

Backpackers – what is the peak experience?

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from a sample of 69 backpackers. The sample represents about 15 percent of the backpackers staying in the Waikato, New Zealand, during the survey period. The research method included both quantitative and qualitative methods and sought to analyse what backpackers perceived as their most memorable experiences. The findings suggest that these include the themes of difference, uniqueness, bonding with special others, a sense of achievement and the ‘adrenalin high’. While about 70 percent of such experiences related to commercial adventure products, other activities, often with a natural setting, were important. The data were analysed using two methods, thematic analysis and the use of software packages that permit perceptual mapping.

Keywords

Backpackers, tourist experiences, adventure tourism, New Zealand.

Introduction

Within the literature pertaining to backpackers a divide can be discerned between a North American literature that primarily refers to those who tramp through forests and natural zones carrying a backpack, and studies emanating from primarily Australasia, but also to a lesser extent from Europe, that focus upon the phenomenon of those using backpacker hostels, but who seek experiences wider than simply those to be found in natural areas. Turner (2002) provides a history of the former tracing a transition from using woodcraft practices to a contemporary practice of leaving no evidence of their use of wilderness. For these backpackers an important component of backpacker practice is a solitary

experiencing of natural areas. Hence a consistent theme within the literature is a concern with encounter frequencies, trail use, coping behaviours and environmental impact (e.g. Stewart and Cole, 2001; Spencer et al, 1999; Hammitt and Patterson, 1991; Patterson and Hammitt, 1990 and Cole, 1983). Studies emanating in particular from the USDA Forest Service have concentrated on behaviours and human-nature interactions, even to the extent of evaluating the use of bear-resistant food containers (Dalle-Molle, Coffey and Werner, 1986).

On the other hand the backpacker in Australasian studies emerges as some-one who, while expressing an interest in natural areas, is also a consumer of nature as a backdrop to commercially provided adventure experiences like bungee jumping or jet boating. Additionally the backpacking experience is enhanced through social interaction with peers, and the commercial network of coach transport, backpacking hostels and adventure product aimed at backpackers is designed to ease these interactions to such an extent that a backpacker 'bubble' akin to that of Cohen's observations of mass tourists can be discerned. Hence Mohsin and Ryan (2003) observe that backpackers tend to visit the same attractions as other tourists, and Uriely, Yonay and Simchai (2002) argue that backpacking is simply a form and not a specific type of tourism. Murphy (2001) argues that a primary motive for the social interaction undertaken by backpackers is the collection of information about accommodation and attractions, while in an earlier study (Loker-Murphy, 1996) she discerns clusters based on motives for travel, namely escapers/relaxers, social/excitement seekers, self developers and achievers. In 1997 Ross argued that the achievement/control needs were high among backpackers, and the existence of and achievement of these needs formed a symbiotic relationship with perceptions of satisfaction. Consumption of adventure products thus loom large among this market segment, and the A.C. Nielsen report for Tourism New Zealand clearly notes the high relationship between what they termed 'active-doers', consumption of adventure product and use of budget and backpacker accommodation (Nielsen, 2002).

While a common theme between the two categories of backpacking experience exist in their usage of nature, the latter typology of backpacker is being scrutinised more critically in the literature as the product has become more commercialised. Nor can the former user of North American forest trails be wholly exempted from criticism. Indeed, a comparatively early study, that of Lucas (1983), noted that 53 percent of backpackers failed to comply with voluntary trail registers. Shackley (1999), noting that the majority of visitors to the Himalayas are activity tourists, is critical of some behaviours exhibited by such tourists, citing, for example, the intrusion of flash photography on sacred occasions and the failure by such photographers to pay for tickets when requested. Duffy (2002) in particular is critical of the behaviours of activity seeking tourists in locations like Belize, arguing that they, for the most case, simply replicate the same problems as mass tourism. Scheyvens (2002: 144) argues that local communities in Asia that host backpackers need to be far more pro-active to maximise potential benefits to be derived from backpackers if they are to 'overcom(e) the self-centred attitudes of some backpackers who might behave irresponsibly'. On the other hand Westerhausen and MacBeth (2003:71) retain some optimism based on studies in Byron Bay, Australia, that backpackers might be the natural allies for local communities in spite of the fact that it 'has become a sanitized and institutionalized tourism alternative'. On the other hand, also in an Australian based study, Wearing et al (2002:143) highlight the emergent consensus that backpackers are but another form of holidaymaking when commenting 'This support Lübbert's (2001) research into German tourists' consideration of environmental concerns when choosing a holiday: despite holding positive environmental attitudes, tourists did not feel environmentally responsible when on a holiday.'

The Research

The research reported here is based upon 69 interviews with backpackers in New Zealand that was a preliminary study into the nature of the backpacker experience. It comprised a combination of quantitative and qualitative research. Initially it was planned that interviews would be undertaken at backpacker hostels but in some cases managers were a little reluctant to permit access to their clients. Consequently the majority (all but 5) of

the interviews were undertaken in a bus station where backpackers were waiting for a bus, and at a tourist information centre that provided free coffee and which was used by backpackers. These surveys took place in the Waikato region of New Zealand, an area that includes the Waitomo region noted for its adventure tourism and the University town of Hamilton. The latter therefore is also attractive to backpackers because of its range of bars and cafes that are oriented toward those in the 18 to 25 age group.

The age and gender of the sample is shown in Table One.

Table One goes about here

Of the sample, approximately half were travelling alone, a quarter travelling with one other person and most of the remainder were travelling in a small group of friends at the time of the interview. Two were on an organised backpacking bus tour. With reference to marital status 52 (88 percent) were single.

The interviews were conducted during the winter period and this may in part explain the long period of intended stay in New Zealand, with an intended mean stay of just under 7 months. Most of the backpackers had already stayed in New Zealand for a period of over 3 months. Reference to the data derived from the Commercial Accommodation Monitor and the International Visitor Survey maintained by the New Zealand Tourism Research Council website indicated that the sample represented approximately 15 percent of the backpackers present in the Waikato during the winter period in which data were collected.

The quantitative component of the questionnaire sought to assess the degree to which backpackers would visit or undertake activities similar to those undertaken by a wider mix of visitors, and hence the sample was asked how important were certain activities to them. A seven-point Likert type scale was used with seven representing the highest degree of importance. The list of activities was derived from primarily two sources. The first was from lists used by Tourism New Zealand in its International Visitors Survey.

The second was from lists of activities used by different researchers such as Ryan (2002) and Mohsin and Ryan (2003). Used as measures of reliability, split-half coefficients of correlation were of the order of 0.75 to 0.86 and the alpha coefficients were 0.86; representing high degrees of internal consistency in the data set.

Table Two shows the level of importance attributed to the different activities. It is evident from the table that the sample confirms the finding of researchers like Murphy (2001) who emphasise the role of socialising because this item emerged as the most important attribute in the study. The table also reveals the importance of adventure tourism products of various types – the generally less commercial like tramping and hiking (generally through National Parks) and the more commercial such as white water rafting and jet boating. The interest in what might be described as eco-tourism products is also present as demonstrated by the comparatively high importance attributed to whale watching. On the other hand activities such as city tours, wine tasting and shopping score less well. Interest in Maori culture is also rated highly.

Table Two goes about here

That such activities have high levels of importance attributed to them is without surprise, either in terms of findings from the literature, or in the fact that such interests are well recorded in the statistical data derived from the International Visitor Survey conducted annually by Tourism New Zealand.

However, the attribution of importance to an activity does not necessarily imply that backpackers will actually partake in an activity (intervening variables such as a lack of money or lack of interest by a travelling partner might inhibit participation), gain satisfaction from such participation, regard the experience as one of the highlights of their holiday, or provide data on the nature of the experience gained.

Accordingly these latter issues were explored in two ways. First respondents were asked whether they had actually undertaken an activity, and then secondly three questions were

asked during which respondents were asked to describe what for them had been truly memorable experiences.

Table three goes about here

Table three shows that the actual participation rates in activities thought important was high – for the most part this was over 80 percent.

The next stage in the research was to analyse the textual data relating to what respondents identified as their most memorable experiences. The range of experiences generally matched the activities listed in Tables two and three. For example comments included:

I spent a night in Maketa with a Maori family. The local school kids came down to perform the haka for us and also taught us. It was probably the best experience I had in New Zealand, it was amazing.

Camping in the bush under a clear sky with no noise, very peaceful, very enjoyable.

In Taupo, tandem sky diving – it was the best thing I have ever done.

Bungy jumping in Taupo was a great experience, for it was the first one in my life and may be the last one as well.

However, not all of the most memorable occasions related to the activities usually listed in questionnaires. One Japanese respondent spoke of attending a rugby sevens event in Wellington, and the ‘fantastic girls’ and spoke of his frustration of not having a condom. Nonetheless, most of the experiences being noted by the respondents were derived from the commercial adrenalin high adventure products – these seemed to account for about 70 percent of the ‘most memorable’ experiences.

Respondents were asked what had made this event so memorable? Undertaking a thematic analysis provided the following themes, complete with a sample of the text to illustrate the theme:

A sense of achievement

It was the first time I had ever thrown myself out of plane, and I never thought I could do it! I overcame a fear of flying. (Skydiving activity)

The presence of others special to the respondent

It was special for me because my family was there too and I hadn't seen them for a long time. And to be invited into a place that had a special meaning for a cultural group added meaning. (Attending a Maori meeting).

A candle lit dinner on tuna casserole with my girlfriend on a huge deserted beach on the East Cape under a starry sky with shooting stars.

The adrenalin high

Exhilarating – I have photos and a video so it will live in the memory (Bungy jumping).

A sense of awe

Learning to dive has opened up a whole new world of adventure and fun to me. It makes me feel happy, exhilarated and privileged to have experienced such wonders. It will affect my future life because it makes me want to join a dive club when I go home and inspires me to visit dive sights throughout the world. (Scuba diving)

The scenery was breath-taking – fantastic (Tramping)

Unique, different, new experiences

A completely new experience – nothing like I ever imagined. A very informative helpful guide with a beautiful display of glow-worms, hot shower and free soap (Black water rafting).

Figure One goes about here

These are not mutually exclusive categories – indeed the above examples indicate ways in which the categories merge into each other. A further analysis was undertaken using the software ‘Terravision’ that, based on principles of artificial neural networks, attempts to covert text into a graphical space that maps relationships between concepts. Figure One indicates one such solution arrived at using a key of 40 commonly used words. This represents an attempt at mapping the raw text, and the first author’s experience is that in order to derive ‘clean’ solutions a process of textual redefinition is generally required. However, in this instance the raw text shows the overlapping relationship between some concepts revealed by thematic analysis, and provides some support for the results of the thematic analysis. For example the words ‘friend’, ‘friendly’ and ‘beautiful people’ are arguably one theme, but are differentiated in this analysis of raw text. However, this concept supports the theme of special others. The sense of scenery as being special emerges as a specific theme in the bottom right hand side of the map. Equally the notion of ‘different’, ‘amazing’ ‘interesting’ emerges toward the central bottom of the map although there is confusion between that of the adrenalin high adventure and the cultural experience (note the word ‘family’ being located near to this cluster). This appears to be because respondents were using similar words when describing both a cultural experience and the adventure product – both were ‘amazing’ and ‘different’. To the left a separate cluster emerges based around words such as ‘can’t be done anywhere’ – representing a theme of uniqueness. While the full analysis is not being reported here, it did seem that

this form of analysis tended to support that derived from the thematic analysis reported above.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to examine whether backpackers derive specifically different holiday experiences given that some of the literature has suggested that backpacking is simply a form of tourism and not a specific type (Uriely, Yonay and Simchai, 2002). The findings confirm other work that shows that backpackers are avid consumers of adventure products but also rate socialisation experiences highly. They are also akin to other tourists in that memorable experiences are derived from difference, be it difference of activity or different settings. They attribute values of uniqueness to settings that are new to them, they value the presence of significant others, they seek a sense of achievement and a sense of awe. Such feelings are often, but not always associated with the commercial product of adventure tourism, but can also be attained through a sense of being at one with nature, especially when a romantic notion is present, either through the presence of loved one or through a feeling of wonder or a sense of being at one with nature. The findings endorse the role of difference as described in general by Dann (2000, 2001) and Ryan and Ruthe (2003) with specific reference to backpackers at an adventure holiday location. Equally the study supports Ross (1997) in identifying a need for achievement as an important component in assessing experience. However, as an initial study the results pose other questions. How enduring might these feelings be and to what extent are they subsumed into any form of life style change? Are these simply like many other holiday experiences, bounded by the margins of escape that is represented by the holiday? Is there a relationship between intensity of experience and any definition of self? In what ways might the intensity of experience be measured, and to what extent do participants become involved? It is these questions that form the forthcoming studies by the second author.

Finally what emerges is that backpackers are holidaymakers whose experiences are memorable in terms of self, that is they are primarily inner directed. Consequently this

study confirms the stance taken by Wearing et al (2002) and Scheyvens (2002) that backpackers are akin to other holidaymakers in locating self at the centre of the experience and interaction with a world where the fantastic, 'unique' and different are components that primarily contribute to experience. The work is thus also consistent with that of Elsrud (2001) who too analysed 'backpackers' narratives' and found that novelty and difference was important, as were narratives of place and identity. Consequently it appears that some consistencies of experience appear independent of location, thereby possibly creating a notion backpacker culture as part of a wider tourist culture that exists independent of place.

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Table One**Age and Gender characteristics of the sample**

Age	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
under 18	4	2	6
19-24	18	9	27
25-30	10	11	21
31-40	4	3	7
41-50	0	1	1
51-60	1	0	1
Total	37	26	63

**Table Two –
Level of importance attributed to activities by backpackers in New Zealand**

Activity	Mean	Std. Deviation
To do new activities with friends	5.37	1.62
To just spend time socializing	5.14	1.58
To visit National Parks	5.07	1.54
To visit sites of Maori culture	4.87	1.62
To go tramping/trekking	4.84	1.67
To go white water rafting	4.80	1.70
To go on short bush walks	4.75	1.78
To visit museums and historical sites	4.74	1.66
To go canoeing/kayaking (rivers)	4.72	1.77
To go sea kayaking	4.63	1.82
To go jet boating	4.56	1.85
To watch others bungee jump	4.52	2.07
To go whale watching	4.47	1.79
To go bungee jumping	4.45	2.16
To buy other souvenirs	4.39	1.92
To take scenic boat cruises	4.37	1.78
To visit city parks and gardens	4.31	1.56
To buy Maori arts and crafts	4.25	2.02
To go shopping	4.15	1.91
To take city tours	4.12	1.98
To go mountain biking	4.02	1.90
To go cycling (touring)	3.76	1.87
To visit farms	3.72	1.99
To go horse riding	3.65	1.95
To go wine tasting	3.65	2.32
To visit casinos	3.31	2.20

Table Three Measure of actual participation rates in activities thought important.

Activity	Percent already Participated
To do new activities with friends	94.6
To just spend time socializing	100.0
To visit National Parks	94.7
To visit sites of Maori culture	92.6
To go tramping/trekking	90.4
To go white water rafting	88.9
To go on short bush walks	94.6
To visit museums and historical sites	88.1
To go canoeing/kayaking (rivers	78.0
To go sea kayaking	89.5
To go jet boating	84.0
To watch others bungy jump	93.5
To go whale watching	79.2
To go bungy jumping	79.2
To buy other souvenirs	100.0
To take scenic boat cruises	87.0
To visit city parks and gardens	100.0
To buy Maori arts and crafts	84.8
To go shopping	92.0
To take city tours	79.6
To go mountain biking	82.9
To go cycling (touring)	88.4
To visit farms	82.9
To go horse riding	75.0
To go wine tasting	75.5
To visit casinos	78.0

Figure One

Mapping concepts used by respondents



