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## ***Working Paper Series***

### **The Changing Geographies of Backpacker Tourism in South-East Asia**

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# THE CHANGING GEOGRAPHIES OF BACKPACKER TOURISM IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA.

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## **ABSTRACT.**

South-East Asia has the oldest backpacker trails. This paper examines the geographies of such flows, drawing upon the largest survey to date of backpackers in Asia using qualitative research in a longitudinal study from the 1970s to the 2000s. Backpacker trails have changed significantly and new routes have emerged including the ‘northern trail’ (Bangkok - Cambodia - Vietnam - Laos). Changing routes are to be expected (backpackers constantly seek new places, pioneering for later mass tourism), however, this paper suggests that fundamentally, these changing trails are due to external variables combining travel innovations (low cost airlines, and other new transport networks); exogenous shock (political instability and terrorism); and growing regional competition, specifically emerging ‘exotic’ destinations such as Vietnam and Cambodia.

**Keywords:** backpackers; small-scale tourism; travel choice; motivation

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This working paper examines one particular form of international tourism – backpackers – who have their own idiosyncratic styles of consumption, travel patterns and peculiarities as a niche but growing segment. In many parts of the world backpacker routes, or ‘trails’ are emerging, including trails in South Africa, Latin

America, and in Australasia. However, the South-East Asia backpacker trail is the oldest trail and is associated with Tony Wheeler's original book 'Southeast Asia on a Shoestring' (1977) and the beginnings of what would become the influential *Lonely Planet* guidebooks used by many backpackers. Also writing in the 1970s, Theroux, in his iconic work 'The Great Railway Bazaar' (1975) described a well-established trail used by young western travellers overland through Asia. Since then, although international youth travel has changed significantly, and has developed from its 'hippy' roots of the 'drifters' (Cohen, 1973) to 'mainstream' backpackers (O'Reilly, 2006), South-East Asia remains one of the most popular areas as a primary backpacker destination. Backpacker trails or networks can be broadly defined as routes or circuits that become established that link the travellers with their destinations, that is, the backpacker urban enclaves, coastal and inland resorts, and the main attractions within a region:

“These elaborately mobile communities are held together by a network of established routes, a circuit of pathways and passages that enable consumption of a range of amenity-rich landscapes, while also insulating the traveller from the perils of solitary travel: the loneliness of the lonely planet.” (Allon, 2004, p.50)

This working paper examines the changing geographies of what Allon (2004) calls these 'pathways' or 'passages'. Since the early 1990s certain clear backpacker routes can now be identified, compared with records of earlier backpacker routes in the region, and then the changes analysed to discover the key drivers for why the routes change. A fundamental question underpins this: in essence are destinations masters of their own destiny on such backpacker trails or, are they ultimately subject to, and broadly driven by, exogenous shock? What role, if any, does transport innovation such as low cost airlines play in the new routes? Finally, does the emergence of new backpackers routes linking emerging destinations such as Laos and Cambodia reinforce the longer-term models of resort evolution (Butler 1980) as the backpackers effectively move on to these newer destinations? If so, what accounts for successful 'mature' destinations on the backpacker trails such as Bangkok's Khao San Road enclave? This working paper discusses these questions which have significant policy implications for government tourism planning and destination management both within South-East Asia and also in other areas that host backpackers.

### *Literature review.*

Although academic researchers understand the term ‘backpacker’ at some levels, there still remains no internationally accepted definition of what a backpacker is. For a working definition here, at the simplest level backpackers may be defined as tourists who travel with backpacks, who live on a budget, and who normally travel for longer periods than conventional holiday periods, but as Maoz (2007) comments such blanket terms are not overly helpful.

Earlier terms that appear in the literature are more relevant to ‘hippy’-type travellers from the late 1960s and 1970s, such as Cohen’s term ‘drifter’ (1973) or what Vogt (1976) called ‘wanderers’. Later work refers to ‘budget travellers’ (Riley, 1988) and, more commonly, ‘backpackers’ (Government of Australia, 1995; Hampton, 1998; Howard, 2007; Loker-Murphy and Pearce, 1995; Murphy, 2000; Pearce, 1990; Reichel et al 2009; Richards and Wilson, 2004; Rogerson, 2007; Scheyvens 2002; Teo and Leong, 2005; Visser, 2004; Wilson, 1997). Riley’s definition remains helpful (1988, p.317) and she defined budget travellers as “people desirous of extending their travels beyond that of a cyclical holiday, and, hence the necessity of living on a budget. . .[T]hey are escaping from the dullness and monotony of their everyday routine, from their jobs, from making decisions about careers, and the desire to delay or postpone work, marriage and other responsibilities.”

Bradt (1995) added to this and argued that there are five key characteristic ‘badges of honour’ of experienced independent travellers who survive on less than US \$15 a day; use local transport; carry all their belongings on their back; bargain for goods and services whilst guarding against rip-offs; and get away from crowds and discover new places. More recently Pearce et. al. (2009) added three further aspects in their own working definition: an age dimension (being under 40 years of age), having flexible itineraries, and demonstrating “a willingness to be involved in social and participatory holiday activities”(p.10).

This present paper is based on a major study commissioned by the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism that analysed backpacker tourism across Malaysia and in four other nearby South-East Asian countries. The commissioning and funding of such a study was itself noteworthy given that, with the exception of South Africa, most tourism departments in Less Developed Countries (LDCs) show little policy interest in backpackers and many in fact, appear to discourage this sub-sector. Of the more

economically developed countries hosting backpackers, the government of Australia has taken a lead since the mid 1990s in both analysing backpackers and then developing policy instruments to expand the sector to increase its contribution to local economies (Government of Australia, 1995; Pearce et. al., 2009). More recently South Africa is also beginning to look at the backpacker segment more seriously in light of the perceived wider economic benefits for poorer host communities than conventional tourism (Rogerson, 2007; Visser, 2004; Visser and Rogerson, 2004).

Similarly, the academic study of backpackers reflected the lack of interest shown by government policy-makers and with early exceptions such as Cohen (1973) had been an under-researched area within the tourism mainstream, however, from the late 1990s the number of studies has multiplied and now researchers are exploring many different aspects of the phenomenon. Research has focussed on economic impacts (Hampton 1998, 2003; Scheyvens 2002; Lloyd 2003); backpackers' behaviour and motivations (Muzaini 2006; O'Reilly, 2006; Reichel et al 2009); enclaves (Allon, 2004; Howard 2005, 2007); relations with the local community (Malam, 2008; Rogerson, 2008) as well as broadening the study areas from its original focus on South-East Asia to include other LDCs such as South Africa (Rogerson, 2006; Visser 2004); India (Hottola 2005; Maoz, 2007) and Mexico (Brenner and Fricke, 2007). There is also a growing literature that studies backpackers in Australasia, and new work on Northern Europe such as Scotland and the wider UK (see for example Cave et al, 2008; Speed and Harrison, 2004). Reflecting on the changing backpacker market, Cochrane (2005) introduced the concept of the 'backpacker plus' and there is the similar idea of the 'flashpacker' (Bleach and Schofield, 2004) that describes wealthier independent travellers. However, despite this growing body of work, little research exists on the backpacker trails and what may account for changes to these routes. This present paper seeks to fill some of those gaps.

Regarding the broader literature on conventional tourist flows, an early theorist was Oppermann (1995) who conceptualised overall flows using visitors' itineraries in Malaysia and then laid these out in diagrammatic form. In particular, he posited the idea of a 'multi-destination areas loop' for long-haul tourists in South-East Asia. In this present paper, the question then arises whether the backpacker trail is a 'multi-destination areas loop'? One difference between Oppermann's focus on conventional tourists and backpackers is that instead of returning to their 'home' at the end of the trip, backpackers return to the air hub entry point (Bangkok, Singapore and, to a far

lesser extent, Kuala Lumpur and from there travel home. Alternatively, if they are on a Round-the-World (RTW) itinerary, they then travel from South-East Asia to the next region. Oppermann (1995, p.61) stated that further research would be useful concerning the relationships between travel itinerary and 'travel-related variables'. This paper builds on this and explores the relationship between travel itineraries, overall flows, and what could be seen as the 'exogenous travel-related variables' for backpackers.

Lew and McKercher (2006) in a review of the main spatial approaches noted that three main groups of variables affect travel patterns: 'time budgets'; personality; and place knowledge. For 'time budgets', backpackers have more time to travel when compared with conventional tourists who tend to take short holidays. Conversely, backpackers tend to have small 'real' (cash) budgets and so tend to travel more slowly using cheaper modes of travel to reach more remote destinations than conventional mass tourists. The second group of variables identified by Lew and McKercher concerned personality (also typologies and motivations). In this 'psychographic' approach, backpackers - it could be argued - tend mostly towards the 'allocentric' end of the scale (Plog, 2001). The third group of variables concern knowledge of place. For backpackers it is interesting to consider the role of intermediaries (such as local specialist backpacker companies, *Lonely Planet*, *Rough Guide* and other niche guidebooks and increasingly websites) as well as knowledge shared by other backpackers within the enclaves (Noy, 2005; Riley, 1988;) or when en-route along the trail when travelling in specialist firms' minibuses. Lew and McKercher (2006) also listed three groups of variables for the destination: trip origins; attractions; transportation. We will return to these later in the paper.

McKercher, Wong and Lau (2006) examined independent travellers in Hong Kong and set out three types: 'Wanderer', 'Tour-taker' and 'Pre-planner'. Backpackers are perhaps nearest to their category of 'Wanderers' that is, at the destination level they commonly arrive without clear plans. However, some backpackers could be seen as 'Pre-planners' especially in light of the 'massification' of backpackers where the differences between backpackers and conventional (mass) youth tourism become blurred (Hampton, 2009). It is reasonable to suggest that there would be an increase in pre-planning by backpackers rather than drifting along with fairly loose itineraries.

Zahra and Ryan (2007) discussed complexity and the application of chaos theory (in the case of New Zealand's regional tourism organisations) and argued that adjustments and effects on tourism systems can be seen "that arise due to structural features such as government, tourism flows, parochialism, exogenous shocks to tourist flows, and continuing problems related to funding" (2007, p.861). This appears to have some parallels with what Turco (1988) called a 'hetrocentric' process of spatial arrangement or territorialisation when significant changes to destinations are a reflection of exogenous factors or 'impulses' (cited by Minca, 2000, p.392). However, many of these factors that Zahra and Ryan (2007) identified can be applied to our study of the changing backpacker routes in South-East Asia. Nevertheless, we do not want to be sidetracked here into the apparent debate over the utility or not of using linear systems type approaches compared with attempting to wholeheartedly apply chaos theory type approaches, so that we tend to agree with Zahra and Ryan that both are useful (but different) ways to analyse change.

Ryan and Gu (2007) reported a study that compared itinerary planning between New Zealand and Chinese students and argued that ethnicity is a key variable and that "spatial analysis retains an importance within tourism research within a context of understanding the social constructs of space and the culture of those spaces and those viewing the places." (2007, p.201). They also attempted to link their spatial work with the wider and (as they argue) more holistic concept of 'mobilities' (Hannam, 2008) and begin to develop a three-dimensional diagram tracking changes in three continua: time; space and 'culture'.

Here we add to this debate by examining the wider context that helps explain the changes to the geographies of evolving backpacker routes in South-East Asia. Here we focus on the exogenous variables, although the effect of the other variables on trip decisions and travel patterns (such as the role of face-to-face informal information sharing by backpackers within enclaves) is also recognised.

#### *Methodology.*

The research reported on in this working paper flows from a major project *The Contribution and Potential of Backpacker Tourism in Malaysia* commissioned and funded by the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism over 2006-7. A research team led by one of the authors comprised four researchers (three Malaysian academics and one British) and two local research assistants which, since the research team comprised



both South-East Asian and European researchers, captured their ‘pre-knowledge’ (Pagdin, 1989) of the main locations. A variety of techniques were used including a questionnaire survey of the backpackers (n=1218); a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with the backpackers, the local service providers and policy-makers (n=91); site mapping, and a brief review of backpacker comments on two well-known internet blogs for independent travel in Asia – TravelBlog ([www.travelblog.org/Asia/Malaysia](http://www.travelblog.org/Asia/Malaysia)) and TravelPod ([www.travelpod.org](http://www.travelpod.org)). The sites contained more than 1500 individual blogs so a rapid random review was used to cross-check interview themes such as personal reflections and micro-level descriptions about particular backpacker destinations.

The main study was a detailed examination of both existing and historic backpacker tourism across Malaysia with intense fieldwork in seven main sites in both peninsula and east Malaysia (the states of Sabah and Sarawak), but also involved comparative field visits to undertake further interviews and questionnaires with backpackers and service providers in backpacker destinations in four other ASEAN countries: Thailand (Bangkok) Vietnam (Ho Chi Minh City), Cambodia (Phnom Penh, Siem Riep) and Indonesia (Bali and Yogyakarta). The project was of around 18 months’ duration with fieldwork in 2006 and 2007. The main fieldwork period fell during the peak season for most of the destinations corresponding with the main holiday season in the generating countries (mostly Northern hemisphere, particularly Europe). The second shorter period of fieldwork corresponded with the Australasian main holiday season although this was happenstance rather than deliberate project design. Fieldwork sites were selected as being major backpacker destinations and included city enclaves (Khao San Road, Bangkok; Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur), inland sites (Kinabalu Park, Sabah; Siem Riep); island destinations (Perhentian islands; Tioman) and coastal resorts (Cherating; Batu Feringghi, Penang).

The research project asked three research questions. First, given the lack of disaggregated data on the backpacker market in South-East Asia, work was required to collect baseline information to develop a comprehensive profile of the backpackers. National tourism statistics, particularly international arrivals data, is only collected at aggregate levels for all types of visitors and as yet no South-East Asian government has commissioned a detailed Visitor Survey of backpackers. Thus one major task was to collect basic data such as nationality, age, occupation, education level, length of stay, overall trip, weekly expenditure on food and accommodation etc. This

questionnaire data would begin to answer some questions about the initial economic impact of backpackers in the host destination. In addition, the project was to collect data on, and then analyse, backpacker travel patterns and flows both within Malaysia and then, for the wider South-East Asian region. Secondly, the project collected information on backpacker satisfaction levels concerning accommodation, other services and facilities for backpackers as part of the trail question. This is reported separately (Ministry of Tourism Malaysia, 2007). Thirdly, the project team was tasked with making recommendations for strategic policy development and the management of backpacker tourism across Malaysia and to use this information to draw lessons for debates about location marketing and theories of how destinations change and possibly even ‘burn out’ over time as the destinations progress up the resort cycle S-shaped curve (Butler 1980). In addition, the project examined what role (or not) was played by the emergence of low cost airlines in the changing trails over time.

This present paper reports on our finding from one key area, that of the backpackers’ travel patterns and the overall spatial flows. The other areas and specifically the policy recommendations were commissioned by the Tourism Ministry to assist future policy, planning and management within Malaysia and are reported elsewhere (Ministry of Tourism Malaysia, 2007).

## **2. THE CHANGING GEOGRAPHIES OF BACKPACKER TOURISM**

### *Backpacker Routes.*

The main backpacker routes in South-East Asia have clearly evolved and there are important changes since the backpackers first appeared in the region in significant numbers. Backpackers, once they have arrived in the destination region, as a function of their normally tight budgets, tend to use surface transport within the region, travelling on local buses, minibuses and trains that offer cheap fares. In insular areas such as Indonesia and the Philippines local ferries are also used. In addition since the early years of the 2000s, they have increasingly used the low cost carriers (LCCs) such as Air Asia for both domestic and intra-regional transport.

Broadly speaking when academics first begin to research backpackers in South-East Asia in the early to mid 1990s, there was a basic route that is described below before moving to the more recent developments. Before then we can surmise the earliest route from the 1970s of the ‘drifters’ (Cohen, 1973) that formed part of the so-called ‘3Ks’ of Asia: Kabul, Kathmandu and Kuta (Bali), see Map 1.

### [Map 1 ‘Original 3Ks trail, 1970s’ around here]

More historical research is needed on mapping this early route. In comparison with present flows its numbers were very small as indicated by proxy figures such as the total number of international staying visitors at Kuta beach in 1973 was only around 15,000 (Picard, 1996). In comparison Yogyakarta, another early backpacker location, in the same year had a total of around 35,000 international staying tourists of whom backpackers would have comprised the major proportion (Hampton, 2002). These remnants of the ‘hippy’ traveller movement (Theroux, 1975) were still occasionally seen in the mid 1980s:

“Like Ubud, Jogja [Yogyakarta] was still soft and accommodating enough to entice the kind of traveling party rarely seen in Southeast Asia: serious-looking Dutch or German couples reading translated editions of George Eliot, ethereal girls in peasant skirts traveling by themselves with flowers in their hair, whole families that had taken to the road.” (Iyer, 1988, p.54)

*The backpacker trail in the 1990s.* In the 1990s the backpacker trail started with their international arrival usually by air into Bangkok as a main international air travel hub (Hampton, 1998). See Map 2. From there, a common land route developed down to the southern Thai coastal and island destinations either on the western Andaman coast (Phuket, Koh Phi Phi and Krabi) or on the eastern coast of the Gulf of Siam (Koh Samui etc). From there, backpackers would travel by train, or increasingly by bus or minibus into Malaysia with Penang often being the next destination. After Penang, the route continued by cheap ferry across the Straits of Malacca to Indonesia, with a circuit by road down through Sumatra usually taking in Lake Toba and Bukittinggi before either travelling across to Singapore, or continuing on through Java via Yogyakarta to Bali and then the eastern Indonesian islands (Lombok with the famous Gili Islands, Komodo for the ‘dragons’ and Flores). Backpacker accounts commonly talk about meeting the same people in accommodation or eating places along the trail in the newly emerging backpacker enclaves or ‘gathering places’ (Vogt, 1976). In this period the notion of a ‘holiday within a holiday’ emerged, that is, it could be observed that certain resorts were becoming increasingly popular among backpackers

as places to relax and stay for a while rather than hurrying through. Such locations included the Gili islands off Lombok in Indonesia, Cherating *kampung* (village) and the Cameron Highlands in peninsula Malaysia, and Koh Samui and other southern Thai islands (Hamzah, 1995). (Our questionnaire survey reinforced this, albeit for the period of the mid 2000s, showing higher average length of stay for the Perhentian islands (9.6 nights) and Tioman (7.2 nights) compared with Penang (4.4) or Kuala Lumpur (4.08) or Malacca 3.5.)

### **[Map 2 ‘Backpacker Trail 1980s - 1990’ around here]**

At this point the backpacker route exited South-East Asia to Australasia. If the backpackers branched off to Singapore, a common route then ran broadly northwards up through peninsula Malaysia with stays in Malacca or perhaps Tioman island, Kuala Lumpur and perhaps Cherating before moving North to Bangkok to exit the region by air. Alternatively, some backpackers began their ‘trail’ in Singapore and their journey would have some reversal of the route above. However, this common backpacker route down through southern Thailand, peninsula Malaysia, Sumatra and onwards has now evolved significantly both in terms of the route travelled and the modes of transport used.

#### *The contemporary backpacker trail since the early 2000s.*

As part of the backpacker questionnaire we included an outline map of South-East Asia and asked respondents to draw their trip on it. These completed maps of routes were then analysed and maps created for each main fieldwork site. As far as the authors of this paper are aware, this simple but effective form of data collection of backpacker routes has not been done before.

*Changes to transport and the low cost airlines.* In terms of transportation, several aspects could be observed. First, although backpackers still tend to choose the most economical forms of getting around - which until now has been mostly ground transport - the innovation of the low cost carriers (LCCs) began to affect their travel choice and patterns. Specifically the emergence of Air Asia as an LCC from around 2000 appears to have had an impact with some backpackers starting to use budget airlines rather than long-distance ground transport within the region. More research is

required on certain destinations such as the Malaysian state of Sabah which had direct LCC air links to Bangkok, as well as other parts of Malaysia, and it saw increasing backpacker arrivals as a result.

The rise of LCCs in Asia was driven by the vast potential domestic and regional travel market in the fast-growing economies combined with the new business models of LCCs developed by airlines such as EasyJet and Ryanair. (Air Asia's strap line painted on every aircraft is 'now everyone can fly'). Once the LCCs began their rapid growth in both flights and routes, some ASEAN governments showed enthusiasm for this sector and built special low cost terminals for the LCCs at existing air hubs (first Malaysia in 2006 next to Kuala Lumpur International Airport, then Singapore with a new LCC terminal at Changi, followed by a dedicated LCC airport in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah). Although it is unlikely that the potential of the backpacker market was considered in the LCC business plans, we would expect to see increasing numbers of backpackers using LCCs in South-East Asia in the short- to medium-term. Pearce et. al. (2009) note a recent and similar process at work in Australia with LCCs starting to affect backpackers' travel itineraries and travel decisions.

Air Asia, for example, uses their Kuala Lumpur hub to offer cheap flights to Bali, Yogyakarta and Bandung. In addition they fly from Johor Bahru to Jakarta which offers a low cost alternative to the scheduled airlines that fly from Singapore to Jakarta. One interviewee in Bali told us that he was "incredibly thankful to Air Asia as we were totally cut off!" (Guest house owner, Ubud).

Further evidence of the growing role of air transport within the region, compared to the backpackers' former reliance on ground transport, can be seen in Borneo. We found evidence of the emergence of a 'Borneo trail' (the loop between Kota Kinabalu and Kuching - by air - providing access to the world-class ecotourism attractions). In addition, Air Asia flights from Kota Kinabalu to Bangkok began to provide connectivity to the dynamic (and growing) Northern Trail. However, this increasing reliance on the LCCs for air travel has also proved somewhat fickle. For example, Air Asia ended their routes from Bangkok to Kota Kinabalu after only 18 months which they claimed was due to a lack of support from the industry. This is not clear, however, as interview respondents from the local Sabah Tourism Board informed us that in the expectation of large tourists flows they had even drawn up plans for a Sabah tourism office in Khao San Road to meet the expected demand. However, the Air Asia route Bangkok- Kota Kinabalu was discontinued in mid 2008.

The second aspect concerns the growth of a parallel infrastructure where initially backpackers would use local public buses or minibuses, but over time local entrepreneurs seeing a business opportunity, would set up private minibus routes specifically for the backpackers. Tourists would be picked up from one enclave and then driven to the next one in the sole company of other backpackers. This has been observed by researchers in Indonesia and Thailand (Riley, 1988; Hampton, 1998; Sorensen, 2003). These transport services are advertised in the backpacker accommodation and other facilities. The minibuses full of backpackers and their luggage would then follow the same routes as the public buses but without the frequent stops or (interestingly) local people as passengers. One of the paper's authors observed this tension in the southern Thailand to Malaysia route in the early 1990s. Specifically heated conversations were noted among backpackers in a café about the relative merits of minibuses versus using local buses with discussion about the experience of using local buses compared with the speed and ease of a direct backpacker minibus non-stop to Penang. For some backpackers the journey itself, its length, the amount of discomfort and the creation of anecdotes that can be told and re-told to other backpackers about the chickens taken to market, sitting on bags of rice rather than on an actual seat etc all becomes part of the 'badge of honour' (Bradt, 1995) in their own narrative, distinguishing them as an experienced 'traveller' rather than just a tourist. Such constructions of self, and the issues of the authenticity (although this is not necessarily a term that the backpackers themselves use) are associated with what appears to be a changing typology of the backpackers and their increasing differentiation (Reichel et al 2009; Ureily et al 2002). One respondent said:

“Five years ago when I started backpacking people watched out for each other, there was more of a community, it was nice. You'd hardly met someone for five minutes and you'd say 'would you mind my bag while I go to the loo?' [bathroom] Now there's less trust among backpackers, they might steal my Lonely Planet [guide book], my iPod, stealing from other travellers - its not the locals. Now everyone comes to Thailand and Singapore, sit in the Raffles, been there.” (British female backpacker, Bangkok)

*Constructions of place, memory and self.* The research found that many backpackers had a particular image of place and had common perceptions of the emerging

destinations such as Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia as being ‘exotic’. This was reinforced by our questionnaire data that showed a longer average length of stay for some countries on the Northern trail such as Vietnam (37.1 nights average length of stay) and Thailand (33.5 nights) compared with Malaysia (27.9 nights). (Cambodia had a lower average of 12.9 nights but still has a limited number of sites and tourism has started from a very low level given the damaged infrastructure and human resource limitations dating from problems associated with the former Khmer Rouge regime, see Brickell, 2008). The common view of the ‘exotic’ new destinations was compared with what many interview respondents described as the somewhat bland image of other countries such as Malaysia in particular. One respondent memorably (but perhaps a little unfairly) told us that “Malaysia is the Belgium of South-East Asia”, in other words, a nice place to visit but not outstanding. Another commented:

“It doesn’t have an image, no image. We’d not heard of it [in Canada]. It’s similar to Indonesia with poor security, terrorism, you know. It was only when we met other backpackers that we even thought of it.” (Canadian female backpacker, Ho Chi Minh City).

This illustrates the interaction between the variables of transport links, country image, and the emerging backpacker destinations on the Northern trail. In this case changing transport networks, specifically the introduction of LCC flights to the new destinations - rather than the long overland journey - has facilitated increased flows of backpackers to Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos. This is further illustrated by the recent packaging of a flight itinerary by Vietnam Air that combines the pull of three iconic UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Indo-China, namely Halong Bay (Vietnam), Angkor Wat (Cambodia) and Luang Prabang (Laos).

#### *Competing internal routes.*

The research found that new tour operators in Malaysia had started selling standard itinerary tour packages to backpackers. Typically the route would be Kota Bahru-Perhentian islands-Taman Negara nature reserve - Cameron Highlands. This route could be reversed or Penang added too. (Similar specialist tour operators were also observed in Bangkok’s Khao San Road enclave offering routes around Thailand). Discussions with respondents revealed the increasing role of one key travel firm, KB

Backpackers, a specialist firm based originally in Kota Bahru city. This illustrates the rise of corporate selection of routes compared with the backpackers in the 1990s themselves choosing, and then following their own routes within the region. In a sense this corporatisation or solidification of the informal routes travelled by the backpackers into formalised, set routes offered by a tour operator (albeit a backpacker-friendly tour operator) demonstrates an important moment in the increasing formalisation of backpacker tourism and its massification (Hampton, 2009). In addition, this raises another issue that possible (potential) destinations may become bypassed if they are not on the routes decided and planned by firms like KB Backpackers. This phenomenon is already happening in the east coast of peninsular Malaysia, where nature guides based in the Gua Musang (Kelantan) area had complained that KB Backpackers and similar operators only use Gua Musang town as a stopover destination while ferrying backpackers from the east to the west coast, despite the existence of adventure and cultural resources within this pristine area that used be popular with backpackers travelling on their own. This has some parallels to the well-documented role of travel intermediaries such as the largest tour operators from northern Europe hugely influencing resort development and thus customer choice in southern Europe (Buhalis, 2000).

This is a significant change from a more customer (or demand)-driven system by the backpackers themselves, to more supplier-driven operations. It could be argued there is also a link to their changing trip durations, that is, backpackers appear to have less time, and shorter trips need more organisation. Nevertheless, backpackers still do not want to travel like mainstream tourists:

“A few companies seem to have a monopoly- the hostel in KL [Kuala Lumpur] herded us onto a tour to Taman Negara [national park] and then to the Perhentians. More competition would be good.” (British female backpacker, Perhentian islands).

Another key finding from analysing the maps was that around 2006 the backpacker trail in South-East Asia appears to have diverged into two main variants, a ‘Northern’ and a ‘Southern’ trail.

**[Map 3 ‘Contemporary SE Asia Trail’ around here]**



As can be seen from Map 3, the Southern route has changed significantly since the 1990s. International backpackers still typically arrive by air into Bangkok and head to the southern Thai islands and may go to Malaysia, however, unlike the 1990s, Penang is now not a major destination. Our research showed that backpackers are now more likely to head to the Perhentian islands, the Cameron Highlands or travel south to Kuala Lumpur. The Northern trail is broadly based upon a loop comprising Bangkok to Cambodia (Siem Riep for Angkor Wat, and Phnom Penh) then on to Vietnam (Ho Chi Minh City or Hanoi) and then returning to Bangkok as the main air travel hub.

### **3. DISCUSSION.**

The research showed that the key routes or backpacker trails appear to have changed significantly over time. To some extent this could be expected given the nature of backpackers who constantly seek new places and often act as pathfinders by opening up new areas for later mass tourism development. In terms of Butler's resort life cycle model (1980) backpackers tend to appear at the 'exploration' stage. This has been observed in both Eastern Indonesia and the southern Thai islands for example (Cohen, 1982; Hampton, 1998). Nevertheless, more recent models of resort development challenge this and argue that stages do not necessarily follow in sequence and that backpackers do not necessarily lead to more industrialised, larger forms of tourism (see Wilson et al, 2008 on the 'OE' (Overseas Experience) from Australasia to Europe; and Brenner and Fricke, 2007 on the 'developer tourists' - former backpackers who become owners and service providers for backpackers). However, it was surprising to discover the extent of the changes revealed to the South-East Asian backpacker trails over a short time period.

It is illustrative to take one example of a destination to examine changes to the backpacker routes. If we consider the case of Penang, it has undergone relative decline since the 1990s and had formerly been the major gateway to the Indonesia segment of the trail. Penang's decline may be partly accounted for by three travel-related exogenous variables that can now be identified. These are first, the ongoing political instability in Indonesia that dampened international demand including the Bali terrorist bombings (and the ongoing instability in southern Thailand); secondly, the 2004 Tsunami that struck North Sumatra; and thirdly, this appeared to combine with the effects of another variable which is at a lower order of significance than the first two, that is the Indonesian government's visa changes of 2004 that discouraged

backpackers by introducing a visa fee for a dramatically shorted tourist visa (reduced from two months duration and free, to limiting visits to only 30 days, and imposing a relatively expensive US \$25 fee with hefty over-staying penalties). In comparison, Malaysia normally allows international visitors to stay for up to three months and there is no visa charge.

These three variables, particularly the first two, appear to have massively lowered demand by backpackers to visit Sumatra from Penang. Thus Penang, through no fault of the destination, has lost its role as a former key node on the 1990s backpacker trail. Interestingly, interviews both with backpackers and service providers showed that a significant number of present backpackers staying in Penang were on the so-called 'visa run' (visa renewals for Thailand) resulting from their grey (unofficial) employment across the border in Thailand, often in the scuba diving business:

“Last two years, this year less business, last year come down, mostly backpackers come from Thailand for visas [go] back to work in Thailand. . . backpackers want cheap, now Indonesia changes visa, now less tourists here, they go to Thailand, Cambodia, Laos.” (Manager of a second-hand bookshop, Penang)

There is also the role played by exogenous shocks, in particular the effect of terrorism in the region (the Bali bombings of 2002) and the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. Other governments' interventions appear to also be of significance, particularly the Indonesian government's sudden imposition of paid visas having an impact on Malaysian visitor numbers and expenditure in nearby Penang.

There are also the changing roles of the backpacker centres themselves. For example Penang has changed from primarily being the gateway to Sumatra in the 1990s to a place benefiting from the 'visa run'. Arguably, for both roles, geographical location, specifically proximity, has played a part. Penang was attractive to backpackers in the 1990s not just for its own merit as a place to see, but also as a stopping point on the way to the several nodes on the trail through in Sumatra. Its proximity just across the Straits of Malacca from Sumatra and the existence of cheap local ferries made it a logical choice of gateway. More recently, its relative proximity to the southern Thai border (and given the size of Georgetown, the island's capital,

the existence of a Thai consulate) allowed backpackers and others on the Thai 'visa run' to stay there temporarily.

Fieldwork also revealed some evidence of re-investment in backpacker infrastructure with some partial re-invention and recapitalisation. Some accommodation in Georgetown was observed as being upgraded mirroring developments in the Bukit Bintang enclave in Kuala Lumpur for the 'backpacker plus' market that has a greater profit margin than the normal backpackers. In addition, in 2008 the city (jointly with Malacca) was listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. This should generate further investment in tourism from both the public and private sectors. However, there is some question whether this might be too late in the lifecycle of Penang or whether this is starting to be evidence of some 'rejuvenation' in the post-stagnation part of a Butler (1980) resort cycle S-shaped curve?

In terms of backpacker expenditure and its economic impact on the host communities, the questionnaire data confirmed the importance of backpacker expenditure. Interestingly the amount spent by backpackers on food and accommodation was strikingly similar across the five countries (US \$15-17 per day). However, backpackers spent more on activities such as trekking and scuba diving in Vietnam and Thailand and paid higher entrance fees for national parks and UNESCO World Heritage Sites (especially Angkor Wat). The study reinforces the notion that backpacker expenditure is significantly uneven over time and the trip, with savings made on budget accommodation, transport and street food and then peaks of expenditure on leisure activities such as PADI dive courses, trekking, rafting, hot air ballooning etc (Hampton, 2009; Tucker, 2008).

For the southern trail, the role of LCCs also appears significant, for example for Indonesia which had been a key component of the classic 1980s and 1990s trail. Specifically it appears that Air Asia gave a lifeline to the Indonesian part of the trail given the ending of Garuda's direct flights to Europe in 2005.

In general, our research found that the nationality of the backpackers appeared to make little difference to their routes travelled or chosen itineraries in the region. However, the one major exception was the Israeli backpacker segment. We found a significant spatial clustering in Thailand and the Northern trail, particularly in Bangkok, but none at all in Malaysia. This is partly due to the Malaysian official restriction upon Israeli passport holders that forbids normal visits without special

permission from the Ministry of Internal Security (Immigration Department of Malaysia, 2009). One Israeli respondent in Bangkok said:

“Thais are OK, they like Israelis. In Phi Phi [island] you can learn to dive in Hebrew, and in Koh Tao and Koh Phangan, many restaurants, Israeli tattoo parlours on Khao San Road. Thailand is changing, its becoming [a place] for older people”

The backpackers' nationality did not seem to affect which route they then followed, which at first sight appears to contradict to the work of Ryan and Gu (2007), however, we did not separate out 'ethnic group' from 'nationality' on the questionnaires. In the main, the backpackers interviewed, or those who completed questionnaires, if European were mainly Caucasian. This was not deliberate since random sampling was employed at the fieldwork sites but reflected the small number of ethnic minorities from European countries that appear to travel as backpackers. Although some Asian backpackers were interviewed who were from the region (mainly Singapore and Hong Kong), ethnicity as a variable affecting travel patterns requires more research.

There is also the broader question that needs investigating about travel propensity and historical linkage to certain former colonies, such as UK citizens travelling to Malaysia/Singapore or Dutch backpackers choosing to visit Indonesia, but it remains unclear how different or similar backpacker trip choice is from other tourists at this level of abstraction.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS.**

This working paper has argued that backpacker routes in South-East Asia have changed and undergone significant modifications over time since the original 1970s 'hippy' trail as noted by Cohen (1973) and Theroux (1975). Although Bangkok remains a major air hub and point of entry to the region for backpackers, other established backpacker centres on the trails such as Penang in Malaysia have undergone relative decline whilst newer destinations such as Siem Riep in Cambodia have emerged. This is to be expected and generally confirms to the dominant model within the literature of resort evolution over time (Butler, 1980). However, this paper argues that we can begin to account for the changing geographies of backpacker flows in the region by considering the effects of exogenous travel-related variables (Oppermann, 1995) specifically travel innovations (low cost carriers (LCCs), and new

networks); exogenous shock (political instability and terrorism, natural disasters such as the 2004 Tsunami, volcanic eruptions etc) and growing regional competition and new entrants.

It can be argued that the current South-East Asian backpacker trail has been shaped by the transport links (connectivity) within the region, and so we concur with Lew and McKercher (2006). However, our research also showed that the transport networks were augmented by the presence of existing highly iconic attractions acting as a pull factor for the backpackers. Bangkok was already well-established from the 1970s (Theroux, 1975; Wheeler, 1977) as a major transport hub with overland connections to Ho Chi Minh City, Phnom Penh and Siem Riep. The emerging northern region has iconic attractions, for example, Angkor Wat or the Mekong Delta that have become 'must see' attractions for the backpackers. Also it became clear from our research that many backpackers had perceptions of the 'exotic' northern route and of exciting new destinations.

In addition as noted earlier, the Southern trail has also undergone further modification with the opening up of minor routes (branches). We found a network of urban enclaves, as well as rural enclaves interspersed with 'holiday within holiday' destinations. The urban enclaves (Bangkok, Georgetown - Penang, Kuala Lumpur) function as gateways. In some cases we found increasing provision of more upmarket, more capital intensive 'backpacker plus' type accommodation. In the rural enclaves, businesses only provided basic facilities but often had high quality attractions or activities to offer such as scuba diving in the Perhentian islands and Koh Tao, or jungle or hill treks inland.

Concerning the relative positions of these three variables in relation to each other, the findings suggest that the three variables are not of equal magnitude. In terms of transport, since the early part of the 2000s new forms of transportation are playing a significant and growing role. Specifically, the rise of LCCs in the region appears increasingly important affecting destination choice, however, backpackers still (at present) mostly travel by land transportation within a region. In other words transport appears to be lower level of significance than perceptions of 'risk' from exogenous shocks such political instability or natural disasters. It seems reasonable that changing forms of transport may act to amplify flows along existing trails and merely make it easier to travel and thus help increase the volume of flows along the routes to the region's northern destinations.

There is also the role of ethnicity and nationality. As noted earlier in our study the majority of respondents were non-Asians and the research showed that Asian backpackers comprised only very small percentage of the questionnaire respondents.

Finally, a growing understanding of the different drivers and specifically, the exogenous travel-related variables affecting changing backpacker routes will prove useful for LDC tourism departments in Asia and elsewhere for planning and management of this growing international segment. Our findings suggest a possible hierarchy that is, the significance of certain variables, so that major exogenous shocks (Tsunami, terrorism) had a major impact on the spatial movements of backpackers along the trails, compared with 'supporting' or lower magnitude variables such as transport innovation like the LCCs. Beyond that, understanding the changing geographies of such flows of tourists helps build the bigger analytical picture of which variables (or interaction of variables) account for flows of people travelling for leisure to particular regions.

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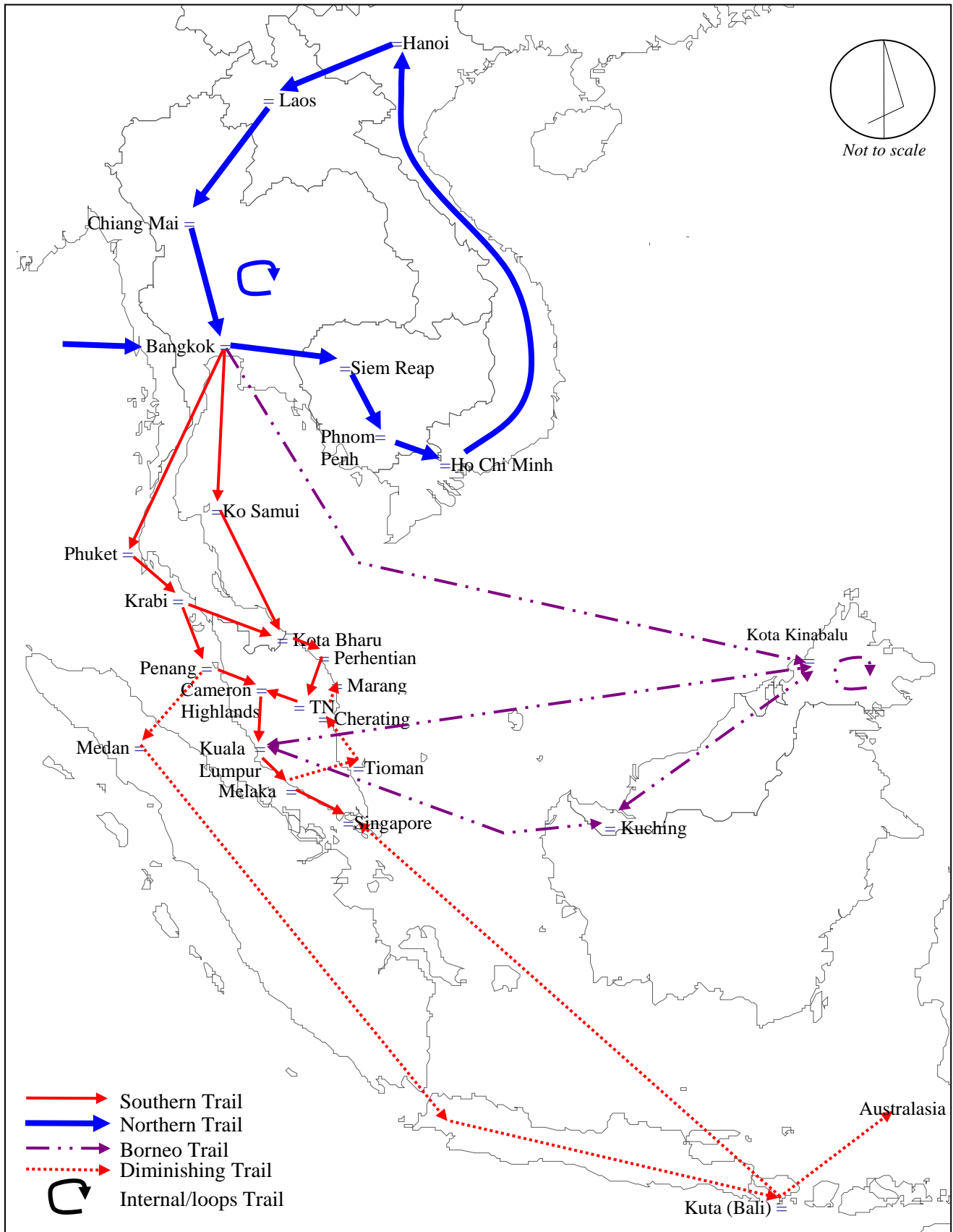
**Map 1. The 1970s trail.**



Map 2. The Backpacker Trail, 1980s-1990s



**Map 3. The Contemporary South-East Asian Trail**



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