

## **The Role of Political Awareness in Backpacker Destination Decision-Making: A Case Study of the Burma Travel Boycott**

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### **Abstract**

This thesis examines the influence of political awareness on backpackers' destination decision-making by applying Burma as a case study. After Aung San Suu Kyi - Burma's democratically elected leader, who has been under house arrest since 1989 and is the only Nobel Peace Prize winner in the world who lives in detention - announced in 1996 that tourists should not come to Burma until democracy has returned, the country became the centre of a long-running boycott debate. Following Aung San Suu Kyi's later statement that 'tourists can be useful, depending on what they do and how they go about it', this thesis seeks to examine how backpackers travel, whether they are politically aware, whether they support the boycott, and where they stand politically. The focus is on backpackers because they represent the fastest growing sub-market in Southeast Asia and are portrayed as seeking to escape the constraints of Western, post-industrial existence by engaging in a form of travel that is thought to be purer than mass-tourism. While travelling to Burma, a country that has been politically and touristically isolated since 1962, is arguably particularly attractive to the boundary-pushing backpacker, the ethical considerations of travelling to the contested destination are complex. By assessing the role of political awareness in backpacker decision-making, their boycott and political opinions generate the context that helps in reaching the research aim. This thesis contributes two-fold: first to the study of backpackers, their travel style, values and political awareness; second, to the study of travel decision-making, by assessing the role of political awareness in backpacker decision-making, particularly in relation to travel boycotts and travel to 'politically contested' destinations.

Fieldwork was conducted for ten weeks in 2007 in Thailand, employing qualitative semi-structured interviews with backpackers. The 27 interviews with 35 participants focused on travelling style, motivations, experiences, and activities before targeting participants' political interest and awareness in general and Burma boycott awareness and opinions in particular. Due to previous boycott research highlighting that values could serve an influencing role in boycott participation, this research also included the influence of participants' political orientations.

Data collection yielded results that demonstrate the extent to which contemporary backpacker tourism has become incorporated into mainstream tourist culture, while the heterogeneity of the backpacker group also became apparent. Participants were divided in their opinions about

boycotting destinations based on human rights violations. Such opinions were largely polarised, and were related to travellers' levels of political awareness. However, regardless of boycott opinion nearly all participants identified the issue of 'selective moralisation' as being significant in the debate, noting the difficulty of isolating destinations based upon their political and human rights records. In terms of participants' political orientations, a slight left-wing tendency was noted. This, however, does not mean that backpackers are likely to be 'stereotypically liberal'; quite the contrary, in that participants actually represented the entire political spectrum. This research also showed that while some participants engaged in distinct political processes, which led to complex and dynamic interpretations of destinations, a general lack of interest and apathy towards politics was found with most participants in the travelling context. This does not only confirm political science literature lamenting the state of political knowledge and motivation among the young, but it also shows that tourism as espoused by Aung San Suu Kyi is perhaps only achievable for few well-informed and politically aware travellers.