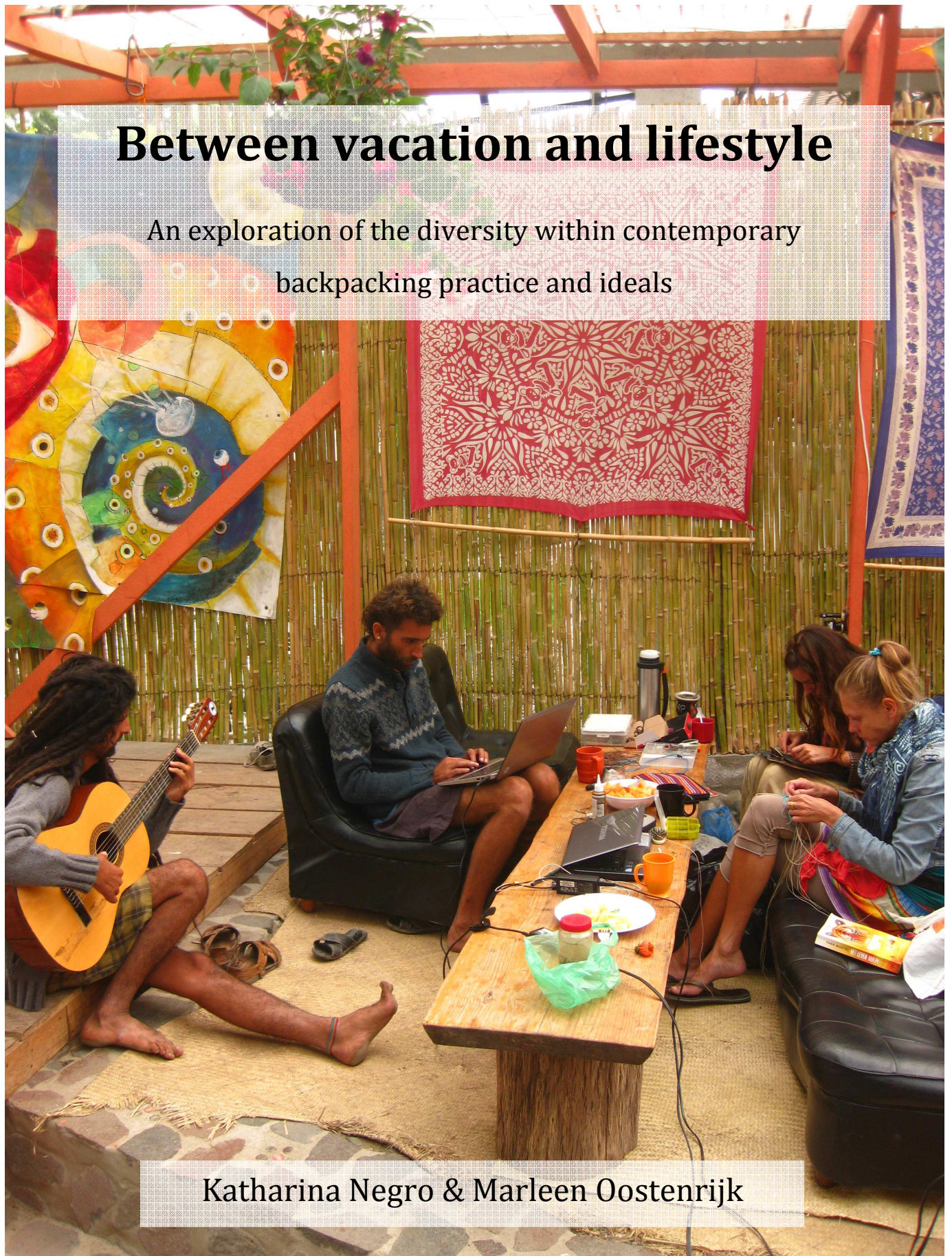


# Between vacation and lifestyle

An exploration of the diversity within contemporary  
backpacking practice and ideals



Katharina Negro & Marleen Oostenrijk

# Between vacation and lifestyle

An exploration of the diversity within contemporary  
backpacking practice and ideals

Bachelor Thesis

Authors:	Katharina Negro	Marleen Oostenrijk
Student number:	3494721	3463044
Contact:	k.negro@students.uu.nl	m.l.oostenrijk@students.uu.nl
Supervisor:	Drs. Marc Simon Thomas	

Department of Cultural Anthropology  
Faculty of Social & Behavioral Sciences  
Utrecht University, the Netherlands

June 2013

Cover photo: Backpackers hanging out in hostel Del Lago, engaging in typical activities: making music, going online and creating macramé jewelry. Taken by Marleen, April 13, 2013.

“You’ll see. Traveling is the best school, my dear.”

Linda (France, 29), traveling since six years

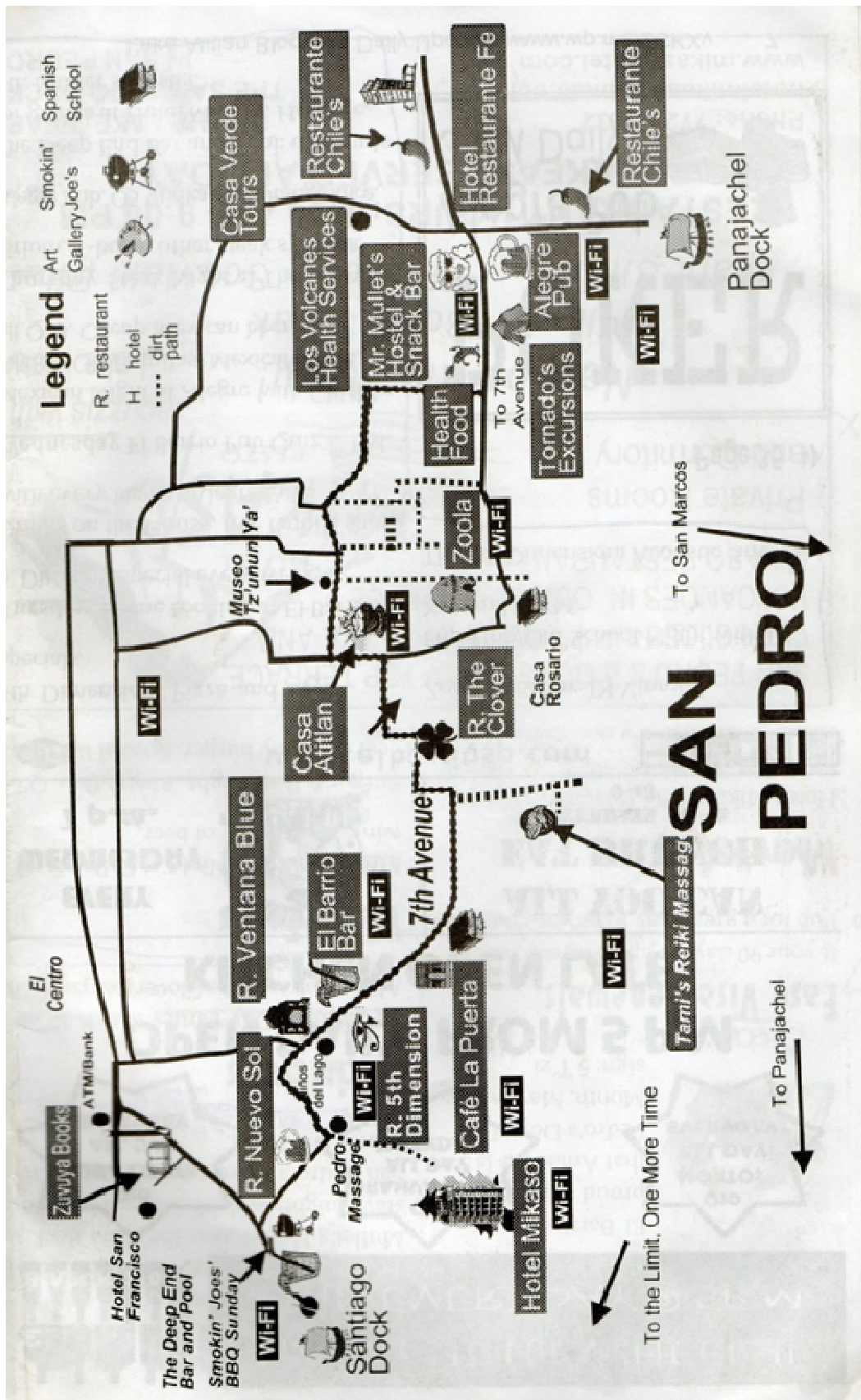
# Contents

<b>Maps</b>	6
Map 1: Guatemala	6
Map 2: Lake Atitlán	6
Map 3: San Pedro	7
Map 4: San Marcos	8
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	9
<b>Introduction</b>	10
The research location	13
Methodological reflection	14
Outline of the thesis	16
<b>Theoretical perspectives of backpacking</b>	17
Anthropology of globalization	17
Traveling and tourism	18
Backpacking as anti-tourism	20
Historical traces of backpacking	20
Contemporary reality	22
Contemporary backpacking ideology and practice	24
Experiencing home through <i>communitas</i>	26
<b>Backpacking in Guatemala: the setting for this study</b>	28
San Marcos and San Pedro	29
The hostels Mr. Mullet's and Del Lago	30
<b>Backpacking in Guatemala: the empirical data</b>	32
<b>Backpacking in San Pedro la Laguna - Katharina Negro</b>	33
Backpackers in San Pedro	33
Defining backpacking in San Pedro	35
The practice of backpacking in San Pedro	38
Long-term budget tourism	39
Feeling at home in enclaves	39
Immersing oneself into a new culture	42
The ideology of backpacking in San Pedro	43
Having an exciting trip	44
Having a relaxing and fun trip	45
Feeling at home through <i>communitas</i>	46
<b>Backpacking in San Marcos la Laguna - Marleen Oostenrijk</b>	49
Backpackers in San Marcos	49
The practice of backpacking in San Marcos	53
Time and flexibility	53

Motivation to travel	54
Atmosphere and community feeling	57
The ideology of backpacking in San Marcos	58
Exploring the culture	59
Developing the self	61
<b>Conclusion</b>	63
The findings compared	64
Backpackers and backpacking in San Pedro and San Marcos	64
The practice of backpacking in San Pedro and San Marcos	65
The ideology of backpacking in San Pedro and San Marcos	66
Answering the main research question	67
<b>References</b>	69
<b>Appendix I: Illustrations</b>	72
Picture 1: Mr. Mullet's from the outside	72
Picture 2: Common area of Del Lago	72
Picture 3: Flyer of Mr. Mullet's	73
Picture 4: A typical advertisement for a bar in San Pedro	73
Picture 5: A typical advertisement of a tour company in San Pedro	74
Picture 6: Guests of Del Lago practicing yoga in de morning	74
Picture 7: Artesanos selling in the main street of San Marcos	75
Picture 8: San Marcos main street	75
<b>Appendix II: Summary</b>	76

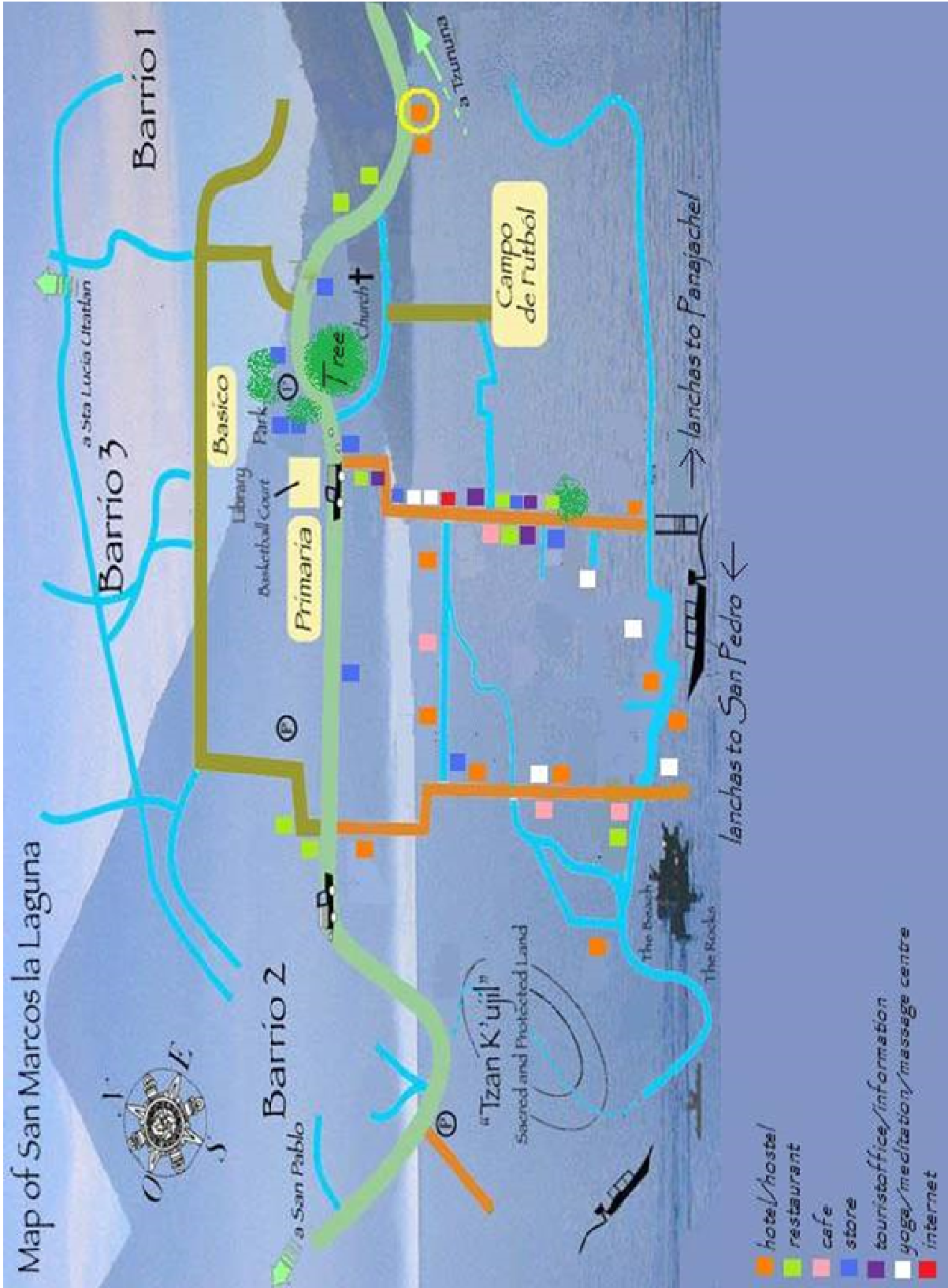


Map 3: San Pedro<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup> Map 3: from free monthly magazine "Sol de Atitlan" in San Pedro

Map 4: San Marcos<sup>4</sup>



<sup>4</sup> Map 4: www.aaculaax.com. Edited by Marleen, April 14, 2013



## Acknowledgements

On the next pages you will encounter the product of seven months of intensive research, fieldwork, discussions, reflections and analyses. To us, this thesis is even more; it represents the final chapter of a four years study in the field of Cultural Anthropology at Utrecht University. Both the thesis and our education would not have been possible without the support of others. Though this page is by no means sufficient, we would like to express our thankfulness to the people who helped us most during this period.

First of all, we thank Drs. Marc Simon Thomas, our tutor, under whose guidance this thesis became what it is now. We appreciate the trust you placed in this unconventional fieldwork and the creative freedom you left us. You know it has been both a challenge and a pleasure to work towards this result. Thank you for your enthusiasm and the many critical readings.

A big 'thank you' also goes to our families and friends, who encourage us to travel, to practice our passions and to experience the world with eyes wide open. Thank you for supporting our wish to carry out this research in Guatemala. We owe special gratitude to Etienne and Sebastiaan, who accompanied us through the whole process. Without your continuing interest, positivity and cheer, the finalization of our studies would have been much harder. Thanks for your readings and suggestions on the end product of this study.

We also express our gratitude to Tim and Eliane, the owners of Mr. Mullet's, and to Brian, the owner of Del Lago, for letting us carry out this research at these perfect locations. Throughout the fieldwork period we met the most inspiring and energetic people. We cannot show enough appreciation to our informants and our new friends. Thank you all for sharing your knowledge and experiences with us. Thank you for the time we spent together and for welcoming us into your lives. Time and again, you enabled us to find satisfaction and enjoyment in this project. Your testimonies form the basis of this thesis. Hopefully, one day our paths will cross again. In beautiful memories we are connected.

## Introduction

*It is a few minutes after nine in the morning. Louis and Pete swing in the hammocks in the hostel's backyard. Three girls walk towards them and sit down. "Morning, how are you guys?" one of them asks. "Well, fine. A little tired. How are you?" "All right" she smiles, "we'll move on tomorrow". "Where are you heading, North or South?" "South" she replies, "but first we want to go to Tikal". "Ah, me too" Louis says and Pete agrees "Yeah, me too". "I also heard about these pools in the jungle: Semuc Champey. I think I'll go there first". The girls look at each other in confusion which reveals that they have never heard about that place. One of them quickly grabs a Lonely Planet from the table and starts browsing. "Ah, there it is... Wow that looks amazing!" She shows the page to her friends. The blonde girl notices that it is far away from San Pedro. "True, but this Semuc thing... It's on the route to Tikal. We pass it anyway. We could stop there too." Her friend insists. "Yeah, why not?" The others answer almost simultaneously and laugh about this coincidence. "But since you're going South, I would also recommend you Playa el Tunco in El Salvador" says Louis. "The place is expensive and the only hostel, the papaya lodge, as well, although the rest of Salvador is really cheap. But the waves are awesome for surfing!" The girl next to Louis writes the recommendations down in her iPhone. "Thanks!" she acknowledges his sharing and adds "I will go get some breakfast. Do you guys wanna join?" Without even knowing each other's names the newly formed group leaves the hostel together.<sup>5</sup>*

Nowadays backpackers, young travelers from all over the middle-class Western world, meet each other in hostels on different parts of the globe. Together they create a community, sharing stories and recommendations. Friendships and travel groups are quickly formed. Over the years, popular travel routes develop, leading backpackers along the major touristic sights of the countries they visit. Along these routes, backpacker enclaves and popular hostels arise, which provide many facilities for the backpackers, like Internet, restaurants, bars, transportation systems and tour companies. Contemporary backpackers make frequent use of these facilities. Academics agree that features like in the above displayed vignette characterize the contemporary way of traveling as a backpacker (Anderskov 2002; Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995; O'Reilly 2006; Elsrud 2001; Sørensen 2003).

---

<sup>5</sup> Vignette based on field notes and observation in Mr. Mullet's, March 06, 2013.

The origin of backpacking is comparably indisputable. A 1976 guide called 'Backpacking' describes backpacking as journeying into the wilderness, independent of the technological society and the tourist industry and its facilities (Nieoczym 2003:56). Cohen (1972:168) is the first academic determining the category of the non-institutionalized tourist, who would later become the backpacker. Cohen terms the travelers of the 1960s and 1970s 'drifters'; Riley (1988:316) calls them 'long-term budget tourists' and O'Reilly (2006:1005) 'hippie travelers'. All these have certain characteristics in common. What differentiates the non-institutionalized backpacker from the institutionalized tourist, are values like "novelty, spontaneity, risk, and independence" (Vogt 1976, in Riley 1988:315).

The drifters are young people from Western origin who carry a backpack, with all they need to survive in it. They reject the material comforts from home, travel under a low budget to places off the beaten tourist paths and immerse themselves into the local host cultures (Cohen 1972:168). They have no fixed itinerary and drift around aimlessly, hence their name. This classic backpacker travels to unknown countries, out of a feeling of alienation with Western economy, politics and culture. In the academic literature, the drifters are generally seen as anti-tourists, society drop-outs, anarchists and hedonists (Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995:824). However, numerous ethnographic studies have shown: since the 1980s, the origins of backpacking and its contemporary practice do not have much in common anymore (Anderskov 2002; Sørensen 2003). The drifters are said to have extinguished.

A growing industry has developed since the 1970s to supply the needs of modern backpackers. Hostels, cheap restaurants, guidebooks and tour companies make backpacking much easier. The increase of cheaper flights, backpacker accommodations, a global middle-class and more flexible work and family obligations, lead to the growing commercialization and mainstreaming of backpacking (Sørensen 2003:848). An increasing number of young people can participate in the experience. Most contemporary backpackers only take a break from their lives in Western societies; they intend to return to their normal life after a while, instead of drifting around for an unknown time. During their travels they stay with other backpackers in hostels where they can enjoy the same food and drinks as at home and frequently use the Internet and mobile phones to keep in touch with their social ties from home.

Despite this, Anderskov (2002), Cohen (2003), Elsrud (2001) and Sørensen (2003) claim that the practice of drifting is still regarded as the ideal of backpacking. The 'real' backpacker should behave like a drifter, although most contemporary backpackers do not accomplish this ideal. This thesis is dedicated to this debate. It analyzes what the contemporary practice of backpacking looks like and which ideology stands behind it, to evaluate whether a discrepancy between ideology and practice continues to exist. The anthropological concepts of home and *communitas* are applied to this question. The ideas of home and belonging can explain why backpackers make frequent use of the facilities provided by backpacker enclaves and hostels.

In enclaves, backpackers feel at home because of the provided facilities, like international foods and drinks, showers, toilets and beds like at home and the possibility to manage everything by speaking English. Through the technological facilities, like Internet and Wi-Fi, they can also keep in touch with their home places and social relations at home. *Communitas*; friendly, supportive and spontaneous bonds between total strangers only develop between people who are similar, for example because they speak the same language or travel along the same route (Franklin 2003:47-48). The concept of *communitas* can partly explain why backpackers stay on the beaten path, in company of other backpackers, instead of exploring authentic places like the drifters have done.

This thesis strives to contribute to the theoretical debate on the discrepancy between the ideals and reality of contemporary backpacking, by presenting more emic insights and experiences on the diverse practices of the phenomenon and on the different ideologies that stand behind it. Most definitions about backpackers are derived from the outside, without the recognition of the individual backpackers. This thesis represents the words of backpackers, to let them reflect their personal knowledge and ideas. By using insight information, obtained from participant observations, informal conversations and open interviews, a nuanced definition of backpackers and backpacking can be developed, herein considering the role of the ancient drifter ideals. The study is brought into practice as a comparative research, using qualitative methods. This means that the same questions are answered by using the same methods, during fieldwork in two different locations on the 'gringo trail' in Guatemala: San Pedro la

Laguna and San Marcos la Laguna.<sup>6+7</sup> The joint findings can then present a more complete overview of the contemporary backpacking.

To put it in a nutshell, this thesis is centered around the following main research question: How do backpackers in San Pedro la Laguna and San Marcos la Laguna in Guatemala experience and describe the practice of backpacking and what does this teach us about the possible tension between the ideals and reality of contemporary backpacking?

## **The research location**

The following prominently factors explain why Guatemala is chosen as the best research location to study contemporary backpacking. The tourism industry in Guatemala only developed after the end of the country's civil war in 1996.<sup>8</sup> The country now forms part of the 'gringo trail' leading through Central America. This route assembles a modern successor of the 'hippie trail' from Europe to Asia from the 1960s and 1970s. As specific location on the trail, Guatemala is selected because it combines a bit of all the different countries. There is year-round spring weather, the biggest ancient and mystical Maya ruins, both the Pacific and Atlantic Sea and their beaches, beautiful and diverse nature, colonial cities and a rich culture that consists of at least thirty different ethnicities, with twenty-six different languages. The phenomenon of contemporary backpacking is not yet scientifically examined much in Guatemala, or in Central America in general. Most research has been carried out in Oceania and South-East Asia (Anderskov 2002:7) .

Two slightly different locations are picked out to study backpackers in Guatemala, San Pedro la Laguna and San Marcos la Laguna at *Lago de Atitlán* (Lake Atitlán). San Pedro is, together with Tikal and Antigua, the most popular place on the gringo trail in Guatemala.<sup>9</sup> Whereas San Marcos is only a short boat ride away, it is a rather alternative destination for backpackers. San Marcos holds a reputation as a 'hippie heaven', while San Pedro is known as the party town of Guatemala. The comparison of these two villages and the backpackers they attract is very interesting in the light of the research

---

6 The gringo trail is a typical path that travelers, specifically backpackers, tend to follow. It leads along the major touristic attractions of different countries. In Central America it leads from Costa Rica up to Mexico or the other way round. It is considered as the 'beaten path'. Gringo is a nick-name for North-American and other foreign travelers. [www.gocentralamerica.about.com](http://www.gocentralamerica.about.com). Retrieved on June 11, 2013.

7 San Pedro la Laguna and San Marcos la Laguna are more often referred to as San Pedro and San Marcos. These forms are mainly used to write about these two places throughout this thesis.

8 [www.nationsencyclopedia.com](http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com). Retrieved on June 05, 2013.

9 [gocentralamerica.about.com](http://gocentralamerica.about.com). Retrieved on June 11, 2013.

question, as it grasps the complexity and diversity of the phenomenon of contemporary backpacking and its ideals.

Since “youth hostels are crucial hubs and ‘gathering places’ on the backpacker circuits” (Vogt 1976, in Nieoczym 2003:3), two hostels in San Pedro and San Marcos are chosen to live among the backpackers that stay there. Hostels provide the ideal surrounding to meet people from different parts of the world, because of their distinct characteristics. These include dormitory rooms, where you rent one of several beds, and common areas, such as a garden, a bar and a communal kitchen, where the guests can meet each other, hang out together and make plans. Mr. Mullet's hostel forms the research basis in San Pedro and hostel Del Lago the research basis in San Marcos. Both hostels are big and popular. Both hostels are owned by foreigners and show the above mentioned typical features for hostels. Although the two hostels have much in common, they spread different atmospheres and attract different types of backpackers, which lends itself very well for this comparative research.

### **Methodological reflection**

For a period of eight weeks, between February 25 and April 19, 2013, anthropological fieldwork is conducted in San Pedro and San Marcos, to explore the practice and ideals of backpacking and to find out whether a discrepancy between the ideals and reality exists. During this fieldwork period different qualitative research methods are used to collect data about backpacking in San Pedro and San Marcos, among which participant observation, informal conversations, and open interviews are the most important. Constantly researching, most time is spent in the communal areas of the hostel. Eating, having drinks and socializing usually starts the contact with the backpackers. Walking through town, undertaking activities together and discovering other places in Guatemala deepens the relationship, in other words the rapport. Being there, at what is supposed to be the most important meeting point for backpackers: the hostel, as a part of the enclave, made it possible to observe, practice and understand the whole backpacker experience, including the ideals, motives and habits. Only a few researchers of the backpacker phenomenon have chosen this approach, namely Anderskov (2002), Riley (1998), Sørensen (2003) and Fink Shapiro (2009).

Traditionally anthropologists journey from the Western world to the periphery to find tribal villages to study the exotic Other. “For four decades now this paradigm has

been criticized and fieldwork locations are changing“ (Nieoczym 2003:7): anthropology is coming home. This thesis follows this direction and studies Western backpackers. Because of our demographic profiles and previous backpacking experience, we have been granted immediately a certain level of insider acceptance, through which we have obtained a lot of emic information. At the same time we feel like outsiders, because this time we are not backpacking, but studying the backpackers. However, once that role is embraced, it guarantees the necessary distance not to ‘go native’.

The research intentions were always immediately disclosed. Within the hostel this anthropological project was widely known. When explaining the research to hostel guests, they mostly responded with great interest and agreed that there would be a lot to say about San Pedro and San Marcos and the backpacking culture in general. The overall consensus is that studying backpackers is a ‘cool’ thing to do and many backpacker have volunteered for participation.<sup>10</sup>

The limitation of anthropological research is that interpretations based on participant observation cannot be replicated with exactitude: anthropological data will always be subjective and obtained in a specific context. However, anthropological methods also guarantee a certain degree of validity. By living with and in the same way as the backpackers in Guatemala, we have learned to totally think, act and behave like they do. We regularly discussed ideas and findings with informants. These moments are considered very important for the research, since member validation leads to new insights and the confirmation of reliable data. The use of researcher reflexivity and member validation enables to account for researcher positionality and biases. The emphasis on the processes and concepts that shape the social reality, being the concepts of home and *communitas*, makes this research more generalizable, since these are not limited to the specific research locations. Other studies can be carried out in different contexts and with different methods to look for evidence that proves the functioning of these processes and increase the understanding of them.

Participant observation, informal conversations and open interviews have been the most important research methods in this research. Observations, conversations and interviews were written down in jottings and field notes. Because the backpackers normally move on quickly after a few nights in one place, there is not much time to build up rapport and conduct more structured in-depth interviews. The research population is

---

10 Lily Fink Shapiro (2009:6) made the same experiences when studying backpackers in party hostels.

constantly changing in a hostel. Therefore this thesis includes a bigger sample than anthropological fieldwork usually does. All the different visitors of the hostels are included, even though it often turned out afterwards that they would not call themselves backpackers. Anyway, all their different opinions contribute to more insight about who is a backpacker and who is not, and about the reality and ideology of backpacking in San Pedro and San Marcos.

Because the collected information is not limited to preconceived questions and categories, the research design also has an explorative character, which is well-suited for this subject, on which not much research has been done. Open, experienced, inspiring, happy, interested and energetic people, enthusiastically share their adventures through this thesis. They have become the teachers, while the researchers have become the students, who have been invited to learn about motivations to travel and about traveling as a way of life. This thesis is based on their experiences and tries to reproduce them as accurately as possible.

## **Outline of the thesis**

Following this introduction the theoretical framework in which this study is placed is displayed. The chapter on the theoretical perspectives of backpacking is organized as a funnel, moving from the broadest theory, the anthropology of globalization, via the discourse on tourism, to the phenomenon of backpacking in history and nowadays, and the tension between backpacking ideals and its practice, using the explanatory power of the anthropological concepts of home and *communitas*. Next, the setting for this study is described, deepening on backpacking in Guatemala and the research locations at Lake Atitlán. The following chapters together form the empirical part of the thesis, in which data obtained from backpackers in respectively San Pedro and San Marcos is presented and analyzed. Both chapters answer three important research questions: Who are the backpackers in San Pedro respectively San Marcos? What does the reality of contemporary backpacking contain of in this place? What ideology stands behind it? The fieldwork data is linked to the theories and concepts presented in the chapter on the theoretical perspectives. The final part of this thesis compares and analyzes the findings from the different research locations and, concluding, gives the joint answer to the main research question.



# Theoretical perspectives of backpacking

Tourism and traveling are well-studied phenomena. This thesis focuses on backpacking, which is a relatively new phenomenon in the broader context of tourism and traveling and therefore not yet completely examined. This theoretical embedding places backpacking in the anthropological frame used to study the phenomenon and discusses the main theories and concepts with regard to backpacking. First, it is outlined in which ways globalization shapes contemporary forms of traveling, followed by a brief review of the literature on traveling and tourism. The next paragraph establishes the traces between contemporary backpacking and its historical predecessor: the drifting of the 1960s and 1970s. It ends with an overview about the similarities and differences that exist between these two practices of traveling. It is also presented what the ideology of backpacking looks like and where it stems from. The last paragraph deepens on the actual practice of contemporary backpacking as understood by its researchers and analyzes how much of the ideology of drifting is still prevalent in this. The anthropological concepts home-making and *communitas* are explained and applied to the contemporary reality of backpacking. They are used to understand the changed nature of the practice and ideals behind contemporary backpacking. The main conclusion from this chapter will be that the literature about backpacking detects a discrepancy between backpacking in theory and in reality. To this debate this study is dedicated.

## Anthropology of globalization

Traveling is a century-old phenomenon. Due to globalization its appearance and magnitude changes significantly. New forms of tourism have emerged in the last thirty years, of which backpacking is an example. This paragraph presents the two characteristics of globalization, increased mobility and communication, which shape contemporary backpacking. First of all, a general definition of globalization explains in which ways the world has changed over the last decades and continues to change in the future. Eriksen (2007:70) states globalization means that the world is moving closer together through increased economic, social and cultural interconnections which allow for faster and more pervasive exchange between people, ideas, cultures and goods

across national boundaries. Distances become increasingly irrelevant for an ever-growing part of the world population, which fosters traveling.

Among other developments, two revolutions provide the background for time-space compression (Harvey 1989). The first, the transportation systems revolution, has started in the nineteenth century in Western Europe with the invention of the railroad system followed by the car and in the 1950s the airplane. Increasingly cheaper and easier means of transportation make more and more middle-class people from the Western countries mobile and thus increases their possibilities to travel (Eriksen 2007:16). The second, the communication technology revolution, has started with the print revolution 1455 in Western Europe; followed by the inventions of radio, telephone and television. However, the Internet and the mobile phone, which become broadly available in the 1990s, have the biggest influence on the increase of traveling (O'Reilly 2006:1007). These technologies foster and simplify on the one hand the imagination of distant places and people through texts and images and on the other hand staying in contact with family and friends in faraway places (Urry 2001:2).

These technologies transform the ways in which contemporary travelers, specifically backpackers, travel around the world and engage with their home-places and social ties. Ever cheaper airline fares allow for traveling the whole globe. Meanwhile, increasing virtual proximity, through social networking sites, email, blogs, mobile phones, Skype and other technologies allows for staying in touch with home (Sørensen 2003:860). Even work can sometimes be done by online. The boundaries and spatial division between home and away become blurred, allowing people greater flexibility regarding their movements through space and time. These developments go parallel with other global changes, including increasing acceptance of middle class travel (e.g. gap years, overseas experience, study abroad), more flexible job contracts allowing for career breaks, changing family and work obligations and advances in credit card technologies (Hannam and Diekmann 2010:43). All these advancements ensure a new kind of mobile traveler can exist now that could not thirty years ago. The next paragraph proceeds with the possibilities for traveling and tourism globalization generates.

## **Traveling and tourism**

As Sanabria (2007:284) points out, "the anthropology of tourism focuses on the sorts of impacts and exchanges between tourists and those with whom they come across in their

travels". More specifically, most literature in the area of tourism studies focuses on the relation between host and guest. This thesis examines the encounter of guests with other guests: backpackers who meet other backpackers. Backpackers can be considered as tourists too; therefore several views on tourism and tourists are presented in this paragraph.

Traveling for a long period of time or to faraway places is not something particularly modern. However, in earlier times, leisure travel has been particularly for the elite. During the Age of Industrialism middle-class travel becomes possible, which is now, in the "post-industrial age, [replaced] by mass tourism" according to Crick (1989:308). Is all contemporary tourism indeed mass tourism? It should be acknowledged that tourism still exists in various forms and that tourists neither all have the same purpose, nor the same motivations. A distinction can be made between travelers and tourists, although these categories may overlap to some extent. Such is the case with contemporary backpackers as a specific category of tourists. Although their way of traveling used to be independent of tourist services, it now increasingly gets more facilitated and therefore more accessible.

To be able to study the phenomenon of backpacking it is essential to define the bigger category of tourism in which backpacking is placed. As the literature shows, this is not an easy task. Cohen (1979:20-21), being one of the first to study the phenomenon of tourism, states that 'the tourist' does not exist and that tourists should therefore not be seen as a homogeneous group. He criticizes other early authors on the either too critical (Turner and Ash) or too idealized (MacCannell and Graburn) view they have of tourists. Turner and Ash (1975, in Crick 1989:309) write that tourists are "barbarians", the suntanned destroyers of culture. Boorstin (1972, in Crick 1989:308) is very critical on tourism as well, stating it is "a form of experience packaged to prevent real contact with others, a manufactured, trivial, inauthentic way of being, a form of travel emasculated, made safe by commercialism". Although many contemporary backpackers agree with these statements (Richards and Wilson 2004), a more neutral definition of the phenomenon is needed for this thesis.

Nash (1981:462) gives a more objective description of the term tourism, placing the tourist himself at the center of the definition. He states tourists might be thought of as (traveling) people at leisure and tourism as the activities they engage in while in this state. Leisure is here described as freedom from primary obligations. The leisured

person must move outside his or her home community in order to qualify as a tourist. In this thesis tourism and tourists are understood according to this definition, while acknowledging that tourism should always be recognized as a phenomenon of a highly varied group.

### **Backpacking as anti-tourism**

Focusing on backpacking as one of various types of tourism, a more complete theoretical background is needed. Richards and Wilson (2004:21) have conducted research on the proportion of different types of travelers in different countries to demonstrate which regions are most attractive for backpackers. They discover that developing countries have the highest rate of backpackers. Currently, about thirty per cent of all international tourist arrivals are situated in developing countries, such as South-East Asia and Latin America (MacDonald 2004:16). Furthermore Richards and Wilsons' study (2004:26) reveals that backpackers' main motives for traveling are a mixture of exploring other cultures, excitement and relaxation. Since backpackers seek free-time activities that contrast with their daily routine, they fit the general definition of tourism (Richards and Wilson 2004:27; Franklin 2003:49).

However, when backpackers are asked, they seldom describe themselves as tourists, but rather as 'real travelers' (Cohen, in Richards and Wilson 2004:43). In Riley's study (1988) all long-term travelers identify themselves with travelers and reject the tourist label, due to their differences on available time and money. Most backpackers also actively try to distinguish themselves because tourists are ascribed with a lack of independence and living in an 'environmental bubble' (Riley 1988:315). Fussell (1980, in Hannam and Diekmann 2010:67) critically surmises that this anti-tourist conviction is both a symptom and a cause of tourist angst, "a gnawing suspicion that after all... you are still a tourist like every other tourist". Reflecting on the debate on defining tourists and backpackers, it is important to recall on the variety within this big group of traveling people, comparing their individual motivations and practices. The following paragraphs deepen on these ideals and realities within contemporary backpacking.

### **Historical traces of backpacking**

The first part of this chapter has lined out how revolutions in transportation technologies are transforming the possibilities to travel since the seventeenth century (Eriksen 2007:16). The costs and risks of traveling have lowered, by which more

destinations become accessible and traveling possible for the middle-class, women and youths as well (Lofgren 1999:163). It is the growing group of traveling youth in the 1960s and 1970s, the drifters, who sets the idea for contemporary backpacking: traveling on low budgets, staying in cheap accommodations, and carrying all belongings in a backpack (Fink Shapiro 2009:15). Their travels have expanded to destinations outside Europe, including the 'Third World' (Nieoczym 2003:55). Soon the hippie trail leading from Europe to India has developed and connected the major sights via an overland route. Although some academics link the backpackers to earlier forms of tourism, like the seven- and eighteenth century Grand Tour and the nineteenth century tramps (Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995; Nieoczym 2003; Fink Shapiro 2009) this thesis follows those academics who see the drifters as the most direct precursors of the contemporary backpackers (Hannam and Diekmann 2010; O'Reilly 2006; Sørensen 2003).

Cohen's (1972) effort to differentiate between the first non-institutionalized tourists and their institutionalized counterparts is seen as the starting point of the study of contemporary backpacking. Cohen has developed a typology of tourists, among which the category of 'the drifter', a scientific description for the traveling youth is first coined. Cohen (1972:168) describes the drifter as a tourist, who "ventures furthest away from the beaten track and from the accustomed ways of life in his home country. He tries to live the way the people he visits lives, and to share their shelter, foods, and habits, keeping only the most essential elements of his old customs". The drifter would not call himself a tourist, because he considers the ordinary tourist experience as inauthentic and superstitious. Furthermore, the drifter has no fixed itinerary or timetable and no well-defined goals of travel.

Cohen (1973:94) identifies three forces that motivate drifters. Cultural forces, summarized as the escape from the comforts of the modern world, in order to experience spirituality which is said to be found only in more primitive, exotic parts of the world. Economic forces, described as an aversion towards working, which can be postponed through traveling. And political forces, meaning a growing alienation with Western politics, such as the Vietnam War, as a reaction to which the drifters want to cut through the bonds with their countries of origin. In contrast to the institutionalized tourist, the non-institutionalized traveler values "novelty, spontaneity, risk, and independence" (Vogt 1976, in Riley 1988:315).

Before drifters, or 'budget travelers' as Riley (1988:316) calls them, or 'hippie travelers' as O'Reilly (2006:1005) terms them, become known as what is nowadays understood as a backpacker, this non-institutionalized form of traveling is associated with wilderness hiking and camping. A 1976 guide called 'Backpacking' describes backpacking as journeying into the backwoods, independent of the technological society and the facilities offered by the tourist industry (Nieoczym 2003:56). However, in the late 1970s non-profit and later for-profit hostels are placed at the locations where the drifters stop along their route (Nieoczym 2003:58). Therewith those travelers get enticed to use commodities supplied by the backpacker industry, what Cohen (1973) calls *Vermassung*.<sup>11</sup> Drifter travel continues into the 1970s, but appears to have declined with the end of the 1980s. The renewed hostilities of the Cold War make traveling along the traditional overland route to Asia too dangerous. Additionally, economic recession and growing unemployment in many Western countries lead to the decrease of drifter tourism (Sørensen 2003:848).

Nevertheless, from the 1980s on the phenomenon of long-term international budget travel, the contemporary backpacking, gradually begins to grow, with regions such as Southeast Asia becoming increasingly popular (O'Reilly 2006:1005). Young, well-educated professionals begin to backpack next to the above described drifters. The increase of cheaper flights, backpacker accommodations, a global middle-class, greater amounts of disposable income among younger people, social support for backpacking in the form of the Gap Year, more flexible work and family obligations, and also increased imagination, all contribute to the mainstreaming of backpacking from the late 1970s on (Cohen 2003:96; Cohen 1973:95–97; O'Reilly 2006:1007-1008). There are few statistics documenting the growth of backpacking tourism in the last years, but various facts prove it undoubtedly; including the growing number of backpacker guidebooks, the growing service infrastructure at home and abroad, travel advertising, and the sheer visibility of backpacker tourism at the popular destinations (Sørensen 2003:848).

### **Contemporary reality**

Heath (2007:100) writes: "Once regarded as a fairly 'alternative' activity, pursued by a small minority of relatively privileged young people, taking 'time out' before engaging in more settled activities is now increasingly commonplace, yet nonetheless remains strongly associated with more privileged groups of students in pursuit of horizon-

---

<sup>11</sup> *Vermassung* means the growing commercialization and mainstreaming.

broadening experiences". Most scholars (Cohen 2003; Elsrud 2001; Hannam and Diekmann 2010; Richards and Wilson 2004; Riley 1988; Sørensen 2003) agree that by the end of the 1980s the characterization of that group as drifters is no longer accurate. Riley (1988:317-319) observes in the late 1980s that contemporary backpackers are no hippies or adherents of a counter-culture anymore since the average traveler is "likely to be European, middle-class, motivated to travel because he or she is at a juncture in life, somewhat older than the earlier travelers (in his or her late twenties or early thirties), college educated, and not aimlessly drifting around". For them traveling is not a lifestyle, but a temporal opportunity that they have to seize now or never (Riley 1988:318). They still travel under flexible timetables and itineraries, but most expect to re-join the workforce of the society they left. They are nomads from affluence, but most have a fixed return date and already booked a flight back home (Sørensen 2003:852).

This description has not changed significantly during the last twenty-five years. "Although contemporary backpackers form an extremely heterogeneous group, according to their motivations and demographics, being their nationality, language, gender, ethnicity and sexuality, there are no big differences concerning age and class (...)" (Fink Shapiro 2009:14-17). An ever-growing part of the world population engages in backpacking travel and it has become impossible to see them as a homogenous group. However, Sørensen (2003:849), Loker-Murphy and Pearce (1995:829) and Welk (2004, in Richards and Wilson 2004:48) claim that all backpackers share a frame of reference, some sort of identity, philosophy or values (Sørensen 2003:849).

Loker-Murphy and Pearce (1995:829) come up with what has become a widely acknowledged definition of the modern backpacker. They focus on the frame of reference that all backpackers share, arguing that backpackers are travelers who exhibit a preference for budget accommodation, prolonged holidays and an independently and flexible organized travel schedule. Modern backpackers want to meet other people (locals and travelers) and engage in participatory recreation activities. This definition is in line with another definition by Welk (2004, in Richards and Wilson 2004:48). He proposes that the backpacker community has evolved of a shared ideology built of five pillars, namely to travel on a low budget, to meet different people, to be free, independent and open-minded, to organize one's journey independently and individually, and to travel as long as possible. Although Cohen has been criticized for not

using empirical data to support his hypothesis, still backpackers are seen as non-institutionalized tourists, in contrast to mass tourists.

What should be noted is that most definitions about backpackers are externally derived, which means they are not established by the backpackers themselves. This thesis gives a voice to numerous backpackers in Guatemala, to let them tell their stories. It does not only strive to develop a sound definition of backpackers and backpacking, it also analyzes how much is left of the drifter ideals in modern-day backpacking. Different researchers (Cohen 2003; Elsrud 2001; Richards and Wilson 2004) state that as a result of the global trends during the last few decades many of the current characteristics of backpackers differ from those of the drifters of the 1960s and 1970s and the practice of backpacking cannot be seen as drifting anymore, but it is the ideology, motives and intentions that have persisted (Sørensen 2003:848).

The ethnographic study by Anderskov (2002:6) in Central America confirms that there is a backpacker ethos, something like a 'real backpacker' who is somewhere out there. He provides a guideline of how to be and behave and how not. She further states that this ideology resembles that of the drifters. Cohen (1972:168) specifies this ideology, by explaining that drifters travel rough because their budget is very low, they want to meet especially locals and immerse themselves in to their culture. Therefore they need to leave the tourist trails and explore authentic places off the beaten path. At the same time Anderskov's informants admit that they "could not live up to that ideal, because their budget was too high, they did not haggle enough, did not interact enough with the locals, did not go off the beaten track enough or travelled for a too limited amount of time" (Anderskov 2002:6). The next paragraph explores in a more practical sense, what the reality of backpacking looks like and which role the anthropological concepts of home-making and *communitas* play in regard to the discrepancy between reality and ideology in contemporary backpacking.

## **Contemporary backpacking ideology and practice**

The previous paragraphs show how the practice of backpacking has changed over the past years, as a result of globalization and mainstreaming. Despite this, the self-reliant drifter who travels without itinerary, timetable or a well-defined purpose continues to be the ideal for modern backpackers (Cohen 2003:97-98; Elsrud 2001:61). This paragraph explores how this travel ideology is practiced nowadays, focusing on the



concepts home and *communitas*, and on enclaves as central places within the backpacker world.

Cohen highlights an important point, stating “while the drifter remains the model for the contemporary backpacker, few backpackers seek to realize it in practice”. Most modern backpackers do not show a great concern for profoundly authentic experiences of sites, events or people on their trip (Cohen 2003:97-98). Only a minority of the travelers gets off the beaten backpacker tracks, or stays with local people. Instead, most of them spend their time in, or on the road between, enclaves with other travelers. Enclaves are backpacker areas, sometimes explained as café zones, where mainly Western travelers come together to gain company, support and information from each other in and around bars and hostels (Wilson and Richards 2008:191-193). Most enclaves are facilitated with Internet access, shops (sometimes selling Western products), a medical care center, a cash machine and the possibility to speak English.

Wilson and Richards (2008:188) describe the backpacker enclave as a social and inter-cultural space in which the gap between ideology and practice in backpacker travel is both created and reconciled. Enclaves are “metaspaces which provide the possibility for backpackers to combine familiarity and difference in appropriate circumstances”. In the literature enclaves are also often referred to as ‘safe havens’ or ‘bubbles’, where travelers can retreat to in order to increase their level of control and counter the culture confusion, or culture shock, that reigns outside, while surrounded by the comforts of home. ‘Home’ can be described as “anyplace”. “It is temporary and it is moveable; it can be built, rebuilt, and carried in memory and by acts of imagination” (Naficy 1999, in Espiritu 2003:10). People, and thus travelers, are able to feel at home in any place, since home can be both an imagined and an actual geography. It is both connected and disconnected from the physical space in which one usually lives (Espiritu 2003:2). Therefore enclaves can be linked to the anthropological concepts of home and home making.

Also, one might look at backpacking as a form of mass tourism within the context of enclaves. Mass tourists mostly stay in an ‘environmental bubble’ provided by the tourist infrastructure, in which the tourist feels as comfortable as at home and contacts between guest and host are minimal and often staged (Riley 1988:315). Enclaves fulfill a function parallel to that of vacationing resorts, in which most mass tourists tend to spend their holidays (Cohen 2003:98). Modern backpacker enclaves, however, focus

more on contact with real locals than most bubbles, as that is what some visitors are looking for while traveling (Wilson and Richards 2008:191-192). Recognizing this, backpacking is indeed going mainstream, providing travelers with these facilities in enclaves. Nevertheless, it should still be seen as a complex and constantly changing phenomenon in which individuals have many choices.

### **Experiencing home through *communitas***

Travel routes and plans are a principal topic of conversation in backpacker enclaves (Murphy 2001, in Cohen 2003:98). As a result of this, shared 'mental maps' of backpacker destinations rise among backpackers, which are updated according to the changing popularity of countries and enclaves (Teas 1988, in Cohen 2003:98). Talking about destinations, as well as following the same paths, guidebooks or websites, backpackers often end up in the same places. Because of this, backpackers meet loads of fellow travelers, with whom they share some kind of community feeling. Murphy (2001, in Cohen 2003:98) describes backpacker enclaves as "places of fleeting, spontaneous, but friendly and pleasant – and frequently intimate – encounters between individuals belonging to a shared, but loosely defined sub-culture".

More authors write about backpackers as a group of individuals having a good time together and sharing ideals, a common identity or a culture. Franklin (2003:47-48) states that tourism in general produces *communitas*: "a unique social bond between strangers who happen to have in common the fact that they are in some way traveling or 'on holiday' together". Among contemporary backpackers this is visible as a loose and friendly bond of friendship and cooperation on the road and in hostels, which contrasts with the relatively closed manner of interaction in normal everyday life (Franklin 2003:49). This community of strangers is based on the feeling that backpackers share a set of particular values, symbols and ideals (Cohen 1985, in Richards and Wilson 2004:78-79), also referred to as the five pillars of the backpacker ideology in the previous paragraph (Welk 2004, in Richards and Wilson 2004:48).

Enclaves clearly give a sense of home to backpackers, because of the facilities they provide and the communal atmosphere. The increasingly essential means for contacting home and friends are mostly provided through Internet cafés and Wi-Fi-spots in bars and hostels, even in the most remote and exotic places. The use of Internet, in particular e-mail, Facebook and Skype, to stay in regular contact with friends and family at home, as well as with people met during the trip, is important to most contemporary

backpackers (Sørensen 2003:860-861). This is a direct result of technological changes and globalization.

Concluding, as this theoretical overview shows, the practices of backpacking have been changing over the years. Influenced by increased mobility and possibilities for communication, a growing travel service industry has developed, offering facilities and opportunities for all kinds of trips. The historical practices of drifting of the 1960's and 1970's develop into an ever more mainstream activity for young Western people who are taking a break from their normal life at exotic destinations. However, while the practice of backpacking changes, because of the availability of facilities, the ideals related to drifting are still prevalent according to the literature. Contemporary backpackers hold on to an image of the ideal, 'real' backpacker, which is, however, not realized in practice. The enclave, which creates a home away from home for backpackers, provides a perfect surrounding to meet other modern budget travelers and experience *communitas*, while protected from the culture shock and rough times that await them when going off the beaten path. These available facilities and the mainstreaming of backpacking will influence the ideals and provoke an adaptation to the contemporary practice of backpacking.

## **Backpacking in Guatemala: the setting for this study**

Although some countries in Central America are popular tourist destinations since the 1970's, the tourism industry in Guatemala only develops after the end of the country's civil war in 1996.<sup>12</sup> This peace treaty brings an end to an era of cruel wars in Central America and the countries open for a joint form of tourism. The so-called gringo trail develops and now connects the major touristic attractions throughout Central America via an overland route. This route assembles a modern successor of the hippie trail from Europe to Asia from the 1960s and 1970s. While research on backpackers in Oceania and South-East Asia is very common, the gringo trail is not yet scientifically well-covered. Therefore this thesis focuses on backpackers in the environment of this trail. However, the whole trail is too big for a small-scale anthropological study, as a result the thesis limits itself to one specific location on the trail. Guatemala combines a bit of all the different countries: year-round spring weather, the biggest ancient and mystical Maya ruins, the Pacific as well as the Atlantic Sea and their beaches, beautiful and diverse nature, colonial cities and a rich culture that consists of at least thirty different ethnicities who speak more than twenty different languages (see map 1 for a map of Guatemala).

In 2000 the service industry constitutes with fifty-seven per cent the largest segment of Guatemala's GDP and employs about thirty-five per cent of the nation's total workforce. While the service sector encompasses several different industries, the most profitable component is tourism.<sup>13</sup> Tourists are often from the United States of America and Canada, due to the geographical closeness, although the number of Europeans and travelers from Oceania visiting Guatemala, who generally tend to stay for a longer period of time, increases. Tourism is an ever-growing phenomenon in Guatemala and the country cannot be imagined without it anymore. In certain regions of Guatemala backpackers dominate the tourist industry, which presents an ideal environment for this research.

Guatemala is easily accessible for backpackers since one can obtain a three-months valid tourist visa for free at all borders. Traveling through Guatemala is also easy and comfortable: one can either use the cheap public transportation, called Chicken busses,

---

<sup>12</sup> [www.nationsencyclopedia.com](http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com). Retrieved on June 05, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> [www.nationsencyclopedia.com](http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com). Retrieved on June 05, 2013.

that go almost everywhere, or a private shuttle for tourists only. Those are cheap compared to Western prices, but offer more comfort and security. At all touristic sights there are hostels and *hospedajes* (guesthouses), which rent beds or rooms from around thirty quetzal upwards for a night.<sup>14</sup> The country is reasonably developed for Western standards, which means that prices are not too high, but comfort and technological development, for example Internet connections at touristic places, are neither too low. Additionally, Guatemala offers a huge variety of activities for tourists, such as outside sports, cultural touristic sights and various places to learn Spanish while living with a local family. All activities can be done in organized and guided tours or alone and cater very well to the niche of backpacking tourism.<sup>15</sup>

## **San Marcos and San Pedro**

As permanent locations to conduct fieldwork, San Marcos la Laguna and San Pedro la Laguna at Lake Atitlán are chosen, because the lake belongs, together with Tikal, to the most popular places along the gringo trail in Guatemala. Lake Atitlán is easier to reach by public transportation than most other tourist attractions in Guatemala and is seen as one of the highlights of every Guatemala trip. The lake is surrounded by three volcanoes and the two villages are situated at the lakeshore (see map 2 for a map of Lake Atitlán and the locations of San Marcos and San Pedro).

Although these villages are only separated by a ten-minute boat ride, they differ significantly from each other and attract different types of backpackers. San Pedro has the reputation of being the party town in Guatemala, expressed by its many bars and (after-)parties (see map 3 for a map of San Pedro). This attracts those backpackers, who want to be entertained. San Marcos, the smaller and more tranquil village, holds a reputation as a hippie heaven, because of its many yoga and meditation classes, centers for massage and reiki and varying workshops, for example on medicinal plants (see map 4 for a map of San Marcos).<sup>16</sup>

However, both villages clearly cater to backpackers, not to mass- or resort-tourism: in the streets wander almost exclusively young independent travelers. Over the years,

---

<sup>14</sup> During the time of fieldwork ten quetzal equaled one euro.

<sup>15</sup> Information obtained by mapping the tourist industry of San Pedro, March 09, 2013 until March, 11, 2013 and San Marcos, March 05, 2013 until March 17, 2013 and through participant observation in San Pedro and San Marcos.

<sup>16</sup> Information obtained through participant observation in the hostels Mr. Mullet's and Del Lago.

the two places have developed as true backpacker enclaves. They have everything a backpacker needs: cheap accommodations, internet cafés, multiple bars and restaurants offering both local and international food and drinks, a bookstore, a volunteer organization, work opportunities, Spanish schools, a medical centre, laundry service, several ways of transportation to other tourist attractions, a tourist information point and tour operators. In both villages the tourist industry in the downtown lies in the hands of foreigners. They speak English and offer the same commodities as in the Western world, which makes the visitor, feel like in a break from traveling through less touristic developed parts of Guatemala. In both villages the atmosphere is very relaxed and friendly and the visitors tend to stay longer than they have planned. They enjoy the beautiful nature, attend different courses, undertake activities or just hang out.<sup>17</sup>

### **The hostels Mr. Mullet's and Del Lago**

In San Pedro and San Marcos are several hostels, where backpackers spend a lot of time during their stay in the villages. Hostels can be seen as crucial points on a backpacking trip. The backpackers sleep there, meet other backpackers, plan activities, and just hang around. To examine backpackers in their natural surroundings, hostels lend themselves very well. In San Marcos, Marleen has lived with the backpackers in the hostel Del Lago, while Katharina has chosen Mr. Mullet's as fieldwork location in San Pedro (see picture 1). Both hostels got their name from their main re-recognition factor. Del Lago is situated at the shore of Lake Atitlán, while the owner of Mr. Mullet's proudly wears a mullet haircut. Both hostels are popular and well-visited.

Del Lago, situated outside town, emits a peaceful and tranquil atmosphere. The spacious common areas invite the guests to relax, go for a swim in the lake and practice yoga (see picture 2). The atmosphere in Mr. Mullet's, which is right beside the spots where private and public transportation arrives and departs, is a bit more hectic. A young dog runs around, in the evenings the hostel bar is always full and during the weekends the owners organize theme parties. Both hostels are owned by foreigners; Mr. Mullet's by a young Dutch couple and Del Lago by an enterprising American, which means the guests can manage everything with speaking English. In Mr. Mullet's one can

---

<sup>17</sup> Information obtained by mapping the tourist industry of San Pedro, March 09, 2013 until March, 11, 2013 and San Marcos, March 05, 2013 until March 17, 2013 and through participant observation in San Pedro and San Marcos.

get a dorm bed from thirty quetzal a night, while Del Lago charges between twenty-five and thirty-five quetzal, depending on the length of stay.<sup>18</sup>

To give an idea of both hostels, two short tours follow. Walking down the double pathway of grass and stones that lead from the entrance gate of Del Lago to the shore of Lake Atitlán, you pass all hostel rooms. They are spread out over five different small and brightly painted houses. The path ends in an open space with seats under a see-through plastic wave-plate roof on wooden pillars on the right. A line of colored Tibetan flags on the top waves in the soft wind blowing from the lake. The side that does not face the open communal space is decorated with colorful cloths. Left of the central stone patio are the reception, the hostel café and the communal kitchen. Further down you find a wooden stage and a structure with hammocks underneath, some tables and seats and a great view over the lake and the volcanoes. Looking through the trees on the left side the camping spaces can be seen, which are right on the water edge. Although everything looks a bit dusty, the colorful paintings, decorations and the hang-out area create a lot of charm and atmosphere.<sup>19</sup>

Mr. Mullet's looks unimpressive from the outside as you only see a two-store high red-painted building with a banana-leaves roof. A sign on the street and one hanging from the gable indicate that this building is a hostel. One of them also gives direct information on the prices for the different beds and the facilities the hostel offers. Facing the street is the Mullet's snack bar, a small restaurant which prepares Dutch snacks. Right beside it, walking up the stairs, you find the reception of the hostel. Next to which one hangout area is situated, where guests can chat with the one working at the reception. From this point you see the whole size of the hostel, which consists of two long hallways divided over two floors at which the dorms and private rooms are located. Both hallways end in the garden, where there are different hangout areas, a fire pit and a bar. All hangout areas have different objectives, some chairs around a low table provide space to communicate with other guests, while hammocks offer space to relax alone and read a book. The hostel is not yet so nicely decorated and looks somehow unfinished. The long hallways first remind many people of a hospital or a prison, but the atmosphere in the hostel's garden does not suffer from that.<sup>20</sup>

---

18 Information obtained through participant observation in Mr. Mullet's and Del Lago.

19 Information obtained through participant observation in Del Lago.

20 Information obtained through participant observation in Mr. Mullet's.

## **Backpacking in Guatemala: the empirical data**

The following two chapters present the data obtained from intensive fieldwork in San Pedro and San Marcos. They retell the interpreted and analyzed stories of the informants and structure them to answer three overarching research questions: Who are the backpackers? What does the reality of contemporary backpacking contain of in this place? And what ideology stands behind it? The first part of both chapters develops a definition of backpackers and backpacking in both locations in order to compare whether those match the definitions for contemporary backpacking as presented in the theoretical embedding. The second part describes the contemporary practice of backpacking in San Pedro, respectively San Marcos, and analyzes to what extent those resemble the reality the literature about backpacking describes. This is framed as a discrepancy with the reality of drifting and as being something entirely new.

The last part sheds light on the ideology that motivates the backpackers in San Pedro and San Marcos and analyzes whether they feel a discrepancy between reality and ideology and how they cope with this. Their ideology will be compared to the ideology of drifting, which many researchers claim to continue being the ideology for contemporary backpackers. The anthropological concepts of home and home making are used to explain why many backpackers tend to stay on the tourist trail and in backpacker enclaves, where they feel at home. The concept of *communitas* is used to discuss and understand why many contemporary backpackers mostly interact with other backpackers. With them they share an identity and particular values, which makes them feel belonging to the same community.



# Backpacking in San Pedro la Laguna

Katharina Negro

## Backpackers in San Pedro

"Why I travel alone? You meet more people that way and it's more spontaneous"<sup>21</sup>

This part answers two essential questions: Who are the backpackers coming to San Pedro? And what is backpacking according to them? Two complete definitions are needed to understand what the reality of backpacking looks like in San Pedro and which ideology stands behind it. Further, thorough descriptions of the people whose stories are told in this thesis and of the surroundings that shape their experiences are necessary to keep the statements comparable to other places in the world where researchers could examine backpackers. As researching backpackers in one surrounding should contribute to drawing conclusions about the whole phenomenon in more general terms.

Subsequently this chapter starts with a description of the external characteristics of the backpackers in San Pedro. Fink Shapiro (2009:14-17) gives a definition of who falls into the category of backpackers. She states backpackers form an extremely heterogeneous group, regarding their motivations and demographics, but are rather homogenous in terms of age and class membership. In the hostel Mr. Mullet's in San Pedro many different-looking people from different parts of the world and in different phases of their life stay for one or more nights.

The motivations to travel are very diverse for those backpackers. For example, Amy (USA) travels to learn Spanish, Celina (Germany, 21) to meet people and Etienne (Germany, 25) to discover nature. Danielle (Australia, 28) started to travel because her partner had broken up with her, Matthias (Germany, 32) to find a place to live outside his home country and Andrew (USA, 35) because he has his annual holidays.<sup>22</sup> Despite the fact that these examples consist of individuals with different nationalities it can be fairly said that all backpackers in San Pedro are of Western origin.<sup>23</sup> Although their mother-tongues differ, the conversation language in the hostel is English, which

---

<sup>21</sup> Open interview with Andrew, March 12, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Informal conversation with Amy, March 07, 2013; open interview with Celina, March 30, 2013; open interview with Etienne, March 29, 2013; informal conversation with Danielle, March 19, 2013; open interview with Matthias, March 18, 2013; open interview with Andrew, March 12, 2013.

<sup>23</sup> During the time of fieldwork only one young man from non-Western origin stays in Mr. Mullet's. However, he currently lives in England.

everybody manages to a sufficient degree. The gender distribution is in general more or less even, although more men are traveling alone.<sup>24</sup> Women tend to visit San Pedro in groups of friends or with their boyfriend. None of the backpackers is married or has children. These observations verify the first part of Fink Shapiro's (2009:14-17) definition by showing that the backpackers in San Pedro are a heterogeneous group concerning their differences in travel motivation, nationality, language and gender.

The second part of her definition claims that backpackers are a rather homogenous group in regard to their age and class background. This is the case in Mr. Mullet's as well, where the backpackers are all relatively young people, in their twenties and thirties.<sup>25</sup> The average age is higher than Fink Shapiro (2009:14-17) suggests, but still backpacking is undertaken almost exclusively by the youth. The backpackers in San Pedro have all finished high school and two third of them also hold a university degree in their home country or are busy obtaining one.<sup>26</sup> That the backpackers display an educational level equal to or above the general level in their countries of origin, indicates that they belong to the middle- or upper class.

Most of them travel during or after finishing their education or during a career break, supporting the argument by Heath (2007:100) that it is nowadays extremely common to take time out before engaging in more settled activities. Only few of the backpackers still have a job in their home country and either are on short holidays or can do their work online.<sup>27</sup> Although their time traveling varies, from three weeks, till one and a half year, their mode of traveling cannot be seen as aimless drifting.<sup>28</sup> In contrary, almost all backpackers in San Pedro plan to go back to their home country.<sup>29</sup> The backpackers also look like normal Western youths while traveling: the men have short hair; they wear tight pants or beach outfits and only sometimes combine those with local accessories. They do not change their look because they do not feel alienation with the West.<sup>30</sup> Concluding, the backpackers in San Pedro fit the scientifically accepted

---

24 This made it easier to contact them and ask them to participate in this study. Therefore the gender distribution is a little uneven.

25 Of the backpackers two thirds are in their twenties, one third in their thirties and one is under the age of 20. Statistics obtained through informal conversations and participant observation.

26 Statistics obtained through various observations and informal conversations in Mr. Mullet's.

27 Data obtained through various observations and informal conversations in Mr. Mullet's and San Pedro.

28 Andrew only spends a three weeks holiday in Guatemala, while Danielle has already been traveling for one and a half years, without knowing when she would stop traveling.

29 Only Darrell (Ireland, 35), Danielle, Louis (USA, 35), Chas (USA, 30) and Rorry (USA) have no concrete plans about going back home.

<sup>30</sup> This argument will further be elaborated in the last part of this chapter.

definitions of backpackers as being Western, middle-class and well-educated people, somewhat older than the drifters and motivated to travel because they are at a juncture in life, not out of a feeling of alienation with their home-countries (Riley 1988:326).

## **Defining backpacking in San Pedro**

Following, a description of what it is that those people do, called backpacking, is developed. In Loker-Murphy and Pearce's (1995:829) widely acknowledged definition, backpackers are travelers who exhibit a preference for budget accommodation, put an emphasis on meeting other people (locals and travelers) and an independently organized and flexible travel schedule. They prefer longer rather than brief holidays and engage in informal and participatory recreation activities. This definition is generally approved by the mode of backpacking in San Pedro, although it can be extended and adapted by six explanations. These resemble the changes the backpacking experience has undergone and is undergoing through its mainstreaming and institutionalization.

In the first place, in line with Loker-Murphy and Pearce (1995), the backpackers in San Pedro show a preference for budget accommodation. Therefore they stay in hostels instead of hotels. However, it reveals that the price is not the only criteria for a good backpacker accommodation. All the hostels in San Pedro are more expensive than guesthouses, but nonetheless more frequently visited by backpackers.<sup>31</sup> They prefer the hostels, because the hostels are designed to meet other travelers.<sup>32</sup> Whereas the guesthouses just provide cheap rooms, but no common areas where the guests can hang out. Darrell claims: "A backpacker is a budget traveler. But also rich people do it. I guess they backpack because it's better than checking in to a hotel, where nobody speaks to you."<sup>33</sup> Thus backpacking is nowadays attached to staying in hostels, which are not necessarily the cheapest places to stay.

It follows from this, that the backpackers in San Pedro indeed love meeting other people. They prefer traveling alone to get to know as many others as possible, as the citation opening this chapter shows.<sup>34</sup> In the hostel, small groups to undertake activities are formed and backpackers find others heading in the same direction and then go

---

31 Data obtained by mapping the tourist industry of San Pedro, March 9, 2013 until March 11, 2013.

32 Informal conversation with Pete, March 06, 2013; open interview with Andrew, March 12, 2013; open interview with Matthias, March 18, 2013; open interview with Celina, March 30, 2013.

33 Open interview, March 07, 2013.

34 Two thirds of the backpackers in Mr. Mullet's during the time of fieldwork travel alone.

traveling together for some time. Even the people, who find it hard to contact total strangers, travel alone, because this is what backpackers do, as Loker-Murphy and Pearce (1995) correctly determine. Amy jokes about this: “I guess that’s why they called it lonely planet”.<sup>35</sup> However, by staying in hostels the backpackers only meet likeminded people, other backpackers. The observations from San Pedro connect with Nieoczym’s (2003:118) idea, that contemporary backpackers do not meet as many locals, as they meet other backpackers.

Approving the idea of backpacking as being an independently organized form of travel, the backpackers in San Pedro do not rely on a travel agency for booking their trips: flights, accommodations and routes are found independently.<sup>36</sup> However, the activities the backpackers undertake in Guatemala are often not independently organized, in contrast to Loker-Murphy and Pearce’s definition. They book tours and guides to hike volcanoes and take shuttle-buses, instead of public transportation, to reach their next destination. Comfort and security are the main reasons for this.<sup>37</sup> Here it is obvious how the growing institutionalization has changed the way of backpacking since the late 1980s, which becomes also widely acknowledged by the scientific community (Nieoczym 2003:123).

The backpackers general travel schedule while being on the road is very flexible, meaning they decide spontaneously what to do the next day and when to move on, as illustrated with the quote at the beginning of this chapter. Tamiko (Germany, 23) explains:

“I planned to go from Tulum to Mexico City, but then I heard about the *cayes* (small islands) in Belize. So I decided to go there. Actually, when I reached there, I heard that the boat to the islands costs fifty US Dollars and since I only had a few days to spend there, I found it too expensive. So I took another bus, without knowing where it would go, because I don’t speak Spanish. The next day, I woke up at the border with Guatemala. And that’s how I got here.”<sup>38</sup>

However, unlike the definition suggests most backpackers in San Pedro are not flexible in regard to their return date and already booked a flight back home. Except for four

---

35 Informal conversation, March 07, 2013.

36 Information obtained through participant observation in Mr. Mullet’s, San Pedro and on the gringo trail; informal conversation with Celina, Etienne, Eliane and other guests, April 03, 2013.

37 Information obtained through participant observation in Mr. Mullet’s, in San Pedro and on the gringo trail.

38 Informal conversation with Tamiko, March 12, 2013.

individuals, the rest of the backpackers intend to return to their home country to finish their education and (re-)join the national workforce (Riley 1988:326).<sup>39</sup> This means they cannot be seen as aimless drifters, they can better be described as 'nomads from affluence', as Sørensen (2003:852) proposes, leaving the Western hemisphere only for a fixed time.

All backpackers in Mr. Mullet's prefer to travel for a long time, but in reality some only are on short holidays. Americans and Canadians often express being jealous of the Europeans who on average travel much longer.<sup>40</sup> This has two reasons. First, it would not be worth it for Europeans to travel that far for only a short time. Second, global changes including among others the increased acceptance of middle class travel, in the form of gap years and more flexible job contracts increase their time traveling (Hannam and Diekmann 2010:43). Thus backpacking ideally means traveling for a long time, as the definition indicates.

It is difficult to generalize on the activities backpackers like to do. Some are very active and in Guatemala they can hire kayaks, climb volcanoes, explore caves and so on. Others enjoy exploring cities, learning something like Spanish or local weaving techniques, while again others like to go crazy on the many parties San Pedro's bars offer.<sup>41</sup> Matthias sees himself more as a tourist, because he likes to relax during his trip.<sup>42</sup> But this do actually all backpackers from time to time. Most backpackers practice a mix of all of these activities during their trips.

Thus a definition of backpacking referring to the way of backpacking in San Pedro would be: Backpackers stay in hostels, because these foster social contact between the guests and are relatively cheap. They travel alone because their primary goal is to meet other travelers. They organize their travel schedule independently, but not all the activities they undertake in the country of destination. Backpackers are travelers who are flexible in regard to the daily activities, but not to the general conditions of their trip, especially the time traveling is often predetermined. They prefer longer rather than brief holidays, but backpacking trips can also be short and during the trip they engage in many different activities and also enjoy doing nothing.

---

39 Information obtained through informal conversations and observations in Mr. Mullet's and San Pedro.

40 Participant observation during a ride in a shuttle bus, April 08, 2013.

41 Participant observation in Mr. Mullet's, in San Pedro and on the gringo trail.

42 Open interview with Matthias, March 18, 2013.

This paragraph demonstrates that the backpackers in San Pedro are young, well-educated people from Western origin, who travel because they are at a juncture in life. There is no debate around this definition in the scientific community (Anderskov 2002; Fink Shapiro 2009; Heath 2007; Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995; Riley 1988; Sørensen 2003; O'Reilly 2006). For the rest, their motivations and demographics diverge, as the literature on backpacking correctly determines. The most complete definition of backpacking, as given by Loker-Murphy and Pearce (1995:829) is basically applicable to the backpackers in San Pedro although it is almost twenty years old. The facilities that developed in the last years around the backpackers have shaped their practice. Nowadays hostels, tour agencies and other backpackers are found almost everywhere and the backpackers make use of this infrastructure. The explanations and adaptations that are added to the definition by Loker-Murphy and Pearce illustrate these changes. The next paragraph will further elaborate on the practice of backpacking in San Pedro.

## **The practice of backpacking in San Pedro**

“Follow the crowds. Go with the flow. When I want to go to another place, I would first go to the tour agencies and ask for the prices of the shuttles. Then I would talk to other backpackers who have been there”<sup>43</sup>

This part of the thesis describes the way of backpacking in San Pedro. The question is whether contemporary backpackers still travel like the literature suggests the drifters of the 1960s and 1970s did (Cohen 1972:168). This is all about traveling with a very limited budget, rejecting the material comforts and luxury one knows from home, exploring authentic places off the beaten path, taking everything one needs in a backpack, and immersing oneself into the local culture. These characteristics will be compared to the reality of backpacking in San Pedro in the above mentioned order. The data presented in this part supports Cohen's (2003:97-98) claim that few backpackers seek to realize the ideology of drifting in practice, which has to do with the changes the backpacking experience has undergone through mainstreaming and institutionalization. The concept of home is useful to explain these changes partially.

---

43 Open interview with Etienne, March 29, 2013.

### **Long-term budget tourism**

To start with, the backpackers in San Pedro do not have an extremely low budget, as the drifters are said to have. It is true, that modern backpackers travel with a budget and try to minimize their daily expenses, in order to travel as long as possible. In this regard they are similar to the drifters, or long-term budget travelers (Riley 1988:316). However, in concrete numbers: Etienne has eight hundred euro to spend for one month, while Darrell even has around twelve-hundred euro.<sup>44</sup> Some examples from the all-day routine in San Pedro depict that a budget like this is quite high when traveling in a country like Guatemala. Many backpackers can afford to eat out most meals, instead of using the hostel kitchen.<sup>45</sup> Eating out in Guatemala of course is cheaper than in Europe, but one meal still costs between three and seven euro. Another example is that the hostel bar is almost always full, although downstairs in the countless shops guests can buy the same drinks for around one third of the price and still be allowed to drink them in the hostel.<sup>46</sup>

These findings support Nieoczym's (2003:127) claim that backpackers are losing the stereotype of cheap and economically insignificant travelers. Except for some individuals, most backpackers in San Pedro have saved enough money for the whole trip in advance and do not need to work while being on the road.<sup>47</sup> This demonstrates that traveling for them means a temporal break from the normal life as a working individual, a leisure activity, not a lifestyle like for the drifters, and they can therefore be seen as tourists (Richards and Wilson 2004:27; Franklin 2003:49; Nash 1981:462). Thus the practice of backpacking in San Pedro is rather one of 'long-term budget tourism'.

### **Feeling at home in enclaves**

Following, the backpackers in San Pedro have not only the means, but also the will to use the facilities the backpacking industry offers them. The guests who come to Mr. Mullet's are not especially interested in having a rough time at that moment. On the contrary, they have chosen the hostel because of its relative comfort, which includes hot showers with pressure, unlike the electrical showers that are typical for Guatemala, quality mattresses and Wi-Fi throughout the whole hostel (see picture 1: advertisement on the

---

<sup>44</sup> Open interview with Darrell, March 07, 2013; open interview with Etienne, March 29, 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Information obtained by participant observation in Mr. Mullet's and in San Pedro.

<sup>46</sup> Information obtained by participant observation in Mr. Mullet's and in San Pedro.

<sup>47</sup> The only backpackers who work are the ones that work in Mr. Mullet's at the reception or the bar, being Tamiko, Fabian, Chas, Louis and Darrell who dj's in different bars in San Pedro.

flyer of the hostel).<sup>48</sup> Unlike the classic drifters (Cohen 1972:168), the backpackers in San Pedro do not venture away from the accustomed ways of life in their home country as far as possible and reject the material comforts they know, but rather appreciate that they can enjoy the same comforts as well while traveling.<sup>49</sup>

The hostel forms part of the enclave San Pedro, which is likewise very much adapted to cater to the needs contemporary backpackers have. The cafés, restaurants and bars offer a huge choice of (vegetarian) foods and drinks from all over the world, as well as free Wi-Fi. The town also has numerous cheap accommodations, internet cafés, shops and a market selling Western as well as local products. It has a medical care center and some pharmacies, two cash machines and all these can be used by speaking English. The majority of the people visiting San Pedro is a backpacker.<sup>50</sup> Concerning these characteristics San Pedro can be called a true backpacker enclave in the sense Wilson and Richards describe them (2008:191-193). Thus, staying in San Pedro is not rough at all and the reality of backpacking differs in this regard from that of drifting. The town actually offers all the comforts the backpackers know from home, which makes them feel at home immediately (Naficy 1999, in Espiritu 2003:10).

The drifters are seen as explorers who go to authentic places off the beaten path. As already suggested, San Pedro is made for backpackers and therefore feels artificial. It is never described by any of the backpackers as an authentic Guatemalan town, sometimes not even as a Guatemalan town at all.<sup>51</sup> What makes the backpackers come to San Pedro anyway, if it is not for an authentic Guatemalan experience? The motivations vary. For example, because it is generally seen as the cheapest place in Guatemala to attend Spanish classes, or because other travelers have recommended it as the best place to party, but also because they think it must be a good place to relax and recover from "weeks of partying in Playa del Carmen".<sup>52</sup> So what the backpackers do all day long in San Pedro is above all meeting other backpackers, chatting and doing activities together. Like enjoying the beautiful scenery of the place, sunbathing and swimming, doing nothing and relaxing in the hostel. They also spend a lot of time in the bars and

---

48 Informal conversation with Matthias and Darrell, March 11, 2013.

49 Open interview with Andrew, March 12, 2013.

<sup>50</sup> Information obtained through mapping San Pedro, March 09 until March 11, 2013 and participant observation in San Pedro.

51 Informal conversation with Celina, March 28, 2013. She literally says: "I don't think San Pedro has much to do with Guatemala anymore".

52 Open interview with Darrell, March 07, 2013; open interview with Matthias, March 18, 2013; open interview with Dave, March 11, 2013; open interview with Andrew, March 12, 2013.



restaurants, for example during pizza and Indian curry nights, but also for the crazy happy hours that start at four pm in one of the big hostels and the legendary parties at many other places. Alcohol and other drugs are widely available in San Pedro. They also take guided tours to the volcano or go paragliding or horseback-riding. Concluding, they feel like on holiday where they can do and leave everything they want.<sup>53</sup>

San Pedro reminds of the 'super hostels' where Fink Shapiro has conducted fieldwork. In super hostels and backpacker enclaves backpackers can take a break from having had a rough trip elsewhere, because everything is provided for them (Fink Shapiro 2009:80). San Pedro is their 'safe haven', a 'bubble' to which backpackers can retreat from navigating in an unknown country and culture. They feel like at home in enclaves even though it is not their actual home, because they get everything from home, they can keep contact with home through the Internet and the other Western backpackers remind them of home (Espiritu 2003:2). The quote at the beginning of this part shows how the places backpackers go to are determined by the recommendations others give and whether the backpacker industry offers the needed facilities, not by their degree of authenticity.

In fact it is good that San Pedro is not the most remote place, without any facilities, since most contemporary backpackers do not take everything they need to survive in the wilderness in their backpack. Only Dave (Australia, 19) says when talking about him and Luca (Italy) climbing the highest volcano in Guatemala: "We probably go without guide and just pay the entrance fee. We will take our machetes and camping gear".<sup>54</sup> Most backpackers want and need to hire guides to climb volcanoes or to explore the caves in Semuc Champey.<sup>55</sup>

*One day Danielle forgot to book a guide to hike the Indian's nose (a mountain close to San Pedro), but Ingrid appeases that it is an easy hike one can do without guide. Danielle gets almost in rage "I'm definitely not doing that. I don't want to get beaten up by 'banditos', who want my money. Because that's what they do here".<sup>56</sup>*

Concluding the contemporary backpackers are indeed no drifters anymore, who bring all they need to survive in the backwoods in their backpack and who do not shy away

---

<sup>53</sup> Information obtained through participant observation in Mr. Mullet's and in San Pedro.

<sup>54</sup> Informal conversation, March 14, 2013.

<sup>55</sup> Information obtained through participant information and informal conversations, while traveling with backpackers on the gringo trail in Guatemala.

<sup>56</sup> Information obtained by participant observation in Mr. Mullet's, March 19, 2013.

from unknown dangers. They prefer feeling at home above an authentic and rough experience. This gets facilitated by the backpacker industry which increasingly provides all these possibilities and which clearly shapes contemporary backpacking.

### **Immersing oneself into a new culture**

The last point sheds light on in how far the backpackers in San Pedro immerse themselves in the local culture. Since most Guatemalans do not speak English, any interaction is very much predetermined by whether the backpacker speaks sufficient Spanish or not. Most backpackers in San Pedro do not speak enough Spanish for more than small talk, which makes it impossible for them to dive into the local culture and understand it.<sup>57</sup> Not speaking the local language influences their way of traveling for a great deal, since it is hard to use local transportation without being able to communicate, it is difficult to buy local products without being able to negotiate and after all “it gets extremely boring to leave the gringo trail, without being able to talk to anybody”.<sup>58</sup> Never a backpacker mentions having built up a friendship with a Guatemalan. Only a minority of the backpackers gets off the beaten backpacker trail, or stays with local people, the majority stays in hostels on the trail for most of the time (Cohen 2003:98). They only have contact with the locals working in the tourist industry. Concluding, contemporary backpackers in San Pedro do not immerse themselves in to the local culture as the drifters are said to have done.

In contrary, as becomes clear by now, the backpackers in San Pedro spend most of their time in hostels and enclaves, where they meet more backpackers than locals. Therefore, it can be concluded that they rather immerse themselves in the backpacker subculture, where they feel at home immediately. Additionally, they do not cut through the bonds with their old cultures, which makes it needless to become accepted and feel at home in the host culture. Many backpackers rather go the simple way and only try to become accepted by the relatively well-known backpacker subculture. Those backpackers are no aimless drifter or adherent of a counter-culture (Cohen 1973:94), but instead one of the many Western youths, who are nowadays traveling around the globe in a new fun and easy way (Riley 1988:326), as described in this paragraph. They do not have rough trips, because everything is provided for them. They do not go to authentic places, because there are many more exciting places made especially for them

---

<sup>57</sup> Information obtained by participant observation and informal conversations in Mr. Mullets and San Pedro.

<sup>58</sup> Informal conversation with Rorry, March 19, 2013.

and they do not immerse themselves in the local culture, because that is impossible once they stay on the trail and in hostels owned by foreigners.

In fact, the backpackers in San Pedro very explicitly distinguish themselves and delimit their identities from those “smelly hippies” they think would visit San Marcos, who have more in common with the earlier drifters.<sup>59</sup> Different researchers argue that it is proven that the contemporary practice of backpacking differs from that of drifting, because of the mainstreaming and institutionalization of the backpacking experience, but it is the ideology that has persisted (Anderskov 2002:6; Cohen 2003:97-98; Elsrud 2001:61; Sørensen 2003:848). The next paragraph will reveal how much of the drifter ideology is still prevalent in contemporary backpacking in San Pedro.

### **The ideology of backpacking in San Pedro**

“What I think so many backpackers like about San Pedro, is the fact that they can meet people from all over the world there, not only Guatemalans”<sup>60</sup>

This last section analyzes in how far the ideology of drifting still reveals as true for the backpackers in San Pedro. First, it is demonstrated that an ideology behind their backpacking does exist. Then, this ideology is analyzed and compared to that of the drifters. It reveals that the ideology of contemporary backpacking in San Pedro is not the same anymore as for the drifters. Through globalization, mainstreaming and commodification their experience has changed so much, that they adapted the ideology of drifting to the new context. Throughout the text it is shown which role the idea of *communitas* plays in this ideology and can be used to explain why backpackers feel so at home in enclaves like San Pedro, where there are many backpackers to relate to.

First of all, most backpackers in San Pedro would not call themselves backpackers, although they display all or some of the characteristics of the before mentioned definitions and take part in the above described practice of backpacking.<sup>61</sup> Thoughts like this are exemplary: “I never thought about myself as a backpacker. I define myself new so many times. Sometimes I’m a tourist, sometimes a tramp”.<sup>62</sup> When they are asked to explain what a backpacker is, answers differ widely, everybody has his or her own

---

59 Informal conversation with Darrell and Matthias, March 15, 2013; informal conversation with Ingrid, Doran and Eliane, March 21, 2013; informal conversation with Tim, March 27, 2013.

60 Informal conversation with Etienne, April 10, 2013.

61 Information obtained by participant observation in Mr. Mullet’s and San Pedro.

62 Informal conversation with Dave, March 05, 2013.

definition. They all focus on different aspects like traveling under a budget, traveling for a long, but unknown time without a defined purpose and not planning much. Going from place to place, to scratch them from one's list and therefore always being in a hurry also characterizes backpackers.<sup>63</sup> It becomes clear that there exists an ideology behind backpacking, a 'real' backpacker who is somewhere out there and provides a guideline of how to be and behave, matching the findings of Anderskov (2002:6).

The ideals named above correspond to those of the drifter (Cohen 1972:168) as well as to those discovered by Welk (2004, in Richards and Wilson 2004:48) in certain points. However, with this the backpackers in San Pedro only talk about the general framework of a backpacker, not about the content of traveling as a 'real' backpacker: the all-day activities the backpacker should engage in, the mindset with which he should encounter locals as well as other travelers or the mode of traveling he should use. For the drifters these were termed in the previous paragraph as roughing it, exploring authentic places and immersing oneself into the local culture. In San Pedro these ideals are practically non-existent. The backpackers do not talk or think about them.<sup>64</sup> Their ideology consists of different values that better match the reality of their possibilities.

### **Having an exciting trip**

What they do talk about a lot are the dangers and adventures they experience while traveling (often they speak not only about their own experiences, but also about those they heard from others).<sup>65</sup> In the stories the backpackers in San Pedro tell each other, it becomes very clear that the ideal for contemporary backpackers is having an exciting trip. They expose themselves to risks they might not at home, like hiking a volcano, hitchhiking, spotting dangerous animals, walking through sketchy neighborhoods or getting stuck somewhere with no money left on their credit card. Unfamiliar things like tropical sicknesses, not hygienically prepared street food, parties with strong drugs, and getting robbed also form very common conversation topics.<sup>66</sup> Sørensen (1999, in

---

<sup>63</sup> Informal conversation with Dave and Luca, March 06, 2013; open interview with Darrell, March 11, 2013; open interview with Andrew, March 12, 2013; open interview with Matthias, March 18, 2013; open interview with Celina, March 30, 2013.

<sup>64</sup> Information obtained by participant observation in Mr. Mullet's and San Pedro.

<sup>65</sup> Information obtained by participant observation in Mr. Mullet's and San Pedro; informal conversation with Rorry March 16, 2013; informal conversation with Danielle and Ingrid March 19, 2013; informal conversation with Tanwen, Michael and Steven, March 24, 2013; informal conversation with Tim March 27 2013.

<sup>66</sup> Information obtained by participant observation in Mr. Mullet's and San Pedro; informal conversation with Dave, March 12, 2013; informal conversation with Ingrid March 19, 2013; informal conversation with Tanwen, Michael and Steven, March 24, 2013.

Anderskov 2002:9) analyzes those kinds of stories and concludes that they are not there to retell the truth, they are either unlikely to have happened or exaggerated. They are there to reproduce the values of backpacking subculture and therefore must be seen as an ideal.

Elsrud (2001: 598) describes how the creation of risk and adventure appears to be facilitated nowadays by the institutionalization of backpacker tourism, especially by the tour companies. They represent themselves as alternatives to mass tourism, and advertise their tours in terms as soft tourism, or adventure tourism, and the places and people on their tours as 'non-touristic' and 'authentic' (Cohen 2003:100). In San Pedro there are about twenty tour agencies, all offering exciting hikes, paragliding and canopy tours (see picture 3: for a typical advertisement board in front of a tour agency in San Pedro). They thus create the impression of offering real adventure and therewith play in to this new ideal and deepen it. As outlined in the previous part of this chapter most backpackers rely heavily on the offers by tour companies, because these appeal to their quest for excitement.<sup>67</sup>

### **Having a relaxing and fun trip**

Furthermore, the observations from San Pedro are in line with Cohen's (2003:98) and Fink Shapiro's (2009:16) findings which show that backpacking has increasingly become tied to fun and leisure. Most of the backpackers in Mr. Mullet's are traveling during a break between jobs or education. They think if they do not travel now, they never will have this chance again.<sup>68</sup> They know they will go back to their home country and participate in a settled lifestyle. However, at this moment in their life they feel truly freed from all obligations, responsibilities, restrictions of their society and parental control. This is especially visible among the many Israeli backpackers, who normally backpack after having finished their obligatory three-year military service.<sup>69</sup> So another ideal is to ultimately enjoy life, have fun, relax and „just do what you want”.<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Information obtained by participant observation in Mr. Mullet's, San Pedro and while traveling with backpackers on the gringo trail in Guatemala.

<sup>68</sup> Open interview with Dave, March 14, 2013; informal conversation with Tanwen, Michael and Steven, March 24, 2013; open interview with Etienne, March 29, 2013.

<sup>69</sup> Information obtained by participant observation in Mr. Mullet's and the hostel „Zoola“, which is owned by an Israeli and attracts almost exclusively Israeli backpackers.

<sup>70</sup> Open interview with Darrell, March 07, 2013; open interview with Dave, March 15, 2013; open interview with Matthias, March 18, 2013; open interview with Etienne, March 29, 2013; open interview with Celina, March 30, 2013.

The backpacking industry which becomes increasingly similar to the mass tourist industry plays in to these wishes. Cohen (2003:102) indicates:

“The freedom most contemporary backpackers desire is that of unrestrained permissiveness found in the enclaves, which enables them to pursue similar hedonistic enjoyment, experimentation and self-fulfillment under relatively simple and affordable circumstances“.

In San Pedro the backpackers find this unrestricted freedom for example in the many happy hours the bars offer, the all-day breakfast many restaurants offer and the after-hour parties some places organize illegally, as explained in the previous part of this chapter (see picture 4 for a typical advertisement in front of a bar in San Pedro). In the enclaves they can get anything they need to feel comfortable and be able to ultimately enjoy without worrying about anything.

### **Feeling at home through *communitas***

Off the beaten track at more authentic places, the backpacker finds himself very alone. There are only the locals, but no one to relate to. Furthermore, there are rarely any of the usual things to occupy one with such as visiting ruins or other natural attractions, using the Internet, hanging out at cafes with other backpackers or go shopping. Anderskov (2002:24) states: “basically there is nothing to do and you are all alone - unless, of course, you immerse yourself into the local culture”. Actually “there exist more exiting places” the backpackers in San Pedro think, in San Pedro they have got all of the above mentioned facilities.<sup>71</sup> This is in sharp contrasts with the drifters who out of a feeling of alienation with their home country look for more authentic places to live.

The quest for authenticity is according to MacCannell (1973, in Cohen 2003:101), closely related to the alienation from ones own society. This means it can be argued, if the modern backpackers do not feel alienated from their home country and the Western world in general, their striving for authenticity will diminish. The backpackers in San Pedro do not feel alienated, in contrary they value their home country more through traveling. “What I learned from traveling? I’m actually for the first time proud of my home country” or “When coming back from a trip, I know how good my life at home is“

---

71 Informal conversation with Michael, Steven and Tanwen, March 24, 2013; informal conversation with Chas and Louis, March 21, 2013.

are typical statements.<sup>72</sup> As the quotation opening this chapter suggests, the backpackers in San Pedro do not represent this quest for authentic places and people, they prefer to meet other backpackers from the Western world in enclaves where they feel at home. Therefore it was not much a topic to leave the trail in San Pedro. Rather, the backpackers change a lot of recommendations about equally cool places to relax and have fun.<sup>73</sup>

Driven by these recommendations most backpackers do very similar things and find themselves in the same places. Supporting what other researchers (Anderskov 2002:21) found out, hanging out with and meeting other travelers is by far the largest time consumer among backpackers.<sup>74</sup>

*“I don’t like lonely beaches, I want to meet people,” Matthias summarizes. The others around the table in Mr. Mullet’s garden heavily agree with him.*<sup>75</sup>

Instead of immersing themselves into the local culture, the ideal of most backpackers in San Pedro is to immerse themselves into the backpacking subculture, where they feel at home and belonging to a community (Murphy 2001, in Cohen 2003:98). They share *communitas* based on the fact they are all traveling in the same way and are guided by the same ideals (Franklin 2003:47-48; Cohen 1985, in Richards and Wilson 2004:78-79). Because the practice of backpacking and the corresponding ideals in San Pedro differ from those in San Marcos, there exist no *communitas* between the backpackers of those two villages and they do not interact much.

Concluding, for the backpackers in San Pedro, the ideals are to have an exciting trip, to have fun and enjoy a temporal break from the normal life, and to immerse themselves into the backpacking subculture and meet as many different backpackers as possible. Their ideals resemble their practice and concluding they do not feel a tension between ideals and practice. They are moving away from the ideals of drifting, because these do not fit their reality at all. The only bond that still exists between the drifters and the backpackers in San Pedro is the general style of traveling: long-term traveling, traveling under a budget, not planning much and visiting different places. These findings support

---

<sup>72</sup> Informal conversation with Tamiko, March 12, 2013; informal conversation with Dave, March 14, 2013; informal conversation with Tanwen, Michael and Steven, March 24, 2013; open interview with Etienne, March 29, 2013.

<sup>73</sup> Information obtained by participant observation in Mr. Mullet’s and San Pedro.

<sup>74</sup> Information obtained by participant observation in Mr. Mullet’s, San Pedro and while traveling with the backpackers on the gringo trail in Guatemala.

<sup>75</sup> Participant observation in Mr. Mullet’s, March 27, 2013.

that there exist many varieties in the contemporary practice and ideology of backpacking. The nature as well as the ideology of backpacking are changing among some backpackers, while others stick with the ideology and practice of drifting, as will be elaborated in the chapter about backpacking in San Marcos. The relative ease with which people can travel long-term is likely to continue in the future, which will probably result in further changes in the nature of the backpacker experience. Drifting is still an option, but it is now accompanied and maybe even overshadowed by more institutionalized forms of backpacking (O'Reilly 2006:1006).



# Backpacking in San Marcos la Laguna

Marleen Oostenrijk

Every traveler has his own story. The backpackers in San Marcos are not part of a specific group; they are all free individuals following their own path. They cross San Marcos on their travels through Guatemala either premeditatedly, coincidentally or spontaneously. They meet many other travelers on their way. Often temporal groups are formed between people who stay in the same place for a while or who are following the same route, but never should they be seen as a delineated population. Therefore, designing a general definition for backpackers in San Marcos is not an easy task. In this chapter, insights and emic information obtained during the fieldwork period in San Marcos are compared to the literature presented in the theoretical embedding of this thesis. A general description of backpackers in San Marcos will be given first. The second paragraph presents the variety within the practice of backpacking in this specific place and finally, this chapter analyzes the ideals of contemporary backpackers.

## Backpackers in San Marcos

*There is a short girl with happy big brown eyes in a skinny face. The skin of her nose is peeling of a little bit, she has been in the sun a lot the last weeks. Long blond dreadlocks end halfway down her back. She smiles. She wears big brown harem pants, a striped tank top and velcro sandals. A big bag full of vegetables hangs off her shoulder. She exudes peace and calm.<sup>76</sup>*

The majority of the people visiting San Marcos is a backpacker.<sup>77</sup> Despite of the great variety of individual travelers, some general statements can be made. Similar to what Riley (1988:326) argues, backpackers in San Marcos are mostly Western, middle-class and college educated people. The town is a meeting place for both male and female travelers of more than twenty different nationalities, of which only few are from outside Europe and North-America.<sup>78</sup> In San Marcos there are more backpackers from the States

---

<sup>76</sup> Vignette based on field notes, March 07, 2013.

<sup>77</sup> Information based on open interview with Chris, the owner of the internet café, April 04, 2013 and observations.

<sup>78</sup> Information based on backpackers visiting San Marcos during fieldwork period. In San Marcos are slightly more male travelers than female travelers. Four informants were from outside Europe and North-America; from China, Argentina, Mexico and Ecuador.

or Canada than from other countries. Most of them have completed an education after high school. Equal to what the literature suggests (Riley 1988:317-319; Cohen 2003:102), they are generally in their twenties or thirties.

Besides these facts it can be said backpackers in San Marcos prefer an independently organized and flexible schedule, like most contemporary backpackers described in the literature (Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995:829; Welk 2004, in Richards and Wilson 2004:48). The backpackers in hostel Del Lago change their plans all the time or postpone making any at all. For all backpackers in San Marcos also applies that it is very common not to have a return ticket or a set time to go home. Cheap flights back to one's home country or to the next destination are often searched for online during the trip.<sup>79</sup> This the opposite of what Sørensen (2003:852) en Riley (1988:318) state about modern backpackers, showing that backpackers in San Marcos enjoy trips that are less a temporal activity than that of most young traveling Westerners. Not having a fixed itinerary is more similar to the travel style of the drifter (Cohen 1972:168).

Another general statement that can be made is that personal features are important in the traveler scene, which is also recognized by Fink Shapiro (2009) and Elsrud (2001), and that reactions on style of dress are very common. At some point during the fieldwork period, more than half of the guests of hostel Del Lago had dreadlocks, like the young traveler described in the vignette above. In general, most male travelers in San Marcos have longer hair or a beard, or both. Many backpackers have tattoos and piercings. Most people usually wear sandals or are barefoot.<sup>80</sup> Elsrud (2001:600) states the clothes one wears are part of the creation of ones own identity.

Analyzing the style of dress of backpackers in San Marcos, it appears that the longer backpackers travel, the less western they look.<sup>81</sup> Just like the hippie travelers, or the drifters, they venture away from the accustomed ways of life, and thus style of dress, of their home country, keeping only the most essential elements of their old customs (Cohen 1972:168). Tight pants for example are very uncommon for both men and women. Their style of dress makes backpackers in San Marcos recognizable as long-term travelers. Fink Shapiro (2009:24), in her thesis on Bolivian party hostels, notes that backpackers who stay in hostels have little interaction with local people, but “display

---

<sup>79</sup> Information based on observations in hostel Del Lago and conversation with backpackers in San Marcos.

<sup>80</sup> Information about style of dress based on observations in hostel Del Lago and the village of San Marcos.

<sup>81</sup> Field notes, March 31, 2013.

their imaginary unity with the locals through consumption of local clothing and goods". Many backpackers in San Marcos wear locally made clothing and accessories from different trips too (e.g. ponchos, *huipiles*, leg warmers, harem pants, feather earrings, macramé jewelry with stones and woolen cloths).<sup>82</sup>

An other similarity backpackers share is the budget they have for their trip. This varies, but is usually low for backpackers in San Marcos, which is in accordance with the literature on contemporary backpackers (Richards and Wilson 2004:48). They mostly search for cheap places to stay, such as a hostel. Several backpackers travel with a tent, they are normally on the lowest budget. Prices in general are important to backpackers, whether they are for accommodation, food or activities.<sup>83</sup> In San Marcos, hostel Del Lago is one of the cheapest places for staying in a dormitory. This is one of the reasons why it is the most popular place to stay in town.

Finally, something else that makes the hostel a popular place to stay is the people who come there, and the possibilities to meet them.<sup>84</sup> Hostel Del Lago has a big common area with a communal kitchen where backpackers gather and hang out with each other. As suggested in the literature (Richards and Wilson 2004; Fink Shapiro 2009; Cohen 2003), meeting others is important to all backpackers in San Marcos. The great majority is particularly very open for getting to know other travelers, as well as other Western people who live in the area they visit. Backpackers in San Marcos often hang out with other travelers they meet in town or in the hostel. The main conversation language is English, however, Spanish is common too.<sup>85</sup> Corresponding to findings of earlier research (Murphy 2001, in Cohen 2003:98) contact with local people is less important and therefore invested in less. One reason for this is that backpackers in San Marcos meet much more other Western people, both travelers and migrants, than locals.

Besides these general similarities between backpackers in San Marcos, several differences that influence the travels are recognized. There are great variations in length of the trip and motivations for traveling. To start with, the time backpackers have for their travel is usually related to obligations at home and their budget. Most backpackers in San Marcos travel in Guatemala or Central America between two months and a year, although the longer trips are more prevalent. Similar to what Welk (2004, in Richards

---

<sup>82</sup> A *huipile* is a traditional Maya square-cut blouse decorated with embroidered designs

<sup>83</sup> Information based on participant observation and conversations with backpackers in San Marcos.

<sup>84</sup> Information based on observations in hostel Del Lago.

<sup>85</sup> Information based on participant observation and conversations with backpackers in San Marcos.

and Wilson 2004:48) proposes, all backpackers in San Marcos travel as long as possible. For several backpackers this means they travel all the time. San Marcos is a popular destination for people who have been traveling since several years.<sup>86</sup> For these backpackers traveling is not an activity that contrasts their daily routine, which excludes them from the general definitions of tourists (Richards and Wilson 2004:27; Franklin 2003:49).

Deepening on the second point of difference, motivation, it becomes clearer that the variety of backpackers in San Marcos does not fit into all definitions given in the theoretical embedding. Riley (1988:326) argues that contemporary backpackers are motivated to travel because they are “at a juncture of life”. This is true for one part of the backpackers in San Marcos. Some travel after they finished an education or lost a job and expect to start something new after this trip.<sup>87</sup> Equal to descriptions of backpackers presented in the first chapter of this thesis, they are taking a Gap Year or ‘time out’ before engaging in more settled activities (Heath 2007:100). Such as Riley argues, they will “re-join the workforce of the society they left” (1988:326) or start a new phase of their lives after their travels.

Yet, for many other backpackers traveling is not something temporal or an intermediate phase; they are not planning on going ‘home’ any time soon.<sup>88</sup> A lot of backpackers in San Marcos do not have any obligations, a job or an education to go back to. They either quit their job before they leave, or make the decision to resign while they are traveling.<sup>89</sup> Most of them sublet or sell their apartment and store their belongings. These long term travelers in San Marcos are clearly not only taking a break. For them, traveling is a way of life. This contrasts Riley’s (1988:326) statement about the contemporary backpacker who goes back to work after the trip and travels because of a specific stage in life, and is more similar to Cohen’s description of the classic drifter (1972:168).

Summarizing, backpackers in San Marcos are not a homogeneous group, but individual travelers who all choose this lake town as one of the destinations on their

---

<sup>86</sup> Information based on observations and conversations with backpackers in San Marcos.

<sup>87</sup> Open interview with Flurina, March 07, 2013 – Flurina will start a new education when she gets back in Switzerland. Open interview with Rick, March 07, 2013 – Rick will move to Costa Rica after this trip. Informal conversation with Anouk, March 20, 2013 – She will start working when she gets back to Belgium.

<sup>88</sup> As explained in the theoretical embedding of this thesis, ‘home’ could be any place. Long-term travelers usually do not have a house (anymore) and can make any place where they stay for a while their home.

<sup>89</sup> Information based on participant observation and conversations with backpackers in San Marcos.

trip. Some of them fit the general definitions of contemporary backpackers as presented in the literature, while others practice a rather alternative way of traveling, more reminiscent to that of the drifter. Designing a broad definition which summarizes the basic similarities between backpackers in San Marcos, they are best described as travelers who organize their trip independently, do not have a fixed itinerary, travel as long as possible, have a low daily budget, like to meet other people and are free, independent and open-minded. This definition corresponds with the contemporary backpacker ideals Welk (2004, in Richards and Wilson 2004:48) describes and also relates to the characteristics of the drifter (Cohen, 1972:168). It is however, very general and it does not deepen the understanding on the reality and various practices of contemporary backpacking yet.

### **The practice of backpacking in San Marcos**

“Right now I have been here for five weeks. At first I was planning to stay five days.

A week, maximum.”<sup>90</sup>

Most backpackers stay in San Marcos at least a couple of days. Many stay longer than they expected. Personal choices within the lives of individuals explain the variety of the practices of backpacking in San Marcos, which is presented and analyzed in this paragraph. The time people spend in San Marcos represents much of the practice of backpacking here and is influenced by three factors, two of which have been introduced in the previous paragraph. First of all, the length of stay is determined by the total amount of time backpackers have for their trip, which directly effects the time they can spend at each destination. This relates closely to the second point: the reason for coming to San Marcos, or the motivation for traveling in general. Finally, for backpackers in San Marcos, atmosphere is an important factor on the length of their stay in a place. As the citation above demonstrates, backpackers are very flexible and change their plans if they want to. “I like it here”, is a good indicator for an extended stay, as this third point will clarify.

#### **Time and flexibility**

To start with, the time backpackers have for their travels influences their practice a lot. It affects the time that can be spent in each place they visit and usually the daily budget

---

<sup>90</sup> Open interview with Asia, April 10, 2013.

as well. Backpackers in San Marcos have different amounts of time to spend in each place, varying from one night to more than three months for every destination. Often travelers have not yet decided how long they will spend in a place or in a hostel when they arrive.<sup>91</sup> Whatever the length of the trip, most backpackers in San Marcos travel under flexible timetables, or have no timetable at all.

“Sometimes I make plans. When I have a specific date, I make a plan so I don’t have to rush. Normally I don’t have a plan. I mostly follow the recommendations of people I meet. But if I have a plan than sometimes plans can change. You meet somebody, then maybe you travel together.”<sup>92</sup>

“I do not have a specific plan. Yeah, I have to go to Panama. But I do not really have a plan. Yes, I do have a plan, but I do not really have a time schedule. I actually have been in Guatemala for too long already.”<sup>93</sup>

Both these quotations illustrate how plans are changed easily. Depending on circumstances, opportunities and feelings, backpackers in San Marcos travel following their own rhythm. Their flexibility, which is comparable to that of a drifter (Cohen 1972:168), is shown by these changes of plans. “We stayed at a hostel there [in Nicaragua] and the people they really liked us. They organized that we could stay at the family house for free. So we did that.”<sup>94</sup>

### **Motivation to travel**

The second factor influencing the length of stay and practice of backpacking in San Marcos, is the purpose of the trip. Four general motivations for travelling can be recognized in San Marcos, being the location, recommendations, to learn something or to work. To start with, most backpackers in San Marcos visit the place for its location. “San Marcos has sunny days and cold nights, which is perfect. It is a gringo paradise. There are no mosquitoes and there is always something to do.”<sup>95</sup> The village attracts a big variety of international people because of its peaceful ambiance, green scenery, position on the lake and presumed spiritual energy emission. It has a welcoming, tranquil air, a beautiful view over the Atitlán Lake and three volcanoes. Simply choosing a destination

---

<sup>91</sup> Field notes, based on observations and conversations while working in hostel Del Lago.

<sup>92</sup> Open interview with Flurina, March 07, 2013.

<sup>93</sup> Open interview with Anouk, April 27, 2013. Translated from Dutch. Original text: “*Ik heb geen specifiek plan. Ja, ik moet naar Panama gaan. Maar ik heb niet echt een plan. Ja ik heb wel een plan, maar ik heb niet echt een tijdsindeling. Ik ben nu eigenlijk al te lang in Guatemala.*”

<sup>94</sup> Open interview with Clare, March 20, 2013.

<sup>95</sup> Informal conversation with Joe, April 01, 2013.

for its geographical location is a characteristic of both tourism and contemporary backpacking, since it is about moving outside one's home community (Nash 1981:462). What the practice of backpacking in San Marcos differentiates from the norm, is a consciousness and utilization of the surroundings.<sup>96</sup>

Backpackers in San Marcos are interested in a healthy lifestyle. Being enclosed by impressive nature, most visitors have a daily rhythm corresponding to the movement of the sun. They get up early to enjoy the cooler mornings and the clear view over the lake. Every day many people practice yoga and meditation, normally from six or seven AM onwards (see picture 6).<sup>97</sup> Physical exercise is combined with a proper diet. San Marcos offers a perfect location and the right facilities to bring this lifestyle into practice. The large common area of hostel Del Lago for example provides a good space for practicing all kinds of physical and spiritual workouts, and local fruits and vegetables can be bought in the village or from the indigenous girls who sell in the hostel every morning. Although this concern for a healthy lifestyle and consciousness of the body is one of the outstanding characteristics describing the type of backpacker that visits San Marcos, it is not explicitly noted in the literature on contemporary backpackers. It does, however, match characteristics of the drifter (Cohen 1972:168), since it is about individual freedom and development, independence and making use of local products.

Besides the location, a second motivation for backpackers to travel to a destination is because people recommended it. "They said I should visit the lake. They told me that San Marcos is nice and relaxed, that there are a lot of hippies here, a spiritual community, yoga... It is a nice and quiet place."<sup>98</sup> Most of the backpackers in San Marcos travel by recommendation of friends or other travelers they met during their trip. Word of mouth is considered the most valuable information. "People give you ideas. I always meet people who stayed in a place for a long time. They give me names of hostels or nice places. I have a guidebook too, but I prefer recommendations."<sup>99</sup>

By following the advisements on routes and accommodations from other travelers, popular backpacker trails and destinations develop (Sørensen 2003:858; Murphy 2001, in Cohen 2003:98). Instead of exploring independently and visiting authentic places, like the drifter did (Cohen 1972:168), most backpackers in San Marcos therefore stay on 'a

---

<sup>96</sup> Field notes, March 12, 2013.

<sup>97</sup> Field notes, March 09, 2013.

<sup>98</sup> Open interview with Flurina, March 07, 2013.

<sup>99</sup> Open interview with Flurina, March 07, 2013.

beaten track'. The track that San Marcos is part of, however, is a more alternative and spirituality focused one. A path that is not (yet) heavily commercialized. This is shown by the fact that hostel Del Lago is not described in the Lonely Planet and on hostelworld.com. Furthermore, it does neither work with online bookings and nor take reservations.

A third reason to spend time in San Marcos is to learn.<sup>100</sup> The attractive ambiance and surroundings of the village are reflected in the activities that are offered in town. There are various classes and courses on yoga, meditation, permaculture, the Spanish language, massage and reiki. Different workshops are also organized every week. For example, workshops on the Mayan calendar, tantra or medicinal plants. Several backpackers mention this as their principal motive to choose for San Marcos. "I knew nothing about San Marcos! I just went to the website of 'the dark retreat', e-mailed the guy and said that I wanted to come for seven weeks."<sup>101</sup> The practice of taking courses and classes represents the will for self-development which is expressed by many backpackers in San Marcos, recognized also by Elsrud (2001). Some backpackers book a course in advance. Most, however, arrive in the village and decide what they want to do when they are there. This again shows the contemporary backpackers' independence and flexibility (Richards and Wilson 2004; Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995).

In San Marcos, there are many backpackers who work while they are traveling as well. Work is a fourth motivation to travel to specific locations. These working travelers can be divided in three groups.<sup>102</sup> First, there are the ones who volunteer several hours every day in exchange for experience, knowledge and accommodation. The activities they undertake are normally centered on the idea to learn something, or to share information or skills. Second is the group of *artesanos*, who make jewelry, bags, dream catchers or other handcrafted products.<sup>103</sup> Often the *artenanos* sell their products on the streets or trade it with others for stones, clothes, other crafts or services (see picture 7). The third group earns money by taking a job in a hostel, bar or restaurant.

These backpackers usually travel from place to place and stay somewhere for a while if they can find people or a job to gain experience from, or make some money. The wages are not high in Guatemala, which means most people of either group can extend

---

<sup>100</sup> Field notes, March 15, 2013 and open interview with Anouk, March 27, 2013.

<sup>101</sup> A dark retreat is a meditation course practiced in darkness. Open interview with Ahha, March 18, 2013.

<sup>102</sup> Information based on participant observations and conversations with backpackers in San Marcos.

<sup>103</sup> Artesano means craftsman, or artisan in Spanish



their stay in one place or the length of the trip through working, but they cannot save much to use later on. "I actually have to leave soon, because I am running out of money. I will go to California, find a job at an indoor place, trimming weed."<sup>104</sup> In San Marcos, the working and learning travelers are usually the ones who travel for a longer period. These backpackers again highlight the fact that most visitors of San Marcos are not just on a vacation or taking a break from their daily routine as most tourists and contemporary backpackers seem to do according to the literature (Richards and Wilson 2004:27; Franklin 2003:49; Riley 1988:326). For them, traveling is part of a lifestyle.

### **Atmosphere and community feeling**

The third factor influencing the practice of backpacking is atmosphere. Many backpackers extend their stay in San Marcos because of 'the crazy rhythm', the special ambiance of the village. "Time is always passing by so weird. People that come for a day stay for a week, people that come for a week stay for a month."<sup>105</sup> This atmosphere is created by the people who stay in San Marcos and the activities that are offered. Since the 1980's a growing community of foreigners live in the beautiful lake town.<sup>106</sup> While most of the indigenous population resides in the neighborhoods on the two hills around the valley, the international group of entrepreneurs and creative minds is mostly located in the lower part of the village, right at the Atitlán Lake. It is primarily these foreigners who made San Marcos into the rather alternative tourist destination it has become. Together they offer the great variety of creative, physical and spiritual courses, which attract many travelers as explained above.

"People are important to feel good in a place," is something many people in San Marcos say.<sup>107</sup> The town in general, and more specifically hostel Del Lago, is seen as a community. The foreigners in San Marcos, both travelers and international inhabitants, experience a special bond with each other, which is based on the fact they all stay there for a while and are therefore connected. This is theoretically explained by the concepts of *communitas* (Franklin 2003:47-49) and the community of strangers, which is based on the feeling that backpackers have a shared ideology (Cohen 1985, in Richards and Wilson 2004:78-79), as explained in the theoretical embedding. This community

---

<sup>104</sup> Open interview with Clare, March 20, 2013.

<sup>105</sup> Informal conversation with Oliver, April 02, 2013.

<sup>106</sup> Source: [www.aaculaax.com](http://www.aaculaax.com)

<sup>107</sup> Informal conversation with Gourmet, March 11, 2013.

atmosphere among backpackers has often been recognized in earlier research as well (Sørensen 2003:863; Elsrud 2001:600).

The atmosphere of San Marcos and this shared ideology can be recognized in the practice of backpacking, when looking at the activities people engage in during the day. Hanging out in the hostel and in town, cooking, attending courses and talking to people are the most popular.<sup>108</sup> Equal to the ideas of Welk (2004, in Richards and Wilson 2004:48) and Loker-Murphy and Pearce (1995:829), many backpackers enjoy meeting other travelers and they spend a lot of time hanging out together. The backpackers meet each other in the hostels and in the streets. Whatever nationality or period of stay, they always interact. “*Hola*”, “*buenas*” and “hey, how are you?” can be heard at any time of the day. Often travelers stop, smile and hug, starting friendly conversations. A walk through the touristic downtown with only two major streets can easily take several hours, wandering around, meeting new people and catching up with acquaintances and friends (see picture 8 for an idea San Marcos’ main street).<sup>109</sup>

In San Marcos the most common conversation topics are travel plans, cooking, experiences (activities, robberies during travels, things done today), drugs (experiences, preparation and drug use), recommendations (destinations, how to get there cheap or fast, where to stay, things to do), things people do at home, spirituality and health.<sup>110</sup> These topics also represent a shared area of interests. The base for this shared ideology, however, lies deeper.

## **The ideology of backpacking in San Marcos**

“This trip is about being in someone else’s culture and being in my own culture.”<sup>111</sup>

The first paragraph of this chapter gives a general definition for backpackers in San Marcos. They might be recognized with all characteristics or just some of them. Interesting enough, when asked, most visitors of San Marcos do not see themselves as backpackers. “I don’t know... I never thought about that. Just traveling,” is a typical reaction.<sup>112</sup> Instead of identifying with the backpacker or tourist label, visitors of San Marcos more often describe themselves and each other as ‘seekers’, people who are

---

<sup>108</sup> Field notes based on observations in hostel Del Lago, March 10, 2013.

<sup>109</sup> Field notes based on participant observation in San Marcos.

<sup>110</sup> Field notes based on observations in hostel Del Lago, March 07-23, 2013.

<sup>111</sup> Informal conversation with Ben, March 31, 2013.

<sup>112</sup> Open interview with Flurina, March 07, 2013.

searching for something.<sup>113</sup> Corresponding to what Cohen (1985, in Richards and Wilson 2004:43) suggests, they search for places where they can obtain a more real experience, both culturally and personally.

The visitors of San Marcos, however, do have an idea about who is a backpacker and what this person does. Equal to Anderskovs informants (2002:6), they often refer to the 'real backpacker'. Yet the definition of this type of traveler differs from the description of the backpacker ethos in the literature, which is mostly linked to the ideals of drifting (Cohen 1972:168). In San Marcos the 'real backpackers' are seen as tough people who want to get the most out of every day of their trip.<sup>114</sup> They want to see many different places and engage in outdoor activities during the day; hike volcanoes, go on mountain bike trips or rent kayaks, and hang out in bars afterwards.<sup>115</sup> This type of backpacker is said to be found in San Pedro and at least partially corresponds to the descriptions of the growing group of mainstream contemporary backpackers in the literature (Cohen 2003; Wilson and Richards 2008; Sørensen 2003). Clearly, the backpackers in San Marcos do not strive to live after this image they have of the mainstream contemporary backpacker. Instead, they hold on to ideals corresponding to the practice of the classic drifter (Cohen 1972). This paragraph deepens on their two ideals: to learn about the country and culture they visit independently, and to go through personal growth.

### **Exploring the culture**

First, as the previous paragraph shows, several backpackers in San Marcos explicitly mention exploring the local culture as one of their motivations for their traveling. The ideal is to learn about clothing, eating habits or history, and to experience the interaction with locals.<sup>116</sup> This is in line with an ideal of backpackers described in the theoretical embedding: getting in contact with local people and gaining authentic experiences (Anderskov 2002; Cohen 2003; Wilson and Richards 2008). This could be seen as a problem, thinking of San Marcos as an enclave where backpackers are 'saved' from cultural confusions (Hottola 2005, in Wilson and Richards 2008:191). In the San Marcos enclave, however, locals are not excluded and visitors are not totally protected from the confusing world outside. It is a highly facilitated place for backpackers, but the

---

<sup>113</sup> Informal conversation with Brian and informal conversation with Ben, March 31, 2013.

<sup>114</sup> Open interview with Rick, March 07, 2013 and open interview with Anouk, March 27, 2013.

<sup>115</sup> Informal conversations with Brian, the owner of hostel Del Lago and open interview with Anouk, March 27, 2013.

<sup>116</sup> Open interview with Flurina, March 07, 2013 and open interview with Anouk, March 27, 2013.

Guatemalan culture can still be encountered. This combination makes it a perfect place to realize the backpacker ideals.

As the backpackers in San Marcos suggest, without speaking the language learning about the local culture is not possible. “There are many people who don’t speak Spanish here in Guatemala. You have to learn [it] to get to know better, to know the culture.”<sup>117</sup> In San Marcos many backpackers speak good or fluent Spanish. Although the local Maya language of the town is Kaqchikel, most of the population understands Spanish well. The quest for local understanding and knowledge in general during the trip is brought into practice by opening up to the indigenous population and getting into conversations with them in Spanish, using local transportation, staying with local friends and acquaintances and avoiding touristic places.<sup>118</sup> A few backpackers in San Marcos also learn some Kaqchikel to communicate.<sup>119</sup> This shows that they are really interested in experiencing contact with local people.

Speaking the language, however, does not necessarily mean all backpackers interact a lot with local people while they stay in San Marcos. The majority mostly uses it to have basic conversations, negotiate in shops and ask for information, rather than building on deeper relationships with Guatemalans. Confirming Cohen’s (2003:98) argument, “relations with the locals in enclaves are of secondary importance in comparison to those with other backpackers”. Nevertheless, by being able to understand the local language, the travel experience will be wider and less staged. These backpackers do not need to stay on the beaten path, since they are able to find their way independent of the technological society and the facilities offered by the tourist industry, like the backpackers in the 1970’s (Nieoczym 2003:56). Therefore, they are able to learn more of the ‘real’ Guatemala than backpackers who only follow the paths between touristic highlights.

Staying in one place for a longer period is also seen as a way to experience the culture.<sup>120</sup> As noted before, many backpackers stay in San Marcos for several weeks. They get to know the place, the surroundings and the way of life at this location. While in San Marcos many backpackers stay in a house, a hostel or in a tent, during other moments of their trip they often stay with (local) friends, acquaintances or ‘strangers’

---

<sup>117</sup> Open interview with Flurina, March 07, 2013.

<sup>118</sup> Open interview with Flurina, March 07, 2013 and open interview with Anouk, March 27, 2013.

<sup>119</sup> Field notes, March 13, 2013.

<sup>120</sup> Information based on participant observations and conversations with backpackers in San Marcos.

whom they, for example, met through couch surfing or because they had a room for rent.<sup>121</sup> These experiences are considered highly effective for learning more about the local culture. “If you travel fast and just stay in hostels, it is different, still luxury. Only talking with other tourists.”<sup>122</sup>

### **Developing the self**

Deepening on the second ideal of backpackers in San Marcos, the following citation is about the search on the personal level. It gives a clear explanation of the sort of travelers that San Marcos attracts and the atmosphere they produce.

“San Marcos is more holistic, natural. People care about themselves more. It is more about working on yourself. Breaking down on materialism; more spiritual. In San Marcos are more focused people, searching for something. And it [San Marcos] is not as well known [as San Pedro]. The difference between San Marcos and San Pedro seems to be like lifestyle versus vacation.”<sup>123</sup>

Personal development is important to backpackers in San Marcos. In line with what O’Reilly (2006:998) argues many see traveling as a contribution to their education and the process of becoming a more complete person. This ideal, as the previous paragraph discusses, can be achieved by learning or working while traveling. It is most often brought to practice by engaging in courses, classes and retreats.

Backpackers in San Marcos do not only believe they can invest in their personal growth by actively gathering new information and learning from others. Many also expect to gain new perspective on their own life and the future because they are travelling.<sup>124</sup> This corresponds to what Cohen (2003:96) states about young backpackers who travel because they are motivated to take a time out from the stresses and uncertainties of the late modern life. Although few backpackers in San Marcos literally state they travel because of alienation with the Western civilization, many regularly reflect on their home society and aspects of their culture.

“For me three months [traveling] is a good time, it’s the minimum. After that you can come away from life and get distance from where you live. Then you can see your

---

<sup>121</sup> Information based on participant observations and conversations with backpackers in San Marcos.

<sup>122</sup> Open interview with Flurina, March 07, 2013.

<sup>123</sup> Informal conversation with Ben, March 31, 2013.

<sup>124</sup> Information based on participant observations and conversations with backpackers in San Marcos.

life, or your country, with different eyes. I think you have to see more from a country. Traveling fast, rushing, you don't see much of the culture."<sup>125</sup>

This citation touches on both ideals of the backpackers in San Marcos, as it highlights the will to experience the country and the culture, while at the same time reflecting on the personal insights it brings and the change traveling might initiate.

Concluding, as Sørensen (2003:852) also highlights, 'the backpacker' is more a socially constructed identity than a pre-defined label. As the first paragraph of this chapter shows, many backpackers in San Marcos generally match the social basics and demographics of contemporary backpackers described in the literature. This should, however, not divert attention of the great diversity of individual practices and ideals within contemporary backpacking, as presented in the last two paragraphs.

Backpacking is related to transitions (Cohen 2003:101-102). In San Marcos this is recognized in various forms. Some backpackers travel because they are at a certain stage in life, in between two different phases; between college and university, between university and a job or between two jobs. They perceive their trip as a break or a temporal gap in their otherwise routine life-path (Elsrud 2001:605). For others this transition leads to a rather more extreme reality. Although (Cohen 2003:101) states "few see in travel an alternative to a 'normal' career or seek an 'elective centre' abroad", several backpackers in San Marcos practice their choice to give up their 'normal life' and stay 'on the road' continuously.

Depending on the sort of transition backpackers are enrolled in, their time and motivations for traveling vary greatly and they have different ideals. All these factors together have their influence on the practice of individual backpackers, creating a big variety of realizations of dreams and ideals. When designing a general conclusion, however, the backpackers in San Marcos should be thought of as open, culturally interested people, who are conscious of their surroundings and the people they encounter on their trip. Eager to learn and develop personally, they bring their own ideals to practice while traveling. Reflecting on the variety within the bigger group of backpackers, this means some of these ideals and practices show a discrepancy with those presented in the literature.

---

<sup>125</sup> Open interview with Flurina, March 07, 2013.

## Conclusion

The final part of this thesis marks the end of a journey through both the theoretical background and the actual reality of contemporary backpacking practice and ideals. This chapter reflects on the previous chapters in a similar order of structure. First, it summarizes the debate on contemporary backpacking encountered in the literature. Next, the most important conclusions and findings described in this thesis are explained. Finally, a joint answer to the main research question is formulated and elucidated.

To start with, the first chapter of this thesis elaborates on the central problem encountered in the literature. Traveling is a phenomenon that has existed, developed and changed over centuries. Due to globalization, particularly increased mobility and communication technologies, there are now more possibilities to travel than ever before. For many people, distances become increasingly irrelevant (Eriksen 2007:70) and the facilities for travelers grow (O'Reilly 2006:1007; Nieoczym 2003:58). This enables traveling and stimulates tourism. Over the years, tourism has become a leisure activity an ever-growing part of the western world population engages in (Lofgren 1999:163). By now, several different types of tourism can be detected. Backpacking is one of them.

According to the literature, backpackers travel to enjoy a mixture of exploring other cultures, excitement and relaxation (Richards and Wilson 2004:26). Although they often distance themselves from other tourists (Richards and Wilson 2004:43; Riley 1988:315), several clear similarities can be recognized. For a long time, parallels have been drawn between backpackers and drifters, who are said to be the first non-industrialized tourists (Cohen 1972) and, therefore, the backpackers' historical ancestors (Hannam and Diekmann 2010; O'Reilly 2006; Sørensen 2003). Several studies suggest that traveling like a drifter seems to be the ideal for contemporary backpackers, although in reality this ideal is most often not brought to practice (Cohen 2003:97-98; Elsrud 2001:61). Modern backpacker facilities such as fully equipped hostels in enclaves, good transportation systems and travel agencies offering pre-organized trips, change the practices and ideals of backpackers (Wilson and Richards 2008:188). This contemporary accessibility and abundance of options and services make backpacking become increasingly mainstream.

## **The findings compared**

Comparing the two empirical chapters of this thesis, it immediately stands out: the backpackers traveling to San Pedro and San Marcos are quite different. This paragraph elaborates the main similarities and differences, which is important in order to capture the variety of the phenomenon of contemporary backpacking and to explain the usefulness of comparative research in this area. The first part answers whether the backpackers in San Pedro and San Marcos fit the existing academic definitions of backpackers. The second part explores the different practical implementations of backpacking that could be observed in San Pedro and San Marcos. The third part analyzes the different ideologies that motivate the backpackers and ultimately proves how much is left of the ideology of the drifters of the 1960s and 1970s in these places.

### **Backpackers and backpacking in San Pedro and San Marcos**

San Pedro and San Marcos can both be described as true backpacker enclaves, because they offer everything the modern backpacker might want and are almost exclusively visited by backpackers (Wilson and Richards 2008:191-193). Regarding their demographics, the backpackers visiting San Pedro and San Marcos are similar. Although they have many different nationalities and ethnicities, the great majority is of Western origin, has a middle-class background and is college educated. The gender distribution is even and most of them are in their twenties and thirties, as argued in the literature (Riley 1988; Sørensen 2003). For all backpackers the individual motivations to travel vary, in line with what Fink Shapiro (2009:14-17) found.

The way of traveling, backpacking, is similar in both places and matches the definitions about general characteristics by Loker-Murphy and Pearce (1995:829), Welk (2004, in Richards and Wilson 2004:48) and Cohen (1972:168). The backpackers travel with a low daily budget because they want to travel as long as possible. The budget backpackers have in San Marcos is usually lower than that of the backpackers in San Pedro. This is revealed by the fact that the backpackers in San Marcos often bring their own tent to sleep in, use the hostel kitchen to cook and some work while traveling. In San Pedro all of this is very uncommon. Backpackers in both places organize their trip independently and do not have a fixed itinerary. They decide spontaneously and autonomously what to do and where to go next. They like to engage in various activities, but also enjoy doing nothing. And, above all, they love to meet other people. This is one



of the main reasons why they stay in hostels. There, friendships and small groups to undertake activities with are created rapidly.

At first glance it appears that the backpackers in San Pedro and San Marcos look different. The backpackers in San Pedro dress like most Western youth (albeit on holiday): the men have short hair and people of both genders wear tight pants or beach outfits, sometimes combined with local accessories, like jewelry or woolen sweaters from the markets. The backpackers in San Marcos look like what the Western world would call a hippie: both men and women have long hair, often with dreadlocks; they wear harem pants and walk either barefoot or with sandals. The data reveals: the longer backpackers travel, the less Western they look. This relates to both the style of dress and lifestyle, another big difference between the two villages, explaining a crucial point about the practices of backpacking in San Pedro and San Marcos.

### **The practice of backpacking in San Pedro and San Marcos**

For many backpackers in San Marcos traveling is more a lifestyle than a temporal break from the routine; a lifestyle comparable to drifting, venturing away from the accustomed way of living as far as possible (Cohen 1972:168). These travelers come to San Marcos to work, to learn or to enjoy the spirituality and beautiful nature. They adapt their daily rhythm according to the daylight and practice a healthy lifestyle, in which they also make use of local products. This practice of traveling in San Marcos is different from that of mass tourists, since it is more about independence and freedom. These are characteristics equal to those of the drifters (Cohen 1972:168).

Most backpackers in San Pedro fit more the description of contemporary backpackers who travel during or after finishing their education or during a career break (Heath 2007:100). They feel more like on a holiday, as they plan to go back to their home country and often have a fixed date to go back, or a flight booked. Backpackers in San Pedro come to relax, party or take cheap Spanish classes, without necessarily using their new knowledge. They attend many festivities and happy hours, and drink and smoke a lot. They live the opposite of a healthy lifestyle, because they feel like on holidays. In the mornings a 'hangover' atmosphere hangs above the village, while the backpackers in San Marcos get up early to practice yoga or meditate.

Backpackers in both places travel on recommendations. It is not very common anymore for backpackers to use a guidebook. Instead they talk a lot with fellow backpackers about things to do and places to visit, like the literature indicates (Welk

2004, in Richards and Wilson 2004:48; Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995:829). This leads to the development of trails and popular backpacker destinations. Instead of exploring independently and visiting authentic places, like the drifter (Cohen 2003:97-98), most backpackers stay on 'the beaten track' most of the time. San Pedro and San Marcos are 'safe havens' (Cohen 2003:98), where backpackers can relax after exploring the unknown Guatemala and its culture. Backpackers retreat themselves to enclaves that feel like home and to *communitas* with other travelers. There is a lot of interaction between the backpackers in both places, but surprisingly little interaction between the backpackers of San Pedro and San Marcos. They attach to different ideals and therefore cannot form an overarching community feeling (Cohen 1985, in Richards and Wilson 2004:78-79).

### **The ideology of backpacking in San Pedro and San Marcos**

This leads to the last part of this paragraph: the comparison of the ideologies, in which meeting people from different cultures takes a central position. In both San Pedro and San Marcos an ideology of backpacking exists and the backpackers refer to the 'real backpacker'. However, this real backpacker is described very differently in the two places. Getting in contact with local people and gaining authentic experiences is one of the ideals the drifters (Murphy 2001, in Cohen 2003:98). The backpackers in San Marcos try to live up to their ideal, which equals that of the drifter, by traveling slowly, learning and speaking Spanish, using local transportation and trying to get in contact with Guatemalans.

The backpackers in San Pedro do not mention getting in contact with the local population and getting authentic experiences as their ideals, they stay on the trail because they enjoy the company they are with and want to continue with having good times while experiencing *communitas*. They are interested in the local culture and language, but much more in the backpacking sub culture (Fink Shapiro 2009:63). They like San Pedro, because there they meet people from all over the world, not only from Guatemala. In enclaves and big hostels on the trail they feel at home, because of the provided facilities.

Having a rough trip is another feature of the drifting ideal (Cohen 1972:168). In San Pedro it becomes clear that those backpackers do not look for a rough trip, they come there to relax and enjoy the comforts the enclave offers. Neither do they organize day-trips, like hiking a volcano, on their own; sometimes because they are afraid, most of the

times because they do not bring the required gear. Instead, their ideal is having an exciting and fun trip, through exposing themselves to fun and bit dangerous, but organized tours. They go river tubing, explore dark caves and go bungee-jumping. Most backpackers in San Marcos, on the other hand, are not afraid to leave their comfort zone. They do camp, buy local foods and take local transportation. This comes closer to how the literature describes the reality of drifting.

### **Answering the main research question**

This thesis is written while keeping in mind a central question, which includes all aspects of the study: How do backpackers in San Pedro la Laguna and San Marcos la Laguna in Guatemala experience and describe the practice of backpacking and what does this teach us about the possible tension between the ideals and reality of contemporary backpacking? By conducting fieldwork in San Pedro la Laguna and San Marcos la Laguna in Guatemala, more emic insights and experiences on different perceptions of the phenomenon of contemporary backpacking are obtained. Reflecting on these findings, an answer to this main research question can now be formulated. The main research question is divided into two smaller questions here, to give a more manageable conclusion.

How do backpackers in San Pedro la Laguna and San Marcos la Laguna in Guatemala experience and describe the practice of backpacking? To start with, this thesis shows that the practice of backpacking differs significantly comparing the backpackers in San Pedro and San Marcos. Backpackers do not belong to a delineated group of people, but instead should be seen as a great variety of free, traveling individuals. Most of these travelers do not even call themselves backpacker. Concluding, no general statements should be made about an universal practice of backpacking.

Contemporary backpackers have many options to choose from before and during their trip. This results in the opportunity to combine several different styles of traveling. As this thesis shows, there are popular places to visit and routes to follow in Guatemala. Backpackers can choose to either stay on the trail or to find a new path, but they can also do both. There are as well many activities backpackers might choose from while visiting this country. They can stay in an enclave or camp in the jungle for a while. They might choose for a cheap *hospedaje*, run by local people during some nights, participate in a community as a volunteer for a week and start to learn Spanish. Then there is still the

option to continue speaking English while on the trail, or to get out of the comfort zone and actually use the Spanish they learned. A backpacker could be defined as a traveler, a tourist and a drifter during the same trip.

Linking the findings from the fieldwork to the literature, the contrasting points become even clearer. While the backpackers in San Pedro fit very well in to recent descriptions such as by Fink Shapiro (2009) and Heath (2007), the backpackers in San Marcos resemble more the style of the drifters as Cohen (1972, 1973) explains it. The whole backpacking experience has changed during the last thirty years and while some backpackers still ideally prefer to travel like the drifters, many others venture away from that practice.

What does this teach us about the possible tension between the ideals and reality of contemporary backpacking? By now it is clear that the ideologies of the backpackers in San Pedro and San Marcos differ widely. For most of the backpackers in San Pedro, the ideal is to meet people from all over the world, more than from the host culture. Besides that they prefer to have an exciting, fun and enjoyable trip. This ideal resembles their practice and it can therefore be concluded they do not feel a tension between ideals and practice. In San Marcos the ideals of backpacking resemble more those of the drifters and they also live up to these. They therefore neither feel a discrepancy between the practice and the ideals.

The backpackers in San Pedro and San Marcos do not represent a sample that can directly be used to make a generalization to all contemporary backpackers. However, being able to recognize several different types of backpackers within the bigger group of tourists on these locations, a more complete view on the variety within contemporary backpacking in general is presented. Although there appears to be no discrepancy between the practice and ideals of backpackers in San Pedro and San Marcos, what does exist is a discrepancy between what is presented about backpackers in the literature and the reality of backpacking in these places. Analyzing the data obtained through being there, living with backpackers, it becomes clear that the reality in Guatemala does not at all points match the descriptions of backpacking as found in the literature. As this thesis shows, future definitions of backpackers and backpacking are best designed in consultation with backpackers themselves, to include the great variety of practice and ideals of backpackers, and to give a nuanced image of both these aspects.

## References

Anderskov, Christina

2002 Backpacker Culture: Meaning and Identity Making Process in the Backpacker Culture among Backpackers in Central America. *Research Report*. Department of Ethnography and Social Anthropology, Aarhus University.

Cohen, Erik

1972 Toward a sociology of international tourism. *Social Research* 39(1):164–189.

1973 Nomads from Affluence: Notes on the Phenomenon of drifter-tourism. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 14(1-2):89-103.

1979 Rethinking the sociology of tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research* 6(1):18–35.

2003 Backpacking: Diversity and change. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 1(2):95–110.

Crick, Malcolm

1989 Representations of International Tourism in the Social Sciences: Sun, Sex, Sights, Savings, and Servility. *Annual Review Anthropology* 18:307-344.

Elsrud, Torun

2001 Risk creation in traveling: Backpacker adventure narration. *Annals of tourism research* 28(3):597-617.

Eriksen, Thomas Hylland

2007 *Globalization: the key concepts*. Berg: New York.

Espiritu, Yen Le

2003 *Home Bound: Filipino American lives across cultures, communities and countries*. University of California Press: Berkley, Los Angeles, London.

Fink Shapiro, Lilly

2009 Pleasure and Danger on the Gringo Trail: An Ethnography of Bolivian Party Hostels. *Thesis*. Wesleyan University.

Franklin, Adrian

2003 *Tourism: An introduction*. Sage: London.

Hannam, Kevin and Anja Diekmann (eds.)

2010 *Beyond Backpacker Tourism: Mobilities and Experiences*. Channel View Publications: Clevedon.

Harvey, David

1989 *The condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Social Change*. Blackwell: Oxford.

Heath, Sue

2007 Widening the gap: pre-university gap years and the 'economy of experience', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 28(1):89-103.

Lofgren, P.

1999 *On Holiday: A History of Vacationing*. University of California Press: Berkley, Los Angeles, London.

Loker-Murphy L. and Pearce P.L

1995 Young budget travelers: backpackers in Australia. *Annals of Tourism Research* 22(4):819-843.

MacDonald, G.M.E.

2004 Unpacking Cultural Tourism. *Master Thesis*. Simon Fraser University.

Nash, Dennison

1981 Tourism as an Anthropological Subject. *Current Anthropology* 22(5):461-481.

Nieoczym, Adrian

2003 Globalization, tourism and the commodification of imagination: an ethnography of backpacking. *Thesis*. Simon Fraser University.

O'Reilly, Camille Caprioglio

2006 From Drifter to Gap Year Tourist: Mainstreaming Backpacker Travel. *Annals of Tourism Research* 33(4):998-1017.

Richards, Greg and Julie Wilson (eds.)

2004 *The Global Nomad: Backpacker Travel in Theory and Practice*. Channel View Publications: Clevedon.

Riley, P.

1988 Road culture of international long-term budget travelers. *Annals of Tourism Research* 15:313-328.

Sanabria, Harry

2007 *The Anthropology of Latin America and the Caribbean*. Pearson education: Boston.

Sørensen, Anders

2003 Backpacker ethnography. *Annals of Tourism Research* 30(4):847–867.

Urry, John

2001 Globalising the tourist gaze. *Cityscapes Conference*, November 2001. Department of Sociology, Lancaster University.

Wilson, Julie and Greg Richards

2008 Suspending Reality: An exploration of enclaves and the backpacker experience. *Current Issues on tourism* 11(2):187-202.

## Appendix I: Illustrations

**Picture 1: Mr. Mullet's from the outside**<sup>126</sup>



**Picture 2: Common area of Del Lago**<sup>127</sup>



<sup>126</sup> Picture 1: Taken by Katharina, April 02, 2013.

<sup>127</sup> Picture 2: Taken by Marleen, February 27, 2013.



Picture 3: Flyer of Mr. Mullet's<sup>128</sup>



**Mr. Mullet's**  
Hostel & Restaurant

**New Backpackers hostel**

One minute from the Pana Dock !

- Dorms/Private/Private w/ bathroom
- New quality mattresses
- Real hot shower with pressure
- Big garden with hammocks
- Snack Bar (10% off for guests)
- Wi-Fi
- Chill-out places

Get a mullet haircut and get the 2nd night free !  
Stay 5 nights, get 6th night for free !

Picture 4: A typical advertisement for a bar in San Pedro<sup>129</sup>



<sup>128</sup> Picture 3: From the Facebook page of Mr. Mullet's, June 21, 2013.

<sup>129</sup> Picture 4: Taken by Katharina, March 09, 2013.

**Picture 5: A typical advertisement of a tour company in San Pedro<sup>130</sup>**



**Picture 6: Guests of Del Lago practicing yoga in de morning<sup>131</sup>**



<sup>130</sup> Picture 5: Taken by Katharina, March 10, 2013.

<sup>131</sup> Picture 6: Taken by Marleen's informant Asia.

**Picture 7: Artesanos selling in the main street of San Marcos<sup>132</sup>**



**Picture 8: San Marcos main street<sup>133</sup>**



<sup>132</sup> Picture 7: Taken by Marleen's informant Melody.

<sup>133</sup> Picture 8: Taken by Marleen, March 17, 2013.

## Appendix II: Summary

There are no statistics about the number of backpackers that exists in this globalized world. However, since three decades they are seen in the most remote parts of the world and a whole industry has developed around them. Evermore hostels, cheap restaurants, guidebooks, web pages about traveling and small tour companies arise (Sørensen 2003:848, O'Reilly 2006:1000). Backpacking has a historical predecessor: the drifter of the 1960s and 1970s, the first non-institutionalized tourist. The drifters are the first young budget-travelers carrying everything they need in their backpack. They journey to remote places off the tourist paths, reject the comforts from home and try to immerse themselves in the local culture (Cohen 1972:168). Academics debate on how much of this drifter is still prevalent in contemporary backpacking practice and ideals.

Most scholars agree that the practice of contemporary backpacking does not resemble that of the drifters anymore (Cohen 2003; Elsrud 2001; Hannam and Diekmann 2010; Richards and Wilson 2004; Riley 1988; Sørensen 2003). They argue that modern backpackers are no adherents of a counterculture and that backpacking has gone mainstream. Contemporary backpackers do not travel out of alienation with their home country. Instead they all plan to return. Summarizing, they are no aimless drifters anymore. However, the same scholars think that the practice of drifting is still the ideal for modern backpackers. The 'real' backpacker, should travel like the drifter.

Through conducting anthropological fieldwork in two backpacker hostels in Guatemala and analyzing the findings, this thesis contributes to this debate. Seven weeks of intensive fieldwork are spend, living among many different backpackers in hostel Del Lago in San Marcos la Laguna and in hostel Mr. Mullet's in San Pedro la Laguna, at Lake Atitlán, participating in their daily life, observing and making notes. Living as a backpacker is experienced through participation in cooking, eating out, having drinks, doing yoga, planning activities, attending parties, engaging in events, meeting other backpackers, going on day-trips and traveling together. Many informal conversations and open interviews answer the questions that develop during participant observation and those that cannot be observed. The goal is to describe and understand the reality of backpacking from inside out and to get to know which ideology stands behind it. This thesis presents and analyzes the findings.

The backpackers in San Pedro and San Marcos match the academic definitions of backpackers (Fink Shapiro 2009:14-17; Riley 1988:318; Sørensen 2003:852). They are young and educated people, from the middle-classes of the Western world. However, they all have different nationalities, ethnicities, sexualities, genders and languages. They travel under a flexible time schedule and organize their travels independently. They travel under a budget, engage in various touristic and non-touristic activities. Some travel very long, others only a few weeks. Above all, they are interested in meeting other people. This is in line with the generally accepted definitions of backpacking (Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995:829; Welk 2004, in Richards and Wilson 2004:48; Cohen 1972:168). Thus both the people in San Marcos and the ones in San Pedro can be described as backpackers who engage in backpacking. However, their daily reality differs greatly.

Data obtained in San Marcos and San Pedro clearly demonstrates that backpacking takes many forms in a globalized world full of possibilities. The villages around Lake Atitlán are both backpacker enclaves in the sense Wilson and Richards (2008:191-193) describe them. Enclaves are backpacker areas, where mainly Western travelers come together to gain company, support and information from each other in and around bars and hostels. They cannot be seen as authentic places off the beaten path. The fact that they are almost exclusively visited by backpackers, shows that backpackers are not always attracted to the non-touristic places. In fact, they enjoy meeting other backpackers, being able to communicate in English and the facilities those enclaves offer. There they feel as comfortable as at home (Wilson and Richards 2008:191-193).

With various backpacker enclaves developing near touristic highlights around the world, many backpackers mostly stay on the trail connecting these enclaves. Spending time with other travelers is the most common activity among all backpackers. Travel routes and plans are popular conversation topics and therefore they mostly visit the same places (Murphy 2001; in Cohen 2003:98). Enclaves are comprehended as 'safe havens' to which backpackers can retreat when they are tired from navigating in an unknown country and culture. At this point the contemporary backpackers differ from the drifters, who show a great concern for authentic places off the tourist paths. Besides, most modern backpackers do not necessarily reject the comforts from home (Cohen 1972:168; 2003:97-98).

What do backpackers do in these enclaves? In San Marcos they live healthy, cook their own food, attend yoga and other classes, learn or work. While in San Pedro they attend many parties, drink a lot, eat out often, engage in activities like hiking the volcano or just relax. In this regard the backpackers in San Pedro can be seen as tourists, who take a break from their normal life as working individuals, while for the backpackers in San Marcos traveling is their lifestyle (Fink Shapiro 2007:80; Cohen 2003:98; Heath 2007:100). However, the backpackers in both places do not immerse themselves in the local culture as the drifters are said to have done. In San Pedro this is restrained by the fact that most backpackers do not speak enough Spanish to have much contact with Guatemalans. In San Marcos backpackers generally speak more Spanish, but still they neither engage much in the local culture. In reality, backpackers in both places spend most of their time in the hostel or in the village with other backpackers, which is in line with the literature (Welk 2004, in Richards and Wilson 2004:48; Loker-Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995:829).

Among the backpackers in these places *communitas* develop. A unique social bond of friendship and cooperation, which is experienced because the travelers have something in common (Franklin 2003:47-48). The backpackers enjoy more often the *communitas* they can share with other backpackers than the contacts with locals. Locals do not move, they have their own rhythm and are busy with their life. Therefore the backpackers and the locals do not have much in common. *Communitas* is based on the idea that backpackers share the same set of values, or ideals. It can therefore explain why the backpackers in San Pedro experience *communitas* and the ones in San Marcos as well. Between the backpackers of both villages no *communitas* exist, because they follow different ideologies.

The backpackers in San Marcos are still attached to the ideology of traveling like a drifter, as described by Cohen (1972:168). It is their ideal to travel for a very long time, while they practice backpacking as a lifestyle. They visit relatively unknown places, want to be conscious of their surroundings and live on a day by day basis. Certainly, their practices are influenced by the modern facilities for backpackers, such as hostels with budget rooms, increasing transportation to reach places and widespread internet connections. They sometimes make use of these services, because they have the opportunity. However, if the facilities would not be there, these backpackers would still

be traveling. Their travels are not dependent on the technological society and the facilities offered by the tourist industry (Nieoczym 2003:58).

The backpackers in San Marcos travel slowly, under a small budget and with a flexible itinerary, or no itinerary at all. They organize their activities independently, use local transportation and generally use the Spanish language to communicate. By taking more time to get to know a place, they learn about the environment and see more of the local culture. These backpackers do not rush through a country to collect as many different exciting experiences as possible, while taking a break from their normal daily life (Heath 2007:100; Riley 1988:318). Like the drifters, when traveling for a long time, they keep only the most essential elements of their old customs (Cohen 1972:168).

The backpackers in San Pedro develop a modified ideology. Instead of having a rough trip, they search for excitement (Elsrud 2001:608; Fink Shapiro 2009:31). In their stories, they often tell others which dangers and adventures they encounter while traveling. When being with them, one could see that backpacking has increasingly become tied to fun and leisure (Cohen 2003:98; Fink Shapiro 2009:16). They do not feel alienated by their home country or the West in general, like the drifters. The drifters are said to have searched for authentic places, because of their growing dissatisfaction with their home country (MacCannell 1973, in Cohen 2003:101).

Contemporary backpackers in San Pedro do not search for authentic places. Instead, they want to find beautiful and relaxed places where they can meet similar people from the Western world. Once arrived in these places, enclaves, it becomes hard to immerse oneself into the local culture, because this is usually not there. Backpackers in San Pedro prefer to immerse themselves into the backpacking subculture and to stay in their own culture. Through the means of modern technologies, like email and Skype they can keep contact with home at all time and just do not feel the need to become accepted as a member of another culture (Nieoczym 2003:120). Concluding, in San Pedro the reality but also the ideology of backpacking differs from that of the drifters.

The globalized world offers many different choices for backpackers. They can stay on the trail for a while, live with a local host family later on and study Spanish during a course. They can volunteer for a local project or just party in a backpacker hostel. Because of the many facilities that are nowadays offered for the ever-growing backpacker community, the backpacking activities have become more varied. This thesis strives to contribute to expand the theory about backpacking. It is shown that the

ideology is not a stable entity, it gets modified by the possibilities backpackers have. The ideology of drifting has not extinguished, but is still prevalent among some contemporary backpackers. Again, the ideologies contemporary backpackers have differ and are very diverse. More research is needed to further determine the values contemporary backpackers share and how these develop.