

YOUTH TRAVEL: BUILDING THE
FUTURE OF TOURISM THROUGH
BACKPACKS

DATE : **MARCH 2012**

LOOKING BEYOND THE BACKPACK

They busily buzz about the world in massive numbers. They descend on locations and immediately fill the space with intense colour, sound and what could easily be described as a hive of activity. They carry on their backs the wings of their mobility, their backpacks. The sharpness of their minds, words and texts can be stinging in their often vowel-less expression. And yet their youthful nature can be as sweet as honey. Some destinations tend to (wrongly) view them as pests, overtaking the image and peacefulness of the places they arrive into. Others, visionaries of the global Travel & Tourism (T&T) world, see these travelers buzzing about like busy bees not as a nuisance, but as a fundamental necessity. Because it is these travelers, *Youth Travellers*, who, through their journeys, are pollinating the future of the industry. Without them, there is no hope of our sector blossoming, of the future of T&T growing across the globe.

Still, sadly the eye can judge based on packaging before the mind understands the value of the contents within. What value can these young people from nations across the globe, typically between the ages of 13 and 29, traveling on their own or with a few mates, often without set itineraries, and carrying their worldly possessions in a small sack snugly positioned on their back for easy transporting whether sitting on a plane, a local bus, a rickshaw or a train, possibly bring to a global sector shaped by the creation of infrastructure, accessibility, investment and promotion? How can the contribution of these young people be of such significance when standing alongside grown-ups?

What value, indeed.

What is so often overlooked is that those small backpacks carry deep within them Blackberries, cutting edge technology, and well-fed credit cards that turn these floating travelers of today into formidable shapers of the future of tourism.

Their current contribution to global tourism activity is strong, double digit strong. In 2011 the Youth Travel segment accounted for a huge 20% of international arrivals. As the global T&T sector as a whole reaches 1 billion travellers this year, at current rates of growth and contribution, Youth Travel is estimated to reach a remarkable 200, 000, 000 (Source: WYSE / UNWTO). In the words of the segment, OMG!

CREDIT WHERE IT IS DUE

While the numbers are staggering, what is often absent in statistics is the heartbeat of the people that make up the metrics.

The global T&T sector takes great pride in the various dimensions of impact that travel has. As all T&T professionals know, it is about so much more than simply measuring Arrivals. T&T has become a key that is actively, excitedly and ambitiously being used by nations across the globe to unlock their economies, societies and identities. In so doing, nations are opening their people up to the possibilities of the future.

In addition to the numbers – the 20% that the segment represents in global arrivals and the over US\$ 165 billion in receipts – Youth Travel offers a number of other key strategic benefits that align directly to the core mandates of tourism authorities around the globe, including:

- Year-round Visitation: unconstrained by holiday periods, able to travel during off-peak seasons when more competitive rates and availabilities allow for longer stays.
- Increase in length of Stay: average length of stay is 53 days (Source: WYSE);

- Increase in revenues: making a higher level of financial to local enterprises (especially SMEs) as more inclined to eat, sleep and shop at local establishments,
- Dispersion throughout the Destination and Region: goes without saying, whether self-guided or on youth travel tourism (ie *Contiki*, one of the world's largest and most successful youth travel companies that really 'gets it')
- Direct participation of, and contribution to, local communities: mixing visitation, work assignments, volunteering and education;
- Repeat visitation: planting the seeds for future return at a later stage in their lives...with or without their backpacks, but probably still carrying their Blackberries.

But the benefits go even further than just the fulfillment of strategic priorities and political mandates. The innate 'insider' quest of a Youth Traveller turns this segment into a vital force of qualitative growth and development as destinations, and as a sector as a whole.

The Youth Travel segment, young people from nations across the globe who cross borders to create a borderless community of global citizens sharing experiences, provides invaluable contribution not only quantitatively, but also in terms of how it creates and champions emerging trends, as well as responds to emerging issues facing the sector. Not only do these travellers bring their own freshness of spirit, imagination and opportunity to the places they visit, and people they connect with (through an increasing number of powerful, pervasive and personal-sharing mediums), they also possess an inner courage and curiosity when it comes to locations of natural, political or social crisis. They want to go see, understand, and even help.

For Youth Travellers, the motivations of travel goes far beyond the quest for sun, sand, sea and stories. At the heart of Youth Travel is a wonderfully personal, positively selfish desire of the traveller to be a more active participant in the world. The travel is about them – their experiences, their learning, their time, their sharing (e- and otherwise). They are traveling with purpose, choosing to put themselves 'out there' to be able to experience the world unvarnished, unpackaged, unedited, and unafraid.

For many travel segments, cultural and environmental awareness and appreciation comes implicitly through travel experiences chosen – locations, accommodation, tours, transport methods. The Youth Travel segment, however, is composed of hundreds of millions of individuals who explicitly seek to learn, to explore, to be immersed, to be involved, and to make an impact. And, importantly, these are not travelers interested in simply dabbling in ways of improving the world, they are insisting on being a real part of them. Youth Travellers view 'Responsible Tourism' is a verb, not a noun.

To travel the world with only a backpack is an explicit expression of "*I want to be a part of where I am through how I travel, where I eat, where I sleep, who I meet and what stories we share.*" A backpack is an overt statement of "*I am open.*"

SAME PLANET, DIFFERENT WORLDS

One of the world's strongest, most passionate advocates of the power of the Youth Travel segment to global T&T is David Jones, the former Secretary General of World Youth, Student & Educational (WYSE). Few international business leaders are able to seemingly reverse-age as they grow wiser in their chosen field of expertise. David has found the source of T&T's fountain of youth. And while no longer WYSE's lead voice, he remains a vital messenger of the power of this often under-estimated, under-credited segment.

Jones is clear in his belief that Youth Travellers – travellers who distinctly do not wish to be referred to as ‘tourists’ - provide a compass for future tourism sector growth.

“Understanding the characteristics and trends of the youth market offers an insight on future mainstream market trends. Youth travellers opened many of today’s most popular destinations and led the trend to independent travel that has now spread through the industry.”

Importantly, Jones emphasizes the need to be careful in classifying all Youth Travelers as simply back-pack carrying, internet café visiting, solo adventurers.

“Youth market demand has been driven by the growth of popular international activities. In the 80’s & 90’s demand was driven by a massive growth in ‘backpacking’ and in the 90’s by the new student working holiday opportunities. The biggest growth sector in youth travel 2000 – 2010, was voluntary experiences. Acts of community service are increasingly important to young people, and the motivation to do some good in the world created a massive demand for international voluntary experience programs in the first decade of the 21st century. This is a demand that continues today.”

It is critical that today’s T&T leaders look closely at, and appreciate, the Youth Travel segment and its evolving areas of interest. It is not simply kind sentiment, it is smart strategy.

Jones continues, *“Destinations that work to build and maintain their appeal to the youth market are future proofing their brand for the next generation of travellers. Those destinations that deliver on the interests of the youth market, including the potential for discovery, cultural interaction, heritage exploration and action, will be the market leading brands now and into the future.”*

Yes, today’s youth can be intimidating. It can be daunting knowing just how sharp and capable these future leaders of the world are. Even attempting to understand what they understand can be deeply humbling. Any adult trying to figure out how their new mobile phone apps work knows the feeling. Yet, it is when the power of youth is harnessed – when we hand over our phones and ask for help – that the possibilities become endless.

In this spirit, the T&T sector needs to embrace the invaluable contribution that Youth Travel makes to one of the world’s fastest growing, and most widely beneficial, economic sectors. Whether they are young, traditional ‘western’ (ie. American, Canadian or European) travellers carrying backpacks, or young Asian travellers carrying Burberry bags, Youth Travellers are defining the direction of our world on the move.

With a billion people traveling the globe, all types of travelers and travel choices are needed to ensure that the power of the Tourism Economy is leveraged across all segments and regions. T&T needs the guided tours and all-inclusive resorts as much as it needs the business traveler hotels and backpacker lodges. There is no ‘right or wrong’, no ‘best way’, no ‘more authentic’, no ‘more valuable’. It is all about shaping the future of the T&T sector through enabling travellers to live out their travel dreams today.

As wisely stated by J.K. Rowling, the award-winning author of the Harry Potter series, *“Age is foolish and forgetful when it underestimates youth.”*

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