

# The Presence of Backpacking Tourism in Europe

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## Abstract

*Global tourism is characterized by constant change. New forms of tourism and various types of tourist movements are emerging, while the number of tourists is constantly increasing and now it surpasses one billion. What considerably contributes to the increase in tourist traffic is low-budget travel. Backpacking is such form of travel. It is mostly present among young population that wants to travel in order to experience authentic adventures and learn about the local culture, far from typical tourist paths. Backpackers aim to see as much as possible for small amounts of money. The process of globalization has contributed to the fact that the phenomenon of backpacking is present all around the globe. In order to determine the presence of backpacking in Europe and some important characteristics of this type of travel there has been conducted a survey via the Internet. The results showed that young Europeans are informed of this way of tourist movements and they make the majority of the participants in backpacking tourism. In the years to come the number of people in the world involved in these types of journeys will grow, which will lead to the need for a more detailed analysis of backpacking worldwide.*

**Key words:** *tourism, low-budget, backpacking, Europe, backpackers*

## Introduction

Modern tourism is characterized by the emergence of new types and forms of tourism. A contemporary tourist is not searching for so-called 3S Tourism (sea, sand and sun), but a variety of activities during a trip and authentic travel experience. Backpacking is the total opposite of mass tourism (Majstorovic, 2011).

This paper analyzes the prevalence of backpacking in Europe as a form of cheap travel. The paper presents the results of a survey research of respondents from Europe about backpacking and the most important characteristics of this phenomenon. The paper aims to point out that this method of travel is increasingly common among Europeans, but little attention is paid to it in the travel literature. The emphasis is on what attracts tourists most to take this type of trip, what affects the possibility of practicing this kind of cheap tourist movements, what the typical types of accommodation and vehicles are etc. The goal of the paper is to pres-

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ent the theoretical foundations of backpacking, and then to analyze its presence in tourist movements in Europe.

## Terminology

The presence of tourists around the globe is not only a sign of the progress of globalization, it is also an integral part of the globalization process. One of the cultures most under threat from the extension of modern society is that of the nomad (Richards, Wilson, 2004). The nomad is the one who can track a path through seemingly illogical space without succumbing to nation-state and/or bourgeois organization and mastery (Kaplan, 1996). The global nomad crosses physical and cultural barriers with apparent ease in search of difference and differentiation and in this way, the backpacker as nomad is placed in opposition to the 'tourist', caught in the iron cage of the modern tourist industry (Richards, Wilson, 2004).

Travel is arguably an integral part of the postmodern 'new world order of mobility' (Clifford, 1997). One of the cultural symbols of this increasingly mobile world is the backpacker. Backpackers are to be found in every corner of the globe, from remote villages in Asia to the centers of London or Paris. According to some authors growing numbers of people are reacting to the alienation of modern society by adopting the lifestyle of the backpacker. Their nomadic existence is supported by the increasing ease of international travel, a growing network of budget hostels and travel companies, and the increasing flexibility of life path and work patterns. The growing demand for backpacker travel has stimulated a dense infrastructure of services dedicated to their needs, from backpacker hostels to companies organizing bus trips, and the 'backpacker's bible'; the *Lonely Planet* guide books (Richards, Wilson, 2004).

Academic interest in the motivations and experiences of backpackers has also grown in recent years, particularly as their economic, social and cultural significance for a range of destinations has become recognized. Although the term 'backpacker' has been used in the travel literature since the 1970s, the backpacker phenomenon has only more recently been widely analyzed by academic researchers (Richards, Wilson, 2004). In 1990 the term 'backpacker' was first noted in the academic literature (Pearce, 1990). Much of the backpacker research has been undertaken in countries where the impact of backpacking is particularly evident, notably in South-East Asia, Australia and New Zealand (Richards, Wilson, 2004).

Phillip Pearce, a professor and backpacking researcher at James Cook University in Australia, considers backpacking a state of mind. In his work *The Backpacker Phenomenon: Preliminary Answers to Basic Questions* Pearce suggests that backpacking is an approach to traveling and holiday taking, rather than a categorization based on age or dollars spent (<http://www.tourism.wa.gov.au>).

Even though the first acknowledgement of the phenomenon of backpacking was formulated by the sociologist and anthropologist Erik Cohen, the most prominent definitions of backpackers today are based on quantitative marketing research: They (backpackers) prefer to stay in budget accommodation, they spend more time travelling around than the average visitor, and they enjoy interacting with people, both locals and other travelers. They are also more likely to independently organize their travels (Loker-Murphy, Pearce, 1995). In many ways this definition is an accurate reflection of the current state of backpacking research. However, although quantitative studies may give an overview of the characteristics of backpackers, they do not give an insight into the culture of backpacking or focus on the understanding of these practices. This is where qualitative research is needed. Unfortu-

nately, there are still only a few ethnographic studies on the culture of backpacking (Binder, 2004). Nowadays, the dominant studies are those of travelers from the UK, Europe, Israel, Australia and New Zealand, who travel to South Asia, Southeast Asia and Australasia. The term “backpackers” is not acknowledged in the United States because it is used for hiking and recreation in the wild (Hannam, Ateljevic, 2008).

There has been determined five pillars of backpacking ideology:

- To travel on a low budget
- To meet different people
- To be (or to feel) free, independent and open-minded
- To organise one’s journey individually and independently
- To travel for as long as possible (Welk, 2004).

Backpacker phenomenon as a metaphor of mobility in the modern context is a way of life and travel, and also an expression of identity. It is a metaphor of modern tourism, and even a metaphor of modern youth. One of the characteristics of a backpacking trip is the research of both oneself and new places. Over the years backpacking infrastructure has become so sophisticated and institutionalized that it is difficult to determine where the main tourist trends end and where backpacking starts (Richards, Wilson, 2004).

## Methodology

In order to obtain the information about the presence of backpacking in Europe, a public opinion research survey was conducted in several European countries in June 2011. The research was conducted through a survey via the Internet. The questionnaire was filled in English by respondents from Europe. The survey was anonymous. There were 94 respondents from European countries in total. The respondents were from the following countries: Poland, Portugal, Ukraine, Denmark, Belgium, Finland, Slovakia, Austria, Germany, Romania, Slovenia, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Great Britain, Macedonia, Greece, Croatia, Hungary, Czech Republic, Switzerland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Italy and Malta.

The questionnaire is divided into three parts. The first part consists of six questions related to socio-demographic characteristics about the respondents. The second part consists of five questions related to their travel habits. In the third part, the respondents expressed their opinions about backpacking in response to eight questions.

## The Results of Survey

### Respondent Profiles

As required by the questionnaire, the respondents were obliged to leave some basic personal information, that is socio-demographic data such as gender, age, employment, and other.

Gender is the first significant characteristic of the respondents. It is evident that there is a minor difference between the number of male and female respondents, although the female population prevails. 44 males (47%) provided the answers to the survey questions while there were exactly 50 female answers.

Since backpacking is mostly present among young people, the respondents in this study were the members of the younger population. The youngest respondent is 19 years old, while

the oldest is 35 years old. The average age of a respondent from the European countries is 23.79 years. This points to the fact that the age of the respondents in this study ranges from 19 and 35. Backpacking is particularly popular at this age as it is related to students or young people employed for the first time, who possess more free time, curiosity and a strong desire to travel.

One of the survey questions was related to living conditions of the respondents. The respondents were asked to answer the question, depending on whether they live with their parents, alone in their own homes, independently as tenants, in a dorm. If their living conditions were different from the above they were asked to specify the adequate response. According to the results, most of the respondents live with their parents (33 respondents - 35%), however, there is a small difference between them and those who live alone as tenants (30 respondents - 32%). Only 13 respondents (14%) live in their own apartments, with the approximate number of people living in a dormitory (14 respondents- 15%). The number of those who do not belong to any of the categories mentioned above is the smallest (4 respondents - 4%). In the European countries gaining independence from parents early is desirable, so many young people rent apartments and live together as tenants. This reduces their ability to save for a backpacking trip, but due to the high standard of living and developed culture of traveling, they are still important participants in tourist movements.

Also, we examined the employment status of the respondents. The respondents gave answers whether they were employed, unemployed, students, retirees, or none of the offered. The student population was dominant with a total amount of 70 respondents (74%). There were 15 employed (16%) and 6 unemployed respondents (6%). There were no retirees. There were only 3 respondents (3%) who did not choose any category but they declared that they were in the postgraduate practice programme and about to get a job. 1 respondent said to be a postgraduate student.

In this study, attention was paid to the cash incomes of the respondents, given that this is one of the most important preconditions for undertaking tourist movements. The respondents were asked to choose one of the answers related to a range of money. Cash incomes refer to monthly wages and are expressed in euro. 20% of the respondents had no income. The same percentage of respondents referred to those with the lowest incomes (up to €300). The percentage of young Europeans who earn up to €500 is significantly larger (17%). 26% of the respondents earn between 500 and 800. Due to a better standard of living in some European countries, 11% of respondents earn from €800-1500. 6% of respondents earn more than €1,500 a month. Based on these survey results, it can be concluded that younger population in the European countries meets the requirements regarding the allocation of certain funds for taking tourist trips.

### Travel Habits

This part of the research survey refers to data about the travel habits of those who were gathered in order to gain the general picture of the characteristics of their tourist movements. The questions that the respondents were asked in this part of the survey were related to the frequency of trips during the year, the organization of the trip, the act of traveling and stay during the trip, typical means of transport and accommodation. It was possible to provide more than one answer.

The frequency of trips during a year is very important for the study of tourist movements. On that basis it can be concluded whether a habit of traveling, that is a culture of traveling exists in a particular environment, or it is still a characteristic of well-educated and well-

paid people. More than a half of the respondents travel more than four times per year (52%). Also, a large number of the respondents (41%) travel two or three times a year, while those who travel once a year make only 7%. There were no respondents who do not travel at all. This result is primarily the consequence of the increased purchasing power of residents from the European countries and their culture of traveling. As confirmed by numerous studies of travel habits, Europeans are accustomed to travel several times a year, although those do not have to necessarily be long journeys. Beside summer holidays, they take short breaks during other seasons, too.

Organization means an important preparation for each trip. It is up to tourists to decide how to organize their trips and their content is closely related to it. The easiest way is to have the trip arranged by a travel agency. However, in the age of modern technology, the Internet is slowly overtaking that role. The respondents had the option to choose more than one answer when answering this question, so the total percentage amount may be larger than 100%. The majority of respondents organize their trips via the Internet (74 patients - 79%). 44 respondents (47%) of the total respondent amount organize their trips to the site. 24 respondents (26%) organize their trips in other ways, mainly with the families and friends or through student organizations. The smallest number of respondents have their trips arranged by travel agencies (only 4 respondents - 4%). The respondents from the European countries prefer arranging their own trips online because they use the Internet extensively and they have the option of booking and payment of a large number of services and other products via the network. That way they can buy each service individually, which may be part of the package, without leaving their own homes. Also, they do not need the services of a tour guide, because all the information about the tourist destination is on the Internet.

Every tourist chooses the mode of transport and the type of stay during their journeys. Some tourists prefer to stay at one place and rest, some prefer to make trips to nearby places for the reason of sightseeing, some visit as many destinations as possible during the trip, and others have their own ways of traveling. The respondents were asked to choose one or more answers already given, or to provide their own answer. Considering that it was possible to choose multiple answers the total percentage amount can be larger than 100%. The respondents prefer to visit as many destinations as possible during the trip (70 respondents - 74%). This method of travel is possible mainly being self-directed and it only confirms the fact that the European tourists mostly make their own travel arrangements via the Internet thus planning their tourist routes. However, some of them like to be stationed at one place and make short trips to nearby sites (34 respondents - 36%). 14 respondents (15%) stay in only one destination, while 10 respondents (11%) combine staying in two tourist destinations. Those who opted for the answer "other" make 6% (6 respondents). They declared that they improvise their journeys, and their travel and stay depend on the situation.

Transportation is an indispensable item of every journey. What means of transportation will be used for tourist traveling depends on the destination location, infrastructure, and financial resources available to tourists. Tourists frequently combine a number of different means of transport during their journey. The vehicles offered by the survey were: a car, a bus, a plane, a train and other. It was possible to choose more than one answer when answering this question, and the total percentage amount may be larger than 100%. The residents of the European countries travel most by train (70 respondents- 74%). An airplane as a means of transport is very popular and this type of transportation service is used by 52 respondents (55%). The same applies to the use of buses and cars (each vehicle was chosen by 36 respondents - 38%). Seven respondents (7%) opted for the answer "other", and declared that beside

a boat and bike as means of transport that they use, they also prefer hitchhiking. Europeans mostly use train as a means of transportation because of the excellent infrastructure, transport links, train speed (especially in France and Germany), the comfort of transportation, the accurate timetables and the possibility of booking and purchasing tickets online. Beside trains, the respondents mostly use the services of airline companies due to extraordinary infrastructure and a large number of low-cost airlines.

The tourists use various types of accommodation depending on their own preference and available funds. Nowadays there are many types of accommodation, and the price depends on the location, type and category of the facility, and of course the quality of the services provided at the facility. The answers offered by the survey were: hotel, private accommodation, hostel, couch surfing, camping and other. It was possible to choose more than one answer when answering this question, and the total percentage amount may be larger than 100%. The respondents use most the services of hostels (77 respondents - 82%). 39 foreign respondents (41%) opted for private accommodation. 32 respondents (34%) opted for camping, while 21 respondents (22%) enjoy the hotel services. 18 respondents are couch surfing users (19%), while 14 respondents (15%) chose the answer "other." They declared that they stay at friends' and relatives', "bed & breakfast" or they like "adventurous" types of accommodation, such as sleeping in a tent or sleeping bag anywhere outside. Europeans mostly sleep in hostels, given that this type of accommodation is currently the most popular in Europe and the number of hostels throughout Europe is growing. They are popular because they are cheap, and they offer basic services (lodging with or without breakfast) in multi-dorm rooms. Some of them even have the rooms typical of hotels (two-bed deluxe rooms), and therefore, sometimes it is better to take a more expensive room in a hostel, which is unequivocally cheaper than a hotel room, with little difference in room quality. Couch surfing is slowly but surely becoming a threat to other types of accommodation as it costs nothing.

### Backpacking in the Mind of a Respondent

The main goal of this survey is to point out the presence of backpacking in the respondents' minds, that is to determine how well the respondents are informed, and whether they know what backpacking tourism is.

Before the specific questions were asked, we had had to establish the number of the respondents acquainted with the term "backpacking". In this part of the survey, only this question was mandatory, answers to other questions depended on this issue.

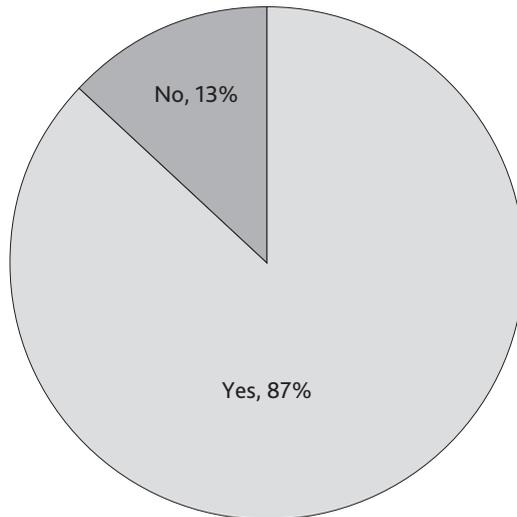
The majority of the respondents are acquainted with the term "backpacking", given that 87% of the respondents provided the answer "yes", while 13% of them answered negatively (see Figure 1).

The following question that the respondents were asked was the extension to the previous question: "If you are acquainted with the term "backpacking", do you go backpacking?" In other words: "Are you a backpacker?" The number of backpackers among the respondents has been analyzed and shown in the following chart.

From the chart we can conclude that taking backpacking trips is very present in the group, with almost 59 respondents who identified themselves as backpackers. It is a promising result. 8 respondents intend to go backpacking soon, while 19 respondents do not practice this method of traveling.

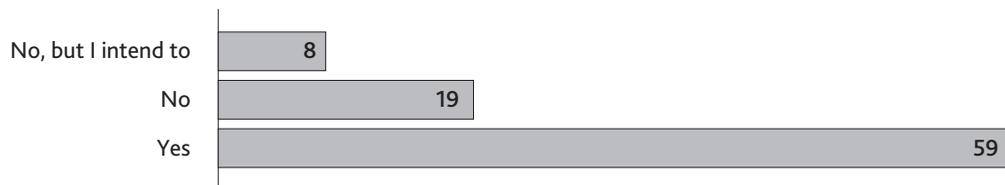
The next question referred to the frequency of travel among those who identified themselves as backpackers. The question was: "How often do you travel as a backpacker?" The

*Have you ever heard of the term "backpacking"?*



**Figure 1.** Acquaintance with the term "backpacking" among the respondents

*If you are acquainted with the term "backpacking", do you go backpacking?*



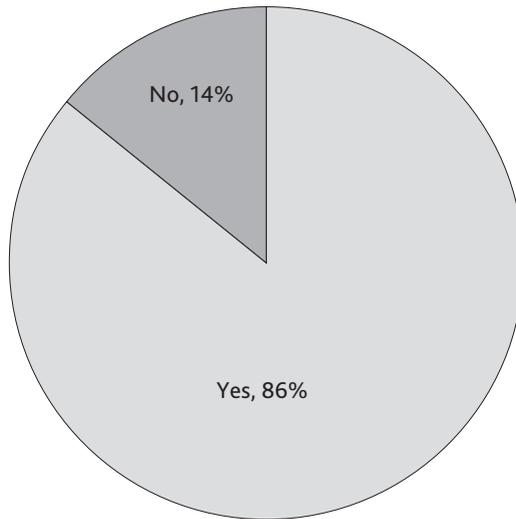
**Figure 2.** The number of backpackers among the respondents

offered answers were: once a year, two or three times a year, or more than four times a year. The majority of respondents opted for the answer "once a year". This is probably because this type of journey is planned a long time in advance, it takes more time and a certain amount of money. A significantly smaller number of the respondents practise this method of journey two or three times a year or more than four times a year.

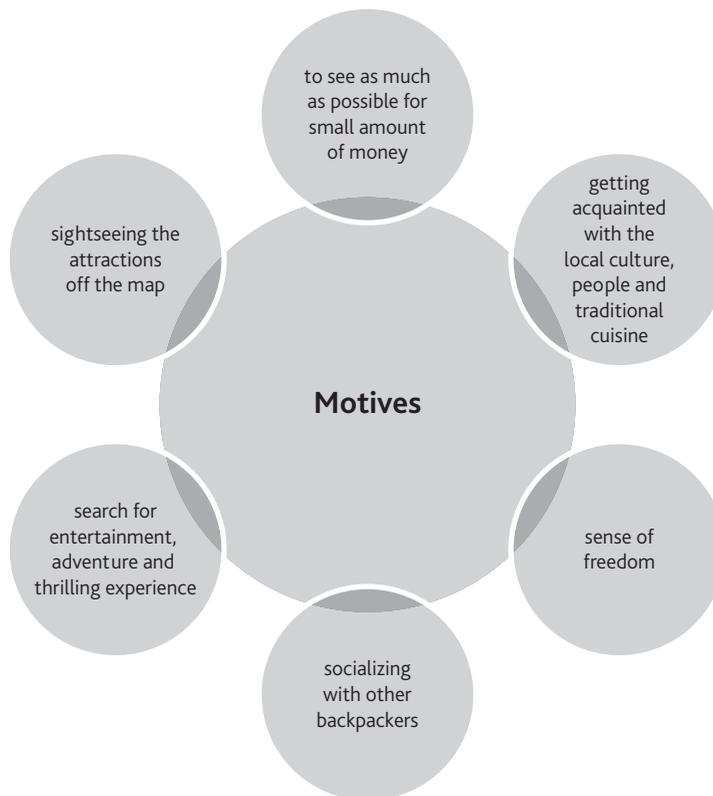
One of the questions required that the respondents write down their associations with the term "backpacking". Some associations were the following: adventure, hitchhiking, a large backpack, mountain, unpredictability, repacking, complete freedom, research, entertainment, camping, youth, unhygienic conditions, traveler (not a tourist), the movie "Euro Trip", cheap travel, "InterRail" ticket, hostel, backache and shoulder pain, mobility, Europe, independence, sleeping bag, tent, risk, uncertainty, hiking, exciting travel, train, spontaneity, active tourism, small amount of money, luck, making friends and many others.

The next question in the survey was about whether the respondent knew somebody in their proximity who practised backpacking. The question was: "Do you know somebody who is a backpacker?"

*Do you know somebody who is a backpacker?*



**Figure 3.** Backpackers in the Respondents' Proximity



**Figure 4.** Motives for backpacking trips

It can be observed (see Figure 3) that the vast majority of the respondents (80 respondents) have acquaintances who are backpackers, while only 13 respondents answered negatively. We should not be surprised at the results, given that the majority of the European respondents stated that they practised backpacking journeys on their own, and this method of travel is widespread among the European tourists.

It is not uncommon for backpackers to travel alone because they consider it the best way to get in touch with as many people as possible and thus making new friendships. However, in this study the majority of the respondents declared that they liked to travel in the company, while a very small number of them stated that they preferred to travel alone. Some of the respondents stated that they liked to combine both traveling alone and in the company, depending on what kind of travel it is all about.

As people differ, so do the motives of their journeys. Each of the respondents who identified themselves as backpackers was assigned to write their own motives for taking backpacking trips. The overview of the most frequent motives of the respondents can be seen in Figure 4.

The last question in the survey referred to the destinations visited by the respondents as backpackers. The destination list is quite extensive, and the most visited destinations in Europe are: Athens, Amsterdam, Budapest, Vienna, Bratislava, Barcelona, Berlin, Brussels, Paris, Prague, Madrid, Munich, Venice, Copenhagen, London, Lisbon, Salzburg, Krakow, Rome, and other. It is typical of the respondents that they have visited almost all of Europe and they gradually conquer destinations all around the world. Non-European countries on the backpackers' map are mainly the following countries: Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Singapore, India, Japan, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Israel and Lebanon in Asia, Canada and the United States in North America; Cuba and Mexico in the Caribbean area; Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru and Ecuador in South America; South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, Morocco, Botswana and Namibia in Africa and, New Zealand as the country of Oceania, is extremely popular.

## Conclusion

It is noticeable that backpacking has become a real trend in Europe among young people. It has now become a common method of traveling enabled by the development of the Internet and the globalization process. Backpackers are slowly becoming significant participants of tourist movements. They are largely characterized and attracted by low-budget accommodation and transportation, socializing with other backpackers and locals, freedom of travel and adventure experiences, and all of that in the long term. Low-budget tourism requires relatively little additional infrastructure to accommodate visitors and puts less pressure on water resources.

The data from the survey shows that the European youth is extensively involved in backpacking tourism. The organization of travel, the mode of traveling to the destination, the choice of means of transportation and accommodation of the respondents indicate the features and characteristics of backpacking journeys. For them, this means a cheap way of traveling and an adventure. What backpackers are exactly looking for is the destination experience. They create their own travel experience and have a chance to get to know the local culture. Due to freer and more flexible ways to travel Europeans frequently opt to take backpacking trips searching for places not overtaken by the mass tourism.

Nowadays the number of backpackers in Europe is growing day by day, and it will be required in the future to undertake a more detailed study of this type of travel. It is inevitable that the number of tourist movement will increase together with the number of participants in cheap traveling. In this way, traveling will be treated as an integral part of the life experience of each individual and a part of their education.

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