

Research note

An investigation into customer satisfaction levels in the budget accommodation sector in Scotland: a case study of backpacker tourists and the Scottish Youth Hostels Association

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Abstract

This research note reports a summary of the results of a survey carried out with the support of the Scottish Youth Hostel Association (SYHA). The focus of this research was to gain a better understanding of the requirements of budget accommodation users in Scotland, the characteristics associated with their accommodation choice and the levels of importance and satisfaction associated with the main Scottish provider of budget accommodation (SYHA).

The research reported in this note is part of a wider study which focuses on a particular tourist segment commonly known as “backpackers” who are also defined in the specialist literature as “independent travellers”, “youth/budget tourists” and “uninstitutionalised tourists” (Loker-Murphy & Pearce, *Ann. Tourism Res.* 22(4) (1995) 819–843; Elsrud, *Ann. Tourism Res.* 28(3) (2001) 597–617; Murphy, *Ann. Tourism Res.* 28(1) (2001) 50–67; Uriely, Yonay, & Simchai, *Ann. Tourism Res.* 29(2) (2002) 520–538).

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1. Introduction

There is increasing competition in tourism destination marketing and there is an opportunity for destinations to focus on the youth and backpacker markets that have “been neglected by researchers” (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2002, p. 55). Keeley (2001) suggests that although it is recognised that Britain has the opportunity to benefit from backpacker tourism, little is known about the size and commercial value of this market. Despite a fairly rapid expansion in the provision of budget accommodation, backpacker tourism tends not to benefit from public sector support and current research does not reflect the potential benefits associated with backpacker tourism and backpacker travel patterns. These should be the subjects for further investigation (Keeley, 2001;

Robson, 2000; Seekings, 1998; Scheyvens, 2002; Elliott, 1997).

Currently backpackers account for “10% of overseas visitors to the UK—an estimated 2.5 million travellers and Britain has huge potential to benefit from further development of backpacker tourism” (English Tourism Council, 2002, p. 1). There are many advantages to targeting the youth/backpacker market and these are outlined in Table 1.

Keeley (1995, p. 7) suggests that hostels are the preferred option for backpackers in the UK but they tend to vary enormously in quality. The main providers of budget accommodation in Scotland are the Scottish Youth Hostel Association (SYHA). This organisation differs in terms of its constitution and charitable status, its size and international affiliations and its approach to accessing the countryside and culture of Scotland from the independent hostel providers, who in the main, are focused on making profits. There are wider differences

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Table 1
Advantages of the youth/backpacker market

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● They travel year round ● They travel country-wide ● They use public transport ● They stay for long periods of time ● They are likely to return to Britain at later stages in their lives ● They only tend to carry essentials with them and will therefore spend on local businesses

(Adapted from Keeley, 2001).

between the SYHA and other hostels that relate back to the early self-help approach of the SYHA. All visitors used to have to be members and everyone was asked to assist in cleaning duties in the hostel. Age restrictions and closing times were in force and motorised means of travel were not allowed for arrival at hostels. The focus was very much on the youth market, self-help and improving awareness of the countryside (SYHA, 2003). This research provides a better understanding of their existing and potential customer base, as well as identifying their requirements and levels of satisfaction with the SYHA product.

In Scotland there has been some data collected by Highlands and Islands Enterprise (2000) on hostels in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and also some by VisitScotland (1999) on the hostel market. It notes that there has been a large increase in provision from 29 independent hostels in 1990 to 151 in 1999. “In 1999 there were 1.4 million hostel bed-nights, with an expenditure of £40 million (about £36 per person per night), split equally between the Scottish Youth Hostels Association (SYHA) and independent sectors.” (VisitScotland, 1999, p. 1). It is this increase in provision and the lack of research into the backpacker tourist (in the UK) that prompted this study.

2. Backpackers—definitions

There are considerable problems associated with defining exactly what or who a backpacker actually is, because backpackers are not easily distinguished economically or demographically. A variety of terms have been used by authors to describe a backpacker and these are outlined in Table 2.

A summary of literature outlined in Table 2 has established the following characteristics associated with backpackers:

- A preference for budget accommodation.
- An emphasis on meeting other travelers.
- An independently organised and flexible travel schedule.

Table 2
Authors for various definitions of the backpacker

Terminology	Author (Year)
Backpacker	Loker-Murphy (1995) Keeley (2001) Ryan and Moshin (2001) Reisinger and Mavondo (2002)
Youth tourist	Loker-Murphy and Pearce (1995) Reisinger and Mavondo (2002)
Traveller	Vogt (1976) in Loker-Murphy and Pearce (1995)
Non-institutionalised tourist	Uriely et al. (2002)
Budget tourist/economy tourist	Elsrud (2001)

- Aged between 20 to 24, but can range from 15 to 60 years of age (as is the case with SYHA).
- Longer rather than brief holidays.
- An emphasis on informal and participatory holiday activities.

3. Satisfaction and service quality

There is discussion and disagreement in both the marketing and hospitality literature about satisfaction and service quality (Gronroos, 1988; Botteril, 1987; Moutinho, 1987; Johns & Howard, 1998; Oh, 1999; Tsang & Qu, 2000; Giese & Cote, 2000; Lee, Lee, & Yoo, 2000; Reichel, Lowengart, & Milman, 2000; Choi & Chu, 2001). Satisfaction can be defined as “a judgement that a product, or service feature, or the product or service itself, provides a pleasurable level of consumption—related fulfilment, including levels of under or over fulfilment” (Oliver, 1997, p. 13). Customer satisfaction has been noted as a major element “needed to create and sustain a competitive business” (Ueltschy, Laroche, Tamila, & Yannopoulos, 2002, p. 2).

Customers will be satisfied if the services they receive are at least as good as they were supposed to be, “a consumer is considered satisfied when his weighted sum total of experiences shows a feeling of gratification when compared with his expectations. On the other hand, a consumer is considered dissatisfied when his actual experience shows a feeling of displeasure when compared with his expectation” (Choi & Chu, 2001, p. 280). This naturally involves an element of expectation associated with the service. However, in this research the focus was not to enter into the already well-developed debate associated with expectations and quality/performance (Oh, 1999; Giese & Cote, 2000;

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