



Research group meeting: Backpacker mobilities?

Sat Parkash Bansal

Report of ATLAS
backpacker research group
meeting during March 26-
28, 2008. Group discussion
issues related to
backpacker tourism.

The definition of a backpacker has evolved over time. Earlier backpackers were associated with hippies traveling from one place to another in 1960s and 1970s. It later followed sections of the old Silk Road and gained momentum in the 2000s as an independent form of tourism. Traditionally, backpacker tourism is a term used to denote a form of low-cost independent international travel, differentiating it from other forms of tourism by having attributes of: minimal budget use, longer duration traveling, use of public transport and visit to multiple destinations/countries. It is more associated with non-institutionalized form of travel.

Backpacking as a lifestyle and as a business has grown considerably due to emergence of low-cost airlines, hostels or budget accommodation in many parts of the world, and digital communication and resources make planning, executing, and continuing a long-term backpacking trip easier than ever before. Technological changes and improvements have also contributed to changes in backpacking. Traditionally backpackers did not travel with expensive electronic equipment such as laptop computers, digital cameras and PDAs due to concerns about theft, damage, and additional luggage weight. However, the desire to stay connected coupled with trends in lightweight electronics have given rise to the flashpacking trend, which has been in a state of continuous evolution in recent years. Simultaneous with a change in “what” they’re carrying, backpacking is also becoming less and less reliant on the physical backpack in its initial form although the backpack can still be considered the primary luggage of backpackers.

This kind of tourism dwells on the “authentic” and fosters “real” interaction between tourists and host communities. Backpackers want to experience the “real” destination. Backpackers aren’t looking for anything fancy – for them functionality is the key. Backpackers are the least demanding

tourists who have no inhibitions in sharing dormitories in a hostel, eating self cooked meals in common kitchens, sharing rides with other travelers or purchasing a bus/train pass in common public transport. What matters for them is sharing experiences with locals and being a part of the host community. This allows backpackers to learn from one another while saving money at the same time

Thus the backpacker segment continues to grow strongly and should not be ignored. The present day backpacker tourists are mostly smart, well educated, and have greater resources to purchase goods at a reasonable price. An increase in the numbers of students and young earning independent professionals has given a boost to Backpack Tourism. They are simply identified as ‘alternate tourists’ travelling independently by themselves and making arrangements on their own, seeking moderate comfort. These tourists mingle with the crowd and local lifestyles

Though thousands of backpacker tourists visit India every year, but there is no independent formal documentation of backpacker travel statistics in various parts of the country. India needs to learn from countries of Europe and Australia where this form of tourism is most prevalent.

In view of the profile of these tourists and their motivations and demands that are strikingly different from that of mass tourists, backpacker tourism can be identified as a lucrative form of tourism that can be easily developed and promoted by tourism development organizations.

Proceedings

Considering that India has a wide variety of attractions that can attract Backpackers, Institute of Vocational (Tourism) Studies along with ATLAS, hosted

Sat Parkash Bansal is
Professor and Head
Department of Vocational
Studies, H.P. University,
Summer Hills, Shimla

the International Conference Backpacker Mobilities? An expert conference on backpacker tourism. About 30 participants from various countries like USA, U.K, Poland, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Malaysia and India participated in the Conference.

Conference discussions: The issues addressed in the conference concentrated around elaborating upon the definition and concept of Backpacker Tourism. Backpacking is still identified as a form of tourism partaken by younger travelers. Backpacker's movement is a kaleidoscope of several activities like sharing local lifestyle, meeting people, and getting in touch with nature and culture of a different destination. Tight budget, involvement and search for authenticity are primary traits of backpacker movement. It was highlighted that the nature of backpacker tourism was such that it constantly seeks out the new and acts as a path finder by opening up areas for later mass tourism development. On the contrary traveling as a GIT is seen as preparation for Backpacking independently. Political ideology also tends to influence backpacker's decisions to travel. The preferences of travelers to travel or not to certain destinations are a reflection of their political values. It was stated that backpacker tourism requires tourists to move beyond their usual comfort zone expectations and adapt to the usual local experience. There is a continuous trend of promoting backpacker tourism and Budget tourism hand in hand. It was even stressed that marketing strategies applied by the backpacker industry to promote backpacker tourism require to be investigated. Studies should be carried out to investigate overseas backpacker travel behavior. The Concept of 'gap year' and 'overseas experience' was highlighted with emphasis that many backpackers work at some point of their travel. Taking specifically the case of women backpacker travelers, it was pointed out that women's backpack travel provides them a potentially liberating experience as they gain the freedom to express their often hybrid identities in new ways. Distinctive perceptions, motives and decision making of backpacker travel need to be thoroughly studied.

Gap: The issues addressed in detail as above, provided an in depth insight into the importance and nature of backpacker tourism. Studies from various countries revealed that backpack tourism can be adopted as a very sustainable form of

tourism. India too can gain from the organized development of this new tourism.

India is a sought after destinations for tourists from all over the globe. But till date India has only relied on the conventional tourist. To strengthen her tourism standing, the country can consider embarking on development of Backpacker tourism in a professional manner. But presently there are a number of grey areas related to development of backpack tourism in the state that need to be dealt with if prior to development of this tourism form. These areas are identified as follows:

No segmentation of backpackers: These tourists are rarely identified as a separate segment. No study has been carried out to target this particular class of tourists. Segmentation needs to be done on the basis of lifestyle of the backpacker tourists. This will give an idea of the motivations of travel of backpackers.

Lack of documentation: India in particular, lacks in including the "backpacker traveler segment" in its documentation of classification of tourists. The identification of this segment alone, can lead to identification of their specific needs and wants, and accordingly designing of services for them.

Inadequate infrastructure: India lacks infrastructure for development of backpack tourism. Though backpackers put very little demand on the available resources as they consciously move away from the standardized accommodation, but they need clean and hygienic accommodation and toilets.

Poor accessibility to remote areas: The remote areas in the country are not easily accessible due to their topography. This can be cited as one of the reason that hinders the development of backpack tourism in the country.

Improper marketing of tourism attractions: Though India has a variety of attractions to offer, there is dearth of proper marketing of the attractions amongst this particular segment.

Need for development of backpacker tourism

The detailed discussions about the growing concept of backpacking, highlighted that backpacker Tourism development can be considered as a viable form of alternate tourism. The strengths of this form of tourism

are identified as follows:

1. *Low impact tourists:* Backpackers are drifters and travel alone or in lesser numbers. They are adventurous by nature and like to visit off beat locales. They like to stay in alternate accommodation as tents, as paying guests with locals or in hostels. They have a low tourist profile and they oppose mass tourism. They put the least pressure on the fragile ecosystems. Therefore development of this form of tourism as low impact tourism can go in favour of sustainability.
2. *Contribution to economy:* Backpacker tourism like other forms of tourism also is instrumental in leading to growth of subsidiary industries of the State and providing employment to the locals. Therefore engaging the local communities in provision of backpacker services can filter the gains of tourism to the roots of the economy.
3. *Even distribution of tourism and its benefits.* As Backpackers trace their steps into every corner of the destination they visit, they are bound to lead to a wider distribution of benefits of tourism spread over a wider geographical area and population. Therefore this is a lucrative segment of tourists that can be captured for even economic development.
4. *Round the year tourism:* Backpackers counter the seasonality pattern of tourism. Their travel is not bound by strict holiday patterns. As most of their travel is independent travel, it is per convenience of the individual and this travel opposed to mass travel is spread throughout the year
5. *Promotion of the indigenous culture:* Backpackers seek the most intense interaction with the community. They do not demand the usual global product and services. Their search is for the authentic that should provide them a unique experience. Interest in local cuisine, handicrafts, culture are the prime motivations for backpackers. Therefore Backpackers become a source of promoting the ethnic product and culture of the destinations they visit.
6. *Contribution to exchequer:* It is a wrong notion that Backpackers are low spending tourists. Backpackers are a segment that has the most intermingling with the local communities and is strongly motivated by connection with the ethnic and real. These tourists show a pattern of substantial purchase of local crafts, souvenirs etc in order to understand the ethnic cultures. Therefore their spending contributes a lot towards exchequer.

Such characteristics associated with Backpack Tourism can lead to the overall development and promotion of Tourism at destinations. Therefore backpacker tourism should be capitalized upon in due course of tourism development.