfilling than it was 20 years ago. For many it still feels like a risk, still feels exciting, and may still have a profound impact on their lives.

A common characteristic of romantic modernity is the tendency to idealize what is past or somehow just out of reach. All that is worthwhile is about to disappear over the horizon, or perhaps it already has and everyone has *just* missed it. Backpackers are just as prone, if not more so, to these tendencies, forever referring to a romanticized past that they may not even have experienced, but know about from word of mouth or the stories of an older traveler who was there when it was all so different and perfect. From a broader social perspective it is clear that backpacking has become more common and more a part of the mainstream, which may devalue the experience in some people's eyes. This is not to say that it has become any less valuable or exciting from the perspective of many individuals. All of those interviewed on the road had a sense that their travels would significantly change their lives, even if they did not yet know how. The thoughts of the ''returned'' interviewees more clearly reflect the long-term value of the experience.

''Ann'' (38) is British, currently a full-time mother and part-time interior designer, previously in sales and marketing for a major clothing retailer. She traveled for 18 months in 1989, when she was 24. Reflecting on the importance of this period of travel, she said:

> Looking back, of all the things I've done apart from being a mother, [traveling] is the thing that helped me evolve the most as a person. It made me self-sufficient and flexible, un-phased by most things. It made me more open-minded. I think these are long lasting effects that change who you are. Having children shows that who you are is etched into you from day you're born, but traveling makes that person who is already there different—it molds you. For some people maybe it doesn't last, but for me it did.

''Alex'' (35), also British, is a marketing manager. He traveled for 22 months in his early 20s. He believes that travel altered his plans for the future:

> [Traveling] did affect my career, because I couldn't bear the thought of going into surveying, which had been my original plan. I felt very unambitious and overly laid back, much more so than before. I had been eager to do something that was a clear job or vocation, but kind of let that go. It did make me question what I wanted—and put me off commitments like debt or financial status symbols that require financial commitment like a big car. It has lasted a bit, this feeling. I would still rather *do* other things, like putting my money into interests like sailing or go carting—pursuing dreams that I had when I was younger.

Incitements to Travel

The last 15 years have been a period of relative affluence in Western countries, with young people more able to save enough money to embark on such trips, and for some parents are more able to partially subsidize travel. Post-Fordist working conditions favor flexibility. Gone is the job for life, and along with it many of the worries about career structure and working one's way up the career ladder. The new conditions of employment have many drawbacks, not least of which is a sense of insecurity and uncertainty about the future, but one advantage is the relative ease with which people can delay entry into the workforce or even take career breaks in order to travel for long periods of time.

It was noticeable during the first period of field research (2000–2002) that those working in Information Technology were particularly confident about leaving jobs to travel. One couple in their mid-20s (interviewed in India 2000), both previously working in this field, said that they had not bothered to take a leave of absence even though their employer asked them to do so rather than resign. An official career break would have put a time limit on their travels, which they preferred to leave open-ended. They felt confident that they would be able to find similar or better jobs when they returned home.

That is not to say there is no risk involved in taking the decision to leave work to travel. For over ten years, ''Mike'' (a 39-year-old investment banker, interviewed in London 2003) traveled independently at least twice a year, but only for two to five weeks at a time. In 2000

he decided to take a leave of absence from his job for a year. One year turned into two, although his employer had only guaranteed his job for one. By the time Mike returned an economic slump meant his company did not re-hire him, and he was still looking for work at the time of interview.

Along with changes in working conditions, the falling price of international airfares has played a part. Airline tickets are the single most expensive item in the budget, making up anywhere from half to one-fifth of the total cost of a round-the-world journey, depending on how long one intends to travel and how low one's daily budget while on the road. A decade ago specialist long-haul travel agencies would put together their own package of flights for a custom-made round the world itinerary. Today the major airlines have joined forces to provide reasonably flexible, low-priced round-the-world packages along a variety of routes, allowing multiple stops and date changes for a full calendar year. At time of press a ticket such as this on the most popular route from London through Asia, Australia, and the Pacific costs as little as US$1,400 (UK£800).

Socioeconomic conditions aside, there are also significant cultural factors behind the rise in backpacking related to the broader shift from modernity to post- (or late) modernity, what might be called incitements to travel. Appadurai writes that ''the imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order'' (1996:31). In the world of late modernity, the imagination is central to all forms of agency including travel—the creation of places and people as objects of desire, the means to fulfill that desire, and the self-identity that develops out of the practice of travel.

Appadurai describes five dimensions of global cultural flows: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes. Individual actors navigate these different landscapes, which are the building blocks of imagined worlds. Tourists are part of the ethnoscape—moving groups and individuals that include immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers—and now constitute an essential feature of the world. Technoscapes make the travel and the communication possible (or easier, for example email). Mediascapes provide the information, the narratives, and the images that fuel desire and create backpacking scripts. The modern and postmodern values in the ideoscape provide the justification and political framework, including sovereignty of nations; the concepts of freedom and rights, including the right to travel; and the colonial idea of the right to visit, view, and obtain knowledge about other cultures—usually without explicit understanding of the one-way nature of this right and the power structures it reflects. These global cultural flows are the means through which the travel imagination has been transformed. In the case of backpacking, this has meant a shift from the margins into a more mainstream activity.

Travel abroad has become normalized and is no longer perceived as particularly exotic or unusual. Visits abroad by UK residents almost

tripled between 1982 and 2002, the great majority of these being for holidays. According to the 2002 International Passenger Survey, visits by UK residents to countries other than North America and Europe rose from less than two million in 1982 to well over six million in 2002 (Travel Trends 2002:17–19). In terms of long-term traveling, taking a ''gap year'' after study is now common in the United Kingdom and Ireland. In Australia and New Zealand working abroad and the ''overseas experience'' are a common rite of passage, while many young middle-class Israelis make extended journeys after their obligatory military service (Noy 2004). Time/space compression (Harvey 1989) has made the world feel smaller, and made us more aware of what other places contain (or at least what we think they contain), feeding the travel imagination. Time–space distanciation has meant a stretching of social life across time and space, where absent others are increasingly important in daily life (Giddens 1990). People are drawn by their imagining of what lies out there, and made to feel able to explore it because relationships across long distances are increasingly common, comfortable, and relatively easy to achieve and maintain.

The place of long term international travel in the popular imagination has shifted. This is evidenced by the number of informants who, when asked where the idea to go backpacking came from, simply said that they had ''always wanted'' to travel. Just over a third gave this type of response. For some the idea seemed to have sprung up spontaneously from within themselves, while others acknowledged that they somehow picked it up but without being sure where. Seventeen out of the 30 interviewed on the road cited the influence of friends and family who had traveled before them. Media representations were also commonly mentioned, including travel programs and wildlife documentaries on television, movies, and novels such as Alex Garland's *The Beach* and Kerouac's *On the Road*.

Aside from transportation technology that enables people to move relatively quickly over greater distances, improved communications technology means that traveling friends and relatives are just an email away. Family news can be passed on in a matter of minutes or days rather than weeks or months. Poste restante is rapidly becoming a thing of the past as email and cheap international phone calls become available in even the remotest parts of the globe. A small but significant minority even maintain their own websites while on the road (Germann-Molz 2004). In a relatively new trend, some moving through the more developed parts of the world carry mobile phones to keep in touch with each other and family back home. As more people go independently, word of mouth spreads about how it is done. This makes a round the world trip seem all the more feasible, not a distant dream but something an ordinary person could easily do, again feeding the travel imagination.

Over the last two decades conceptualizations about acceptable life paths have come to include the possibility of a period of time spent traveling, something which is now presented to many school leavers and university graduates as a reasonably mainstream option they might

choose. In the scheme of things, it fits neatly into the break between education and career, building on the former and potentially enhancing prospects for the latter. Travel can be good for the curriculum vitae in a number of ways, not just in terms of work experience gained on the road but also in demonstrating qualities that many employers find attractive (O'Reilly 2005). In terms of identity, backpacking can be a key element in the reflexive project that Giddens (1991) has identified as central to the late modern condition. It is significant that almost every person interviewed during the course of this research felt the need to ''set up'' the trip in a context of personal development, whether this was a primary or more peripheral reason for taking the trip (O'Reilly 2005). The following is just one example of this.

''Alan'', an Australian backpacker who had been on the road for about 18 months, sent group emails during the final stages of his journey through South America and Europe in 2001. Addressed to 50 friends and family, Alan's emails move between thoughts and observations about the places he visits and self-reflection. The following excerpts are typical:

> [Writing about Brazil] ...They have a passion for living, music and the arts. Incredibly hospitable and genuinely want you to have a good time in their country. They love parties and any sort of gathering with people and energy. They will talk to people with no barriers and are incredibly open. When you meet someone on the street you give the girls a kiss on each cheek and the men a typical handshake with the other hand patting the shoulder or arm. Very touchy people which is another gesture highlighting their warmth and openness. I like their style. ... The openness of the people has been very good for my spirit. I have never been the most open person myself and Brazilian encouragement has helped me grow. Shy people don't seem to exist here. They all seem to know you have to ''give it a go'' to learn, and there is always a lot of encouragement to dance, to kiss a girl passionately in the street, or to go and watch the sunrise after partying all night.

Later in the same message he says:

> A little on the real purpose of my trip, self-development. The fact that I'm by myself helps a lot. I have no connection to home and nobody knows me. I've realized this allows a subtle form of greater freedom where your ''normal'' behavior does not exist. I'm ultimately by myself and plans can be changed at will if the situation calls. People and places are different allowing me to experience other ways of life encouraging [me] to question my own beliefs and values. Having to talk to other people and meet new people all the time is surprisingly easy. I've learnt a lot about individuals, cultures, attitudes, interests, differences and, of course, the similarities among all of us.

This selection is rather more contemplative than some of his other missives that focus on humorous anecdotes, but it is not out of keeping with the mood of his group emails as a whole. Alan is a keen observer and an articulate writer, perhaps more so than your ''average'' backpacker. However, he is not unusual in his views about the transformative

experience of travel, nor in the way that he explains his experiences in terms of self-development. This example demonstrates how this experience can contribute to the development of a reflexive self-identity, and contrasts with the more instrumental, modernist view of travel as educational that can be traced back to the Grand Tour. While the non-professional narratives of backpackers such as Alan often fall back on stereotypes of the Other and may lack the depth and complexity of contemporary ethnographic writing (Galani-Moutafi 2000), for the individuals involved the sense of transformation and growing self-knowledge can be profound (Elsrud 2003; Noy 2004). For some the experience will tend to strengthen and confirm rather than challenge cultural identity and sense of self (Galani-Moutafi 2001). For others, such as Alan above, traveling offers the chance to question, explore and confront.

As the profile of backpacking has increased, so have popular media images, disseminating the idea and accelerating its appeal. Guidebooks designed for the independent traveler are big business. Aside from websites associated with these guidebooks, there are an increasing number of sites dedicated to backpacking. Examples of these include BootsnAll.com, Travel-library.com, The-backpacking-site.com.. *Wanderlust*, a glossy magazine aimed specifically at independent travelers, was launched in 1993. Articles about backpacking regularly appear in newspaper travel sections. In the last few years several novels have been published with backpacking as their theme or backdrop (Barr 2001; Gardner 2002; Garland 1996; Harris 2001; Sutcliffe 1997).

There has been some speculation that the availability of so many media images, particularly via the internet, constitute a kind of virtual travel that may take the place of actual corporeal travel. Urry (2002) argues that virtual travel cannot be a simple substitute for the corporeal type, while highlighting the ways in which the former has had an impact on the nature of co-presence. Virtual travel means that the sociocultural context in which corporeal travel occurs is different, but the two are not wholly interchangeable. The social and cultural capital associated with physically being in a place and the value placed on the ideal of individual experience are not negated by the availability of virtual travel. If anything, it acts as further incitement to actual travel, heightening the desire to be physically present in a particular place. Perhaps more than any other factor, virtual travel feeds the backpacker imagination.

A final incitement to consider is the accumulation of social, cultural, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1991). Although backpackers themselves are unlikely to admit that the enhancement of their social position is a *motivating* factor, many do consider the experience to have a positive effect either more generally in terms of enhanced personal confidence and improved social standing among family and peers, or in specific areas such as employment (though a small minority express anxiety that gaps in employment left by time spent traveling will look bad on their curriculum vitae). Although some do sense the potential for this while on the road, this acknowledgement came across most

clearly in the 20 interviews with ''returned'' backpackers as they reflected on the various ways in which their experiences had made an impact. All 20 informants believed that their travels had changed their lives in some way, from the more intangible effects such as improved confidence and broad-mindedness to more tangible influences on personal relationships and career choices.

Following Putnam (2000), the term social capital is used broadly to include not only social networks and connections between individuals, but also the intangible shared norms and ideas that develop through these connections and have repercussions for how people think and act in relation to others. Examples might include tolerance of difference, awareness of global issues, or the sense of common humanity that many backpackers attribute to their experiences of travel. Social capital can be accrued through backpacking in a number of ways. While on the road contacts and networks are established with other travelers and potentially with institutions and employers. It is difficult to quantify the extent of these contacts and the degree to which they are maintained post-travel, but for some they can become significant in their personal or professional lives, particularly for those who later find travel-related employment. Post-backpacking informants included guidebook writers, travel journalists, and travel agency employees.

Even where contacts established on the road are not maintained, informants believe that their experiences either reinforced or altered their views of the social world both at home and globally. They expressed these beliefs by, for example, professing a greater cultural and/or political understanding of other countries and their own country's role in the world; through expressions of self-development that they believe enhanced their social relationships and/or careers; and sometimes through radical changes in life plans that led to careers never before considered or long periods spent living and working abroad (see ''Ann'' and ''Alex'' case studies above).

The symbolic capital of having made a lengthy, independently organized journey—and the desirable personal qualities it projects—can enhance prestige and reputation in a variety of contexts, from employment to social circles. These qualities are nicely summed up in what Urry calls ''aesthetic cosmopolitanism''. They include:

> the idea that one has the *right* to travel anywhere and to consume all environments; a *curiosity* about all places, peoples and cultures; an *openness* to other people's culture and a willingness/ability to appreciate some elements of language/culture of the place one is visiting; willingness to take *risks* by moving outside of the tourist bubble; an ability to *locate* one's own society and its culture in terms of a wide-ranging historical and geographical knowledge; a certain *semiotic* skill—the ability to interpret tourist signs and know when they are partly ironic (1995:167).

These skills and qualities are transferable, and are particularly suited to the current context of flexible employment conditions.

They are also valued by many people in general, such that possessing these qualities is reason to be admired or looked up to. Through narrative—storytelling, journal writing, email communications, personal reflections, and so on—backpackers have the opportunity to develop and practice these qualities.

Finally, cultural capital, defined by Bourdieu as legitimate knowledge, is accrued through the legitimating force of experience that travel is thought to provide. Knowledge of the world and oneself gained through this experience are valuable, and are being acknowledged as such more widely in almost all social contexts. As Harrison points out, travel is a way of expressing particular tastes that reinforce middle class status and help guard against falling down the social ladder, even when income levels are not, for the time being at least, commensurate with the social status a person wishes to demonstrate (2003:10–11).

In terms of education and occupation in relation to parents' occupations, there is evidence of upward social mobility in the sample interviewed on the road. Twice as many came from a working-class background as currently had working-class occupations, and as other researchers have also found, education levels were high relative to the general population (Richards and Wilson 2003; Riley 1988; Sorensen 2003). This suggests that travel is not just about pleasure and adventure, but is part of broader strategies to maintain or enhance social position. Coupled with a strong cultural value attached to worldliness, independence and (limited) risk-taking, the symbolic and cultural value associated with backpacking experience can reinforce social capital. This does not necessarily happen automatically: the majority of post-travel informants had made active use of the social, symbolic, and cultural capital accumulated through their journeys to alter and enhance their social positions.

One example is Jo Drury (28 years old), who traveled and worked abroad extensively throughout the late 90s and has successfully used the social capital gained to establish a new career. As she worked her way around the world, she and a partner came up with the idea of starting a website to help others arrange work in advance of their travels or while on the road. Anyworkanywhere.com has been running since 2001. Another interviewee, ''Faith'' (39), believes that her travel experience influenced her career as a free-lance food and wine journalist. Cultural capital in the form of worldliness, confidence, and a ''go-getter'' approach has been crucial to her success in a highly competitive field.

CONCLUSION

The popularity of backpacking continues to increase, although the more mainstream it becomes the more its credibility as an alternative or unusual activity diminishes. Still, only a minority of tourists

undertake lengthy backpacking trips, a fact that helps to maintain a certain degree of the mystique and prestige associated with it. The significance of the experience for most individuals seems not to have diminished with the increasingly mainstream nature of the activity. As backpacking along the most popular routes in Asia and Australia becomes increasingly easy and commonplace, the more adventurous will continue to seek out locations ''off the beaten track'', eventually encouraging the development of a local tourism infrastructure and bringing more tourists in their wake.

The backpacker imagination has gradually become more pervasive over the last 20–30 years. This can be understood as the meeting place where wider processes of globalization and the post-Fordist, postmodern socioeconomic order impact upon individual agency. Economic and political developments in a globalized world order have made this form of travel more accessible and practical than ever before, while cultural practices from email to media representations create further incitements to hit the road. The relative ease with which people can travel long-term is likely to continue in the immediate future. This will in all likelihood result in further changes in the nature of the backpacker experience. Drifting is still an option, but it is now overshadowed by more institutionalized forms of backpacking—what one informant called ''backpacker-light'', in homage to worthy but boring low alcohol beers. As with other types of tourists, there is now wide variation in the level of independence and in orientation towards travel among backpackers.

Presented in the right way, backpacker experience can be status enhancing. At least some individuals use the experience to improve job prospects, possibly with the ultimate effect of boosting their incomes. However, it would be very difficult to accurately assess the extent to which traveling influences career choice or trajectory, much less income, without an indepth longitudinal study. What can be said is that the continuing development of reflexive self-identity and the ability to project the desirable attributes of aesthetic cosmopolitanism (Urry 1995) are the key benefits of backpacker experience, and that these can have an impact on people's life trajectory in both career and personal spheres.

As backpacking has undergone a transformation from alternative to the mainstream, the status associated with it has become more transferable. It has long been ''cool'' to travel independently, for example on the road to India in the 70s as vividly described by Tomory (1998), but it is only more recently that this coolness has been more widely acknowledged and accepted. Backpacking has gradually moved into the margins of the mainstream as an acceptable ''alternative'' activity, assisted by knowing and unknowing analogy with the Grand Tour ideal of travel as educational, producing a more ''cultured'' individual. Ironically, now that it has entered the mainstream backpacking is increasingly seen as ordinary and therefore less adventurous, perhaps ultimately undermining the very characteristics that have thus far made it status-enhancing. A

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