

TRAVEL

Travel

Gringo Trails: Is Tourism Destroying the Planet?

By Stephanie Valera | Published: Feb 1, 2014, 8:13 PMEST | weather.com



Ascene in 'Gringo Trails' shows the litter-strewn aftermath of tourists' full moon party on Haad Rin, Koh Pha Ngan, Thailand. (Photo courtesy of Icarus Films)



With its white sand beaches, azure waters and idyllic views, the island of Koh Phangan is considered one of the most beautiful places in Thailand. But every month, the day after its world-famous, all-night "Full Moon" party, when the island's Haad Rin beach is littered with trash, beer bottles and drunk tourists, Koh Phangan seems more like a hedonistic playpen than a tropical paradise. The island is just one example of the devastating impact of tourism, an issue that is in the heart of the new documentary "Gringo Trails."

A film by anthropologist Pegi Vail, "Gringo Trails" explores the changes brought about by tourism on cultures, economies and the environment. The documentary collects stories from the western traveler's route — the "gringo trail" through South America, Africa and Asia — raising important questions along the way: Are backpackers destroying the planet? How are tourists changing the remote places they visit as they seek out "authentic" experiences?

"I was interested in showing the different stages of what I refer to as 'tourism globalization,'" Vail told Weather.com. "It was this long-term observation in different places that made me realize the more important story to tell was the cultural and environmental impact of tourism and that the film could serve as a visual document to these changes — to offer a cautionary tale if you will."

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For the film, Vail used footage she has collected on trips to Burkina Faso and Mali, Peru and Bolivia and Laos and Thailand, since 1999. She also used archival footage and interviews with tourists, guides and travel writers such as Pico Iyer, to discuss the impact of tourists on these countries.

Are backpackers to blame for out-of-control tourism? They may have played a role. "India and

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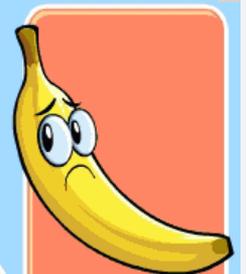
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countries within Southeast Asia in particular have especially seen large numbers of travelers during this modern wave of tourism of the past 30 plus years, starting with independent intrepid travelers, followed by backpackers," said Vail. "They opened the doors to other styles of travel, ultimately bringing in mid-budget independent and mass tourism, package tourism, and even luxury tourism."



Filmmaker Pegi Vail.

The impact of tourism extends beyond Asia, of course. "Certainly countries in Europe and North Asia, or other economically advantaged countries around the world have also had places negatively impacted," said Vail. "However, in developing nations I believe the stakes are higher, partly due to the limited resources to control the influx and partly due to the desire to maintain and grow tourism for the economy, so long-term planning was not a priority."

But while the documentary may cast a dark shadow on the tourism industry, it encourages tourists and backpackers to travel more responsibly.

"It costs nothing to learn about the places you're going to before you go," said Vail. "This will inevitably enrich the cultural encounters you will have and make us all more responsible

travelers."

Local governments and the tourism industry must also make changes. "I think the tourism industry needs to work with local communities and even governments for longer term planning now that we have seen what can happen with mismanaged or unplanned tourism growth over the last few decades," said Vail.

Some countries are already making changes, attempting to preserve cultures and the environment — with dramatic results. The documentary spotlights Bhutan, an interesting case in that unlike countries or communities that have begun to rely on the tourism economy, it is not dependent on this income, according to an interviewee featured. Vail also points out the changes made by Rwanda.

"Rwanda has banned plastic bags since 2008," said Vail. "That takes changing the cultural habits of an entire nation (and those who visit, including tourists)! I visited Rwanda in 2011 and was amazed by this nation-wide initiative. It's a great example that also impacts how tourism, in turn, affects the culture and environment."

Gringo Trails will be screened at the [Visions of Nature/Voices of Nature Environmental Film Festival](#) in St. Petersburg, Fla. on February 15 and at the [Environmental Film Festival in the Nation's Capital](#) in Washington, DC on March 17.

Watch the trailer for "Gringo Trails"

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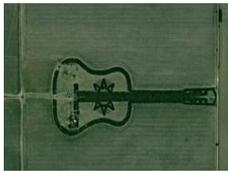
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