

Exploring Backpacker Tourism: A study of German backpackers in New Zealand

Executive Summary

This thesis aims to explore the backpacking segment of tourism and in particular the group of German backpackers travelling to New Zealand. Current literature is reviewed in the first part to outline the current research situation concerning backpacking tourism. According to Adler (1985) beginnings of this form of travel can be traced back to the 17th and 18th Grand Tour where young aristocrats travelled the world as a finishing touch to their education. The popular class developed their own version of this grand tour by including years on the road into the education to separate young tradesmen from their families and to compensate unemployment. This form of travelling education was regarded as a positive thing for a long time. However, after the industrialisation jobs were concentrated in cities making travelling unnecessary and leading to shifts in perception: life on the road was no longer considered educational and positive but rather seen as aimless drifting by society drop outs. This was taken up by Cohen (1971) who divided different tourist types according to their use of tourism infrastructure. Those travelling very independently and without relying on this infrastructure he called drifters. For a long time, particularly in the 1960' and 70's this was associated with begging, aimless drifting for months on time and drug taking. This rather negative view of this tourism segment changed in the late 1990's. A study by Pearce and Murphy revealed that these long term budget travellers are not aimless, drug taking drifters but rather young people of the middle class at a juncture in life. Most expect to join the work worce in the society they left. Pearce noticed the heterogeneous nature of these travellers and introduced the term 'backpacker' as the backpack facilitates this travel form better than a suitcase. Five characteristics are associated with backpackers today:

1. a preference for budget accommodation
2. an emphasis on meeting others (backpackers and locals)
3. an independently and flexibly organized itinerary
4. longer rather than brief holidays
5. an emphasis on informal and participatory activities

New Zealand is one of the few countries actively encouraging this kind of travel as its tourism industry noticed the economic and non-economic benefits of such travellers. The tourism industry caters for this segment by offering cheap accommodation in more than 600 hostels and by transport companies offering hop on-hop off services to allow flexibility. This is also

supported by the government as they issue more than 20,000 working holiday visa every year which allow young people to live and work in NZ for 12 months.

Germany is one of the big source markets for NZ and the large majority of German tourists prefers to travel independently. Some of these independent travellers can be identified as backpackers as they stay at backpacker accommodation such as hostels. The group of German backpackers is of economic relevance for the tourism industry in NZ and this thesis aims to find out more about their travel characteristics.

The main aspect raising awareness for and attracting Germans to NZ is its scenery. Besides images of the country, stories and travel reports from returning friends and family members are of highest influence.

The largest occupational group among German backpackers are employees. This supports the results from earlier studies that a shift within the backpacker segment towards a growing proportion of older backpackers applies to German backpackers as well. In terms of information sources, travel guides and family and friends are found to be most relevant among the sample which differs from other studies. For German backpackers the Internet is only of secondary importance; travel guides such as Lonely Planet are used as an information source more often. Almost every second backpacker pre-books aspects of the trip while still in Germany. These pre-bookings are mostly for accommodation right after arrival and the choice which hostel to book at is often based on information from returning friends and family members. The booking is then conducted via internet booking engines. In most cases, this pre-booking is based on a need for a certain amount of safety upon arrival.

Although backpackers are known to be spontaneous and flexible, roughly 12 % of the German sample state to be interested in a package tour as they believed it to be the best way to visit a lot of the country in a short time.

Backpacker hostels are the most popular accommodation among German backpackers as they offer good prices, a meeting point for travellers and the chance to inform oneself about things to see and do. Besides backpacker establishments, campgrounds, wwoofing farms and friends and family are used as places to stay. In order to attract German backpackers it is relevant to offer high quality services as word-of-mouth and the ratings in the BBH guide. These are the main criteria the majority base their decision for or against individual hostels on. Both sources of information are based on personal experiences – while good ones are likely to lead to recommendations, bad ones will result in backpackers staying away from these hostels. The internet is not important as an information source for choosing certain hostels.

In terms of transportation, Germans prefer private and rental cars as they are believed to offer the highest degree of flexibility and spontaneity. Young backpackers not entitled to rent a car due to the age limit of 25 and backpackers staying for more than six months prefer buying their own vehicle. Rental cars are popular with older backpackers and backpackers staying for a shorter period. Backpacker buses are preferred by short term backpackers as they allow seeing a lot in a short time and to meet a lot of people from different countries. Meeting people therefore is not only of importance when choosing a place to stay but also in terms of transport choice. The large majority travels in the company of either friends or fellow backpackers, roughly 30 % travel on their own for most parts of their trip.

Just like nature is one of the main aspects attracting German backpackers to NZ, they like to spend their time enjoying nature once they are in the country. In this regard, German backpackers match results for backpackers and tourists from most nations. Hiking, visiting geothermal attractions and Scenic Drives are each listed by more than 70 % of the sample as one of their favourite pastimes. Typical holiday activities such as relaxing and visiting cafes and pubs are important as well. This shows that German backpackers do not require sophisticated infrastructure for their stay but rather want to enjoy the country by experiencing the way of life instead of experience an illusion of an artificial tourist life style.

Although backpackers do not belong to the group of particularly high spending tourists, they still contribute to New Zealand's economy. On average, every German backpacker spends around \$90 per day during the trip. The biggest amounts are spent on accommodation and activities with around \$23 each while lower amounts are spent on transport, food and restaurants. The proportion of backpackers spending more than the calculated average on items such as accommodation, transport and food/restaurants sinks considerably with longer trip durations. In terms of different age groups, for most items increases in the average amounts are identified with increasing age. The only exception to this is expenditure on activities: here those between 15 – 19 and 24 – 29 spend an average amount twice as high as calculated for the remaining age groups. Older backpackers in general are more likely to spend higher amounts per day but are often in the country for a shorter time than the traditional long term budget travellers in their early 20ies. Individual businesses and the national tourism board should consider this when marketing the country as a backpacking destination. The two groups both have benefits and are valuable segments of the tourism industry but are likely to require different marketing approaches.

Personal highlights are concurrent with aspects attracting German backpackers to NZ. Again, nature and scenery are often listed as personal highlights of the backpackers' stay. The people encountered during the trip and certain, very special activities such as whale watching or bungee jumping are also identified as highlights of the trip by various respondents. Dissatisfaction was expressed about criminality, lack of recycling and prices for activities, but the highest number of interviewed backpackers identified the (number of) German backpackers as the most negative aspect of their stay. This is a very important result of the study as German backpackers clearly differ e.g. from backpackers from Israel in this regard, the only other nation where detailed information is available: Israeli backpackers tend to keep to the company of countrymen.

The large majority of 97 % of the sample declares to recommend NZ as a travel destination to family and friends after returning home to Germany. Besides general information about travelling through the country the focus group revealed that very specific information about specific hostels and activities is passed on. These personal stories therefore play an important role for tourism to NZ and for the success of specific businesses as they act like a cheap and effective marketing campaign reaching a broader audience than any other marketing strategy would.

The results of this study provide valuable information about German backpackers and their travel characteristics. It furthermore offers information on how to market the group of German backpackers. Knowing that reports from friends and families and the travel guides are considered more valuable than information found on the internet should be taken into account when developing marketing strategies to attract German backpackers. Both the national marketing organization and individual businesses should therefore pay attention to the quality of products and services they deliver: word of mouth from customers is a valuable information source for future backpackers. Finding out that the high number of German backpackers encountered during the trip causes negative feelings can be seen as an indication to promote the shoulder season and remoter regions in an attempt to distribute the high number of German backpackers both in terms of time and itinerary.