

Posted on: February 10, 2014

Love it to death

By Arnie Weissmann



Arnie Weissmann

Everyone who was inspired to enter the travel industry because of a trip taken between the ages of 16 and 29, raise your hand. And keep your hand up if you took that trip with a pack on your back, a monthly budget you might now consider your daily travel spend and an earnest commitment to "authenticity" in travel.

From conversations I've had over the years, I'm guessing about 50% of Travel Weekly's readers could identify with at least parts of that description. It's certainly an exact match for my early travel profile.

And while my \$18-a-day circumnavigation of the globe profoundly changed my life, I look back at it with more than a twinge of embarrassment when I think of how little I actually knew about the world, its cultures and landscapes and the local customs of the lands I passed through.

I like to think that I was more sensitive than many of my fellow budget travelers, yet I vividly recall when my ignorance, combined with a hunger for experience, became a careless imposition on my hosts and might have contributed incrementally to the degradation of places I visited.

I recently watched a thought-provoking documentary, "Gringo Trails," that examines the impact Western-oriented budget travelers have on the developing destinations they visit. It will make any former backpacker uncomfortable at times, but it's not an anti-backpacker film. In fact, it ends on a hopeful, prescriptive note.

Through the juxtaposition of thoughtful recollection and commentary, before-during-and-after imagery and on-location interviews with contemporary backpackers, the filmmakers tell a story that largely de-romanticizes a travel subculture that thrives on romanticized self-perception.

Much of the film takes a journalistic approach -- backpackers and affected locals are interviewed and filmed without commentary -- but what provides the film with structure and depth are the stories of Yossi Ghinsberg, an Israeli backpacker who got lost in the Amazonian jungles of Bolivia in 1981, and Costas Christ, an American backpacker who visited the Thai island of Ko Pha Ngan in 1979. Each was 21 years old when his "Gringo Trails" story begins.

Ghinsberg, who became separated from friends and almost died after a month in the jungle, wrote a book that inspired thousands of young adventure-seekers to make a pilgrimage to the areas he wrote about. Pegi Vail and Melvin Estrella, the husband-and-wife team who spent 10 years making the film, chronicle the developments in South America that followed, and the result makes one cringe.

Christ had visited Ko Pha Ngan by chance, before it developed the prototype for the hedonistic "full moon parties" fictionalized in the film "The Beach." As many as 50,000 people now crowd beaches that were deserted when Christ visited.

Ghinsberg, prompted both by gratitude to the local people who found and saved him and comprehension of the unintended consequences that resulted from writing his book, educated himself about ecology, sustainable development and local cultures, raised \$1.5 million and returned to the Amazonian village that rescued him. He worked with residents to build a sustainable local tourism industry catering to backpackers, an alternative to employment in logging, drilling or mining. The area is now part of a large national park.

And Christ became an expert on sustainable tourism, writing for National Geographic Traveler and administering the Tourism for Tomorrow Awards organized by the World Travel and Tourism Council, which recognize exceptional sustainability efforts within the travel industry, among other activities.

Many of the travelers in "Gringo Trails" come off as shallow and almost proudly insensitive, but most former backpackers can likely relate to this observation from Lina Brocchieri, another traveler featured in the film, about her backpacking days: "I thought of myself as this invisible traveler who has no impact on the places he visits. And so, in a way, my idea of traveling was a very selfish experience, totally selfish. It was just about me going to this place and being affected, inspired, meeting people."

The growing profile of the travel industry as an economic and political powerhouse over the past decade will likely prompt additional attention to the impact it has on the world. Last year gave us Elizabeth Becker's "Overbooked" (Simon & Schuster, 2013), a critical look at the global industry. More are likely to follow.

I found "Gringo Trails" to be a particularly welcome investigation.

"This is not about not traveling," Vail told me in an interview. Rather, "It's about being a self-aware and responsible traveler." She and Estrella are making arrangements to distribute it to universities and even hostels.

While the world could benefit if travelers in all demographics were enlightened, backpackers are a crucial subset to address. Although they operate largely outside the travel industry and are presumed to have an economic impact that's too trivial to measure, the film's subjects (and presumed audience) are beginning to develop habits for a lifetime of travel.

And, stops on the "Gringo Trail" ultimately gentrify and provide the genesis of most industry inventory.

Raise your hand if you've visited Thailand, Peru, India, Myanmar, Mexico or Bali -- and spent more than \$18 a day.

Email Arnie Weissmann at aweissmann@travelweekly.com and follow him on [Twitter](#).

This article has been updated to reflect that Israeli backpacker Yossi Ghinsberg got lost in the Amazonian jungles of Bolivia, not Peru; that as many as 50,000 people, not 15,000, visit the

beaches of Ko Pha Ngan, Thailand, beaches that were deserted when Costas Christ visited in 1979; and a quote previously attributed to Ghinsberg has been correctly attributed to Lina Brocchieri.

This page is protected by [Copyright](#) laws. Do Not Copy. [Purchase Reprint](#)