

# Backpackers Make a Difference

Targeting the backpacker segment may be an effective means of diversifying Hong Kong's tourism market and promoting sustainable tourism, according to the SHTM's Lung Ching Nok, Wantanee Suntikul, Elizabeth Agyeiwaah and Denis Tolkach. In a recently published article the researchers revealed that, according to survey results, "backpackers are pushed by the search for new ideas and pulled by the unique food culture of Hong Kong". Destination marketers in the city should also be aware that backpackers are more likely to support the local economy than other types of tourists, many of whom visit because of its reputation as an international shopping destination.

## A Changing Tourism Market

Until very recently, Hong Kong's tourism market was dominated by continual growth in the number of mainland Chinese tourists, who were "predominantly interested in shopping". However, this trend has been reversed in the past few of years, as the number of mainland visitors dropped from a peak of 47.2 million in 2014 to 40.3 million in 2016. Potential reasons for this change include "local residents' resentment towards shopping tourism", especially parallel trading, in which goods are transported from Hong Kong to China for resale, and the general economic downturn.

Whatever the reasons, the researchers stress that there is an "urgent need for Hong Kong to diversify its tourism offerings". The backpacker market presents one such opportunity, because these tourists "demand little infrastructure

development" and tend to spend more money with local businesses, thus benefitting local communities.

Importantly, the researchers note that backpackers are an "educated group" of generally younger adults who like to travel independently and interact with the communities they visit. They are usually quite adventurous and "do not confine themselves to their 'comfort zone'" but prefer to explore unfamiliar places with an emphasis on outdoor activities and eco-travel. Because they often spend longer at a destination, their overall spending is higher than that of other tourist groups, and they often visit more remote districts and use local services, thus spreading their expenditure throughout the local economy.

However, the benefits of the backpacker market have also been challenged, with some studies suggesting that there may be limited or even negative effects on local communities. Understanding the motivations, preferences and behaviour of backpackers in Asia is an important first step in deciding whether and how to attract this particular group.

## Backpackers Surveyed

The researchers thus conducted a survey of backpackers staying at seven youth hostels in Hong Kong, as hostels are an "inexpensive accommodation option that is popular among backpackers". Other respondents were surveyed while taking part in outdoor activities, such as hiking on the popular MacLehose Trail and Dragon's Back Trail. Overall, 90% of the respondents were staying in youth hostels and the other 10%

were interviewed outdoors.

More than 60% of the respondents were independent female travellers in their twenties, and more than 93% held a Bachelor's degree. Almost 80% came from North America, Australia or Europe, and just over 20% from Asia. Their average length of stay in Hong Kong was a week or less, and they spent around US\$46-86 per day. According to the researchers, they tended to "visit remote areas of the city, guided in their itineraries by guidebooks and social media".

## Motivations and Preferences

The main 'pull' factors that motivated the backpackers to visit Hong Kong were the "unique local food", the opportunity for "friendship with people of different countries" and the "local lifestyle".

The researchers note that the desire to experience local food is not generally associated with backpackers' travel motivations. This is an important finding because it differentiates backpackers in Hong Kong from those in other destinations and indicates a means of attracting this group of travellers. Food as a pull factor "serves as a source of employment and income for local food providers and indirectly for local farmers". It also offers opportunities for cultural exchange between travellers and host communities.

Shopping was ranked as the lowest priority, as expected given the usual interests of this group of travellers. Rather more surprisingly, outdoor activities also ranked very low, despite such activities normally being one of the main attractions

for backpackers. The researchers suggest that this may be because Hong Kong is not “primarily a nature-based destination” and outdoor activities are not part of the destination’s image.

Among the internal ‘push’ factors that motivated the respondents to visit Hong Kong, the top three were “learning new things”, “independence” and “experiencing unfamiliar life”.

Again, the researchers note that the most important factor, the desire to learn new things, differs from that found in studies conducted elsewhere, which have tended to identify escape and relaxation as backpackers’ main internal motivation.

Similar to backpackers elsewhere, the majority of respondents preferred to stay in youth hostels, although they differed in the “elements and qualities” that they expected. “Friendly local staff” was the most important accommodation feature, along with areas for meeting new friends. As the researchers note, these features fit well with backpackers’ desire to learn new things, as friendly local staff “provide an environment for interaction and local knowledge”, and this is complemented by the opportunity to make new friends.

Another Hong Kong-specific feature identified by the study is the preference for local street markets. The researchers highlight this as “indicative of how Hong Kong’s existing attractions could be capitalised on”, because backpackers are more interested in exploring the unique features of a destination, which does not require any additional infrastructure.

## **Sustainable Tourism**

Another important element of the contribution backpackers make to Hong Kong is the extent to which they contribute to the development of sustainable tourism. To be sustainable, tourism must aid in economic and societal development, cultural conservation and environmental protection, meeting the needs of the present community while preserving resources for future generations. Backpackers’ approach to travel and tourism is beneficial in this respect, as the market generally shows high sensitivity toward promoting sustainability and concern for the environment and local culture.

The backpackers interviewed in Hong Kong certainly endorsed these values. For instance, they were much more likely to buy products from local shops than from international brands, thus supporting local employment at the destination. They also contributed to sustainable tourism by supporting local activities, such as participating in cultural workshops and other culture-related activities, and interacting with village residents. As the researchers note, the point of sustainable tourism is to enhance the positive effects on destinations, and this is “exactly what backpackers in Hong Kong are likely to do while enjoying their trip”.

## **A Heterogeneous Market**

The study provides plenty of suggestions for how Hong Kong can be marketed as a destination for backpackers, who are an important segment of the tourism

market. The researchers note that even though Hong Kong has a reputation for “grand infrastructure projects, commercial attractions and shopping”, the backpacker market is interested in supporting small local businesses, shopping in local markets, and visiting cultural and natural attractions.

Consequently, creating diversity in the tourism market by targeting this group could lead to “a high propensity for cultural exchange and environmental preservation”. Yet the researchers also warn that their findings indicate the “backpacker segment is a heterogeneous group” and the push and pull factors may differ for other destinations. Destination marketers should thus develop strategies relevant to their particular destinations.

### **POINTS TO NOTE**

- Hong Kong needs to diversify its travel market as Chinese visitor numbers fall.
- Backpackers represent a potential new target sector for Hong Kong.
- Backpackers value unique local food and lifestyle and learning new things.
- They are more likely to support the local economy than buy international brands.

Nok, Lung Ching, Suntikul, Wantanee, Agyeiwaah, Elizabeth and Tolkach, Denis. (2017). “Backpackers in Hong Kong – Motivations, Preferences and Contribution to Sustainable Tourism”. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 34, No. 8, pp. 1058-1070.