

The Grass is Greener on the Other Side: What Motivates Backpackers to Leave Home and Why They Choose New Zealand as a Destination.

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Abstract

This research explores why backpackers decide to leave home and why they choose New Zealand specifically as a destination. While there has been some prior research focusing on backpacker motivations, very little has looked at both the backpacker's decision to leave home and his/her destination choice. Furthermore, almost no previous research has looked at both aspects together within a New Zealand context. New Zealand is a popular backpacker destination and has a well-established backpacker industry. This makes the findings of this research relevant for the academic literature and for New Zealand's backpacker industry and the tourism industry more generally.

In this research backpackers were defined as young, long-term budget travellers who emphasise socialising and interacting with locals and other travellers. They travel independently and have flexible itineraries. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with fourteen backpackers were carried out in Queenstown in the South Island of New Zealand in August 2010. The backpackers were aged between nineteen and thirty-four years of age with five coming from England, three from Ireland, two from Canada and one each from Wales, France, Germany and the Netherlands.

Six main themes emerged from the interviews to explain why backpackers choose to leave home and go backpacking. The first two relate to the desire to explore the wider world and meet new people; backpackers travel in order to have experiences unavailable at home. The third factor that emerged from the interviews relates to self-development and identity formation and this reflects the findings of previous research. While not necessarily a conscious motivating factor, the backpackers interviewed alluded to a desire for cultural capital. Many of the backpackers had been wanting to travel for a long time and often the decision to go backpacking was related to a lack of commitments at home coinciding with the availability of both time and money with which to travel.

Three main themes emerged from the interviews to explain why backpackers specifically choose New Zealand as a destination. Overwhelmingly, the main motivating factor for coming to New Zealand related to the country's scenic landscapes. New Zealand is a highly recommended destination and all but one of the backpackers had friends and/or family who had previously visited the country. New Zealand is an extremely popular backpacker destination and the idea of a round-the-world "backpacker route" including Asia, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and the United States was mentioned by several interview participants. For some of the backpackers interviewed there was no specific reason to come to New Zealand except that it was perceived as a must-see backpacker destination. Somewhat

surprisingly, neither Maori culture nor adventure tourism was found to be a motivating factor for backpackers to come to New Zealand.

This thesis concludes by emphasising the implications of these research findings for both the academic literature and the New Zealand tourism industry. Suggestions are made regarding issues within backpacker tourism that require further research – particularly those relating to how backpacking is changing and developing in the twenty-first century.

Key words: backpacker, backpacking, youth travel, budget travel, motivation, New Zealand