

## Gringo Trails: Is tourism destroying the world?

By **Zoe Li**, for CNN  
updated 5:21 PM EST, Fri January 3, 2014

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### The negative effects of global tourism

#### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Documentary explores fallout from mismanaged tourism in developing world
- Filmmaker uses dramatic examples from around world
- Film looks at "dark tourism" travel to sites associated with suffering and danger

(CNN) -- A new documentary suggests tourism is out of control in parts of the world, irreversibly damaging the environment and indigenous cultures.

"Gringo Trails," a film more than a decade in the making by American anthropologist Pegi Vail, looks at the effect of the unplanned or mismanaged growth of the tourism industry in developing countries.

Using dramatic examples from different continents, such as the devastating impact of hedonistic full moon beach parties on Thailand's Koh Pha Ngan island, the film is moving and informative, if sometimes elementary.

The story starts and ends in Bolivia, focusing on the impact of the autobiographical book "Lost in the Jungle" by Israeli traveler Yossi Ghinsberg.

In 1981, Ghinsberg headed into the Bolivian rainforest and soon got lost, but miraculously survived for three weeks despite near-death experiences.

His tale of survival has lured many other adventure-seeking travelers to Bolivia, adding to the pressure on the country's fragile ecosystem.

People who already know the issues won't find much new here, but for the uninitiated it serves as a 78-minute, around-the-world guilt trip revealing the frequent callousness of the tourism industry and how it implicates everyone.

"If I were looking at the oil industry [rather than tourism], people would take note of how powerful it is," says Vail.

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Guns, grenades, human skull fragments and a lipstick pepper spray -- the TSA had a busy year in 2013, as a new report reveals.

"[But] tourism is that type of industry -- it's that powerful."

"Gringo Trails" refers to the well-trodden paths across the globe by "big groups of travelers with power."

And "gringo" no longer just means white faces, says Vail.

In the past few decades, the traveling middle class has expanded to include different faces from many different cultures.

This is the first feature film from Vail, who works full time as the associate director of the [Center for Media, Culture and History](#) at New York University.

[MORE: Vang Vieng: Backpacker heaven or hedonistic hell?](#)

CNN Travel spoke to Vail about where tourism harms and helps and about the evolution of so-called "dark tourism."



Pegi Vail (left) and Melvin Estrella, "Gringo Trails" cinematographer and co-producer respectively, shooting on the Bolivian salt flats.

**CNN: What caught your attention about Yossi Ghinsberg's story in Bolivia?**

**Pegi Vail:** It formed the beginning and end of the film because it showed how travelers' storytelling can facilitate what I call "tourism globalization."

**CNN: What is "tourism globalization"?**

**PV:** I liken it to urban gentrification.

Backpackers are like artists [and others who gentrify neglected areas].

But artists end up staying -- only to be displaced themselves eventually. Backpackers move in and out of the places they visit, but the process is similar.

Intrepid travelers go into a place, they tell stories about it, then more people come.

Guidebooks cover it, novels get written and feature films are made - - "The Beach," for example.

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**CNN: So what's the problem?**

[As] more people come, there might not be the infrastructure to support such growth.

Or the big operators come in and reap the benefit.

**CNN: You've been making this documentary since 1999 -- what surprised you along the way?**

**PV:** It surprised me how little travelers think about their own role and how few local voices we hear [in areas affected by tourism].

Independent travelers, who mostly come from the middle class in industrialized countries, often travel to the poorest parts of the countries they visit in search of their idea of the "most authentic."

They're looking for pre-modern, romanticized images.

Lina, the Italian tourist in my film visiting Timbuktu, talks about "Out of Africa" and "Lawrence of Arabia" in the same line -- even though they're in totally different parts of Africa.

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COURTESY PEGGY VAIL

Tourism hangover: Koh Pha Ngan beach after full moon party.

**CNN: Is there a right or wrong way to travel?**

**PV:** Look, if you're just going to Koh Pha Ngan for the full moon party, to cross it off your bucket list, then that's the wrong reason to travel.

You could have a party at home -- you're just using the place as a backdrop.

And, yes, you might be bringing money into a town when you travel there but the relationship with local people has to be managed -- they need to be at the planning table.

**CNN: What are some tips on traveling responsibly?**

**Pegi Vail:** First, no matter what your budget, it costs nothing to research your destination, to find out more about the environment and the culture.

I would read local writers who've written about their own culture -- or at the very least your guidebook's history section.

Learn about the dos and don'ts.

If someone says, "Don't go naked on the beach," then don't go naked on the beach!

**READ:** [20 biggest travel mistakes](#)

**CNN: What's your own backpacking background?**

**PV:** I've traveled in more than 75 countries, but not always as a backpacker.

I'm a travel addict.

**CNN: What's addictive about it?**

**PV:** The new experiences that expand your understanding of the world and your relationship with different cultures.

I actually feel more at home when I'm away.



JOHN HOOPER/REUTERS IMAGES

Dangerous territory: Should illegal Mexican border crossings be recreated for tourists?

**CNN: Apart from backpacking, what other kinds of tourism are you looking at?**

**PV:** "Dark tourism" [travel to sites associated with suffering and danger] has been happening for years now, but some travelers are taking it to extremes.

However, communities can use dark tourism to retell their own history.

The Mexican town of El Albarito simulates [illegal] border crossings into the United States for tourists, for example.

Or there's the Bolivian mining town of Potosí, which conducts mine tours -- despite the dangerous conditions below ground.

Indigenous miners there get to tell their side of the story, not the colonialist version of events.

**CNN: Where do you want to go next?**

**PV:** [Mongolia](#) -- for the wide-open spaces.

*"Gringo Trails" was released in November 2013 in North America, through Icarus Films, and is now showing on the global festival circuit.*

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Upcoming screenings: *Sebastopol Documentary Festival*, in California, March; and the *Environmental Film Festival*, in Washington, D.C., on March 19.

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• 2 months ago

**jefnvk**

"I've traveled in more than 75 countries but not always as a backpacker. I'm a travel addict.

CNN: What's addictive about it?

PV: The new experiences that expand your understanding of the world and your relations

SO, in other words, do as I say, not as I do, I don't want my vacation destinations ruined. I honestly experience wide open spaces in Montana, there is zero need to go to Mongolia.

I meet a lot of these types while traveling. The "enlightened" ones who have all the answers. Generally, the type of people I can stand the least at hostels are this exact type, usually first-time travelers who can name every little bit of exploitation they see but who themselves have been traveling non-stop in a manner they deride against, yet they are the same guy.

638

11

• Reply • Share >



• 2 months ago

**Hyptiotes** → [jefnvk](#) ago

I completely agree. The only ones worse are mountain climbers. They raise money for some cause--but are really just in it for the climb. Speaking of trashed tourist destinations, garbage and frozen corpses littering the side of the mountain with climbers practicing

This woman's documentary is, of course, a vehicle to support her further travels. due to tourism.

98

1

• Reply • Share >



Well said, I know someone who raised 50k\$ for an Everest climb for charity on the climb. Everyone has an agenda which is why I also stopped giving t

35  
1  
• Reply • Share >



**David Polewka** → Hyptiotes ago • 2 months

It's unfair to allow continual increase in population.  
Unfair to other creatures & unfair to future generations of humans.  
Birth control alone means fewer workers to support a growing number of elderly. Gotta have death control, too. We should  
AT LEAST stop preventing influenza.

17  
8  
• Reply • Share >



**ozbukes16** → David Polewka ago • a month

Do us a favor then and take the cyanide now

27  
1  
• Reply • Share >



**someguysarerude** → David Polewka ago • a month

We haven't had a world war lately. That tends to thin out the crowd

16  
• Reply • Share >



**scott bleyle** → someguysarerude ago • a month

A deadly Pandemic would be a start.

1  
• Reply • Share >



**joseph phillips** → scott bleyle ago • a month

no

• Reply • Share >



**someguysarerude** → scott bleyle ago • a month

Yeah, and zombies, too.

• Reply • Share >



**joseph phillips** → someguysarerude ago • a month

:L maby

• Reply • Share >



**Isolde Gruenbein** → David Polewka ago • a month

Following your line of thought, how about volunteering to be culled c

11  
• Reply • Share >



**CaribbeanMischief** → Isolde Gruenbein ago • a month

I will never be culled because of the gifts I was born with. But David continue unchecked past the earth's carrying capacity is unfair to e

Conservatives will point out the ingenuity of the free market at solving of when the precautionary principle should be employed? I mean, v the carrying capacity, but there are 500 million people too many on family planning before you encounter this type of problem?

5  
1  
• Reply • Share >



**David Polewka** → Isolde Gruenbein ago • a month

You're not following the line...you're changing the subject!

4  
- Reply - Share >

 **Joseph Phillips** → Isolde Gruenbein ago · a month  
??? killed do u mean and yeah if ur sayin that we dont want a war i  
^ · Reply · Share >

 **loudestenemy** → David Polewka ago · a month  
So I'm assuming that you either refuse to have children or are plar  
6 · Reply · Share >

 **David Polewka** → loudestenemy ago · a month  
We'll get our longevity the old-fashioned way:  
we'll earrrrrrrrrrnnnnnnn it! (In 14 years,  
there will be 8 billion people on the planet!)  
3 · Reply · Share >

 **loudestenemy** → David Polewka ago · a month  
You lost me at "unfair to other creatures." Why not just advocate  
places instead of the fatalistic approach you are spamming the boa  
creatures and argue for the death of people and not be full of ship.  
2 · Reply · Share >

 **David Polewka** → loudestenemy ago · a month  
Habitat destruction is the process in which natural habitat  
is rendered functionally unable to support the species present. In th  
process, the organisms that previously used the site are displaced  
destroyed, reducing biodiversity. Habitat destruction by human acti  
resources for industry production and urbanization. Clearing habitat  
destruction. Other important causes of habitat destruction include n  
destruction is currently ranked as the primary cause of species exti  
environmental change that may be caused by habitat fragmentatio  
human activities such as the introduction of invasive species, ecosy  
mentioned below.[,,,]  
10 · Reply · Share >

 **loudestenemy** → David Polewka ago · a month  
So you propose that humans increase their rates of death by refus  
you put on small children and the elderly, who comprise the highest  
and polio. I don't think you and I have anything further to disqus.  
5 · Reply · Share >

 **David Polewka** → loudestenemy ago · a month  
You would rather shift the burden to other creatures and future ge  
6 · Reply · Share >

 **Joseph Phillips** → loudestenemy ago · a month  
u ish an instean  
^ · Reply · Share >

 **Joseph Phillips** → loudestenemy ago · a month  
k thats a good idea  
^ · Reply · Share >

 → David Polewka

we are too many , but you have weird way to cut down population and instead just enjoy time.

2 • Reply • Share >



**David Polewka** → Guest • a month ago

It's the way we did it up until a couple hundred years ago. An aging population puts more burden on the young, and that's no

2 • Reply • Share >



**Joseph Phillips** → David Polewka • a month ago

so u say older people shuld die pointing finger at u bro im 15 i can li

• Reply • Share >



**David Polewka** → Joseph Phillips • a month ago

I'm looking at the Big Picture, and you're just thinking of yourself! Sorry!

• Reply • Share >



**Joseph Phillips** → Guest • a month ago

:D yolo brolo u smart mang enjoy life as it is

• Reply • Share >



**Submariner\_Highlander** → David Polewka • a month ago

Selective culling is another effective solution in addition to those me

2 • Reply • Share >



**Troll Ghost** → David Polewka • a month ago

Fantastic bowling ball.

• Reply • Share >



**David Polewka** → Troll Ghost • a month ago

Politics as Usual Tool Kit:

1. Tell lies
2. Call names
3. Put words in mouth.
4. Change the subject.
5. Play dumb.
6. Be sarcastic.
7. Get angry.
8. Get violent.

• Reply • Share >



**Jack of All Trades** → Hyptiotes • a month ago

Some people run marathons and raise money, not because they have a fa what?) they love to run.

3 • Reply • Share >



**Daniel Schoeman** → jefnkv • 2 months ago

Nailed it! Worst ones are tourists from first world countries. One minute decrying t exact same. Specially like the Canadian vegan dreadlocks types who always buy b supporting the local crime underground and possibly human trafficking as well. The

169 • Reply • Share >



**Eurasia Africa** → Daniel Schoeman • 2 months ago

The worst I have seen in Africa are the the hippie westerners followed by t every ten seconds.

117 • Reply • Share >



**Pike Juan** → Eurasia Africa ago • 2 months

Yeah, what's up with those Chinese spitters? Gressed me out wher  
39

• Reply • Share >



**Eurasia Africa** → Pike Juan ago • 2 months

My current apartment is in an Indian neighborhood and you should  
of pan masala phlegm on the walls.

12 • Reply • Share >



**royorb** → Pike Juan ago • a month

it's part of their culture... gets rid of demons supposedly...or somet

• Reply • Share >



**SemiahmooWR** → Eurasia Africa ago • a month

You forgot to mention how they scuff their feet, often speak loudly  
contact by brushing up against you, eating with their mouthes oper  
polite than those from China.

12 • Reply • Share >



**MerleC** → SemiahmooWR ago • a month

Everything else i agree with but the Chinese and many other South  
their hands to feed themselves and they talk too while chewing. Yo  
matter to these people. Though many modern ones embrace the

3 • Reply • Share >



**royorb** → MerleC ago • a month

Using one's hands instead of utensils is actually a common practice  
Kansas and limit your travel to the Travel Channel... we'll all be bett

6 • Reply • Share >



**James** → Daniel Schoeman ago • a month

Lol lol so true I met a girl from oregon in India while traveling and she woul  
will solve all problems of poverty in India and corporates r evil and she was  
backpack, products of capitalism lmao

29 • Reply • Share >



**Adams Cta** → Daniel Schoeman ago • a month

chinese and israeli tourists are by far the worst

20 • Reply • Share >



**EmilyStrongarm** → Daniel Schoeman ago • a month

"Canadian vegan dreadlocks types" made me chuckle. Yes, we do have q

18 • Reply • Share >



**Jones** → EmilyStrongarm ago • a month

And we do our best to export them so they can bother someone e  
Now that I think of it I was once a dread-locked straight edge Cana  
people back in the day.

• Reply • Share >



**TheSyndicateProject** → Daniel Schoeman ago • 2 months

No need to bring Canadians into this

18  
↑  
↓

• Reply • Share >



**Ted Logan** → TheSyndicateProject ago • a month

why not?

14

↑  
↓

• Reply • Share >



**royorb** → Daniel Schoeman ago • a month

@danielschoeman Those vegan canucks, they're known as Granola here in

↑  
↓

• Reply • Share >



**Paul Z** → Daniel Schoeman ago • a month

It can now be bought in that other foreign country.....USA.

↑  
↓

• Reply • Share >



**Freida Alass** → jefnvk ago • 2 months

oh there are plenty of young males who say the same thing. This sentence crack side of the story, not the colonialist version of events." She really thinks she's know

141

↑  
↓

• Reply • Share >



**jefnvk** → Freida Alass ago • 2 months

Oh, there certainly are! I just tend to notice more often than not, the won drink :)

36

↑  
↓

• Reply • Share >



**Jim** → jefnvk ago • 2 months

If she really cares she should organize expeditions to cleanup areas people. Then people might take her seriously..

49

↑  
↓

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