

Other Film Review

Gringo Trails

Directed by Pegi Vail, 2013, 78:58 minutes, color.
Distributed by Icarus Films, 32 Court St., Brooklyn,
NY 11201, <http://www.icarusfilms.com>

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The subject of this new film by New York University anthropologist Pegi Vail—the destructive social and environmental impacts of backpacker tourism on remote landscapes and communities around the globe—will likely rouse uncomfortable recognition among many readers of this journal. This is especially the case for those among us who have “been there” in the sense of having been globe-trotting backpacker travelers ourselves, as well as those of us who have worked in those same remote communities, or stayed in those low-budget hostels in foreign capitals, sought out by this class of tourist. But provoking discomfort among anthropologists is not the primary goal of this film. In fact, it has relatively little of substance to say directly to anthropologists—about the practice of visual anthropology, for example, or the complex social dynamics of tourism development—although none of this makes this film any less interesting or relevant.

Rather, the aim of this film seems to be to provoke those adventure- and pleasure-seeking backpackers themselves, and perhaps the government planners and communities targeted by these tourists, to think more critically about the rise of what sociologist of tourism Erik Cohen in the film calls “backpackaging” tourism; the problematic tropes of adventure, fantasy, and narcissistic pleasure pursuit that fuel it; and, perhaps most important of all, the impacts on local communities, wildlife, and ecology of uncontrolled tourism. The focus on backpackers makes for an unusual and worthy subject. The associations of globe-trotting backpacking with the virtues of “travel” as opposed to the banalities of “tourism” have meant that few up close and critical examinations of backpacker culture—in print or on film—exist. It takes an ethnographer with years of circulating in this transnational crowd to be able to pull

together a project whose scalar focus is large enough to take serious stock of this transnational phenomenon. It turns out that it is remarkably consistent around the world, so that even as individuals might think they are setting out to find a world full of unique places and experiences, they are quickly channeled into a journey laid out (many thousands of times) before them known as “the Gringo Trail.”

Drawing on years of footage shot among backpacker tourists in four countries—Bolivia, Mali, Thailand, and Bhutan—the film has already been recognized in the press for its cringe-worthy scenes of young 20-something Europeans, Americans, and Israelis engaged in the everyday life of the backpacker. These scenes include images of blowout parties attracting tens of thousands to once-pristine Thai beaches now littered with trash (Figures 1 and 2), alcohol-lubricated lounging around at remote ecolodges in the Bolivian pampas, trips into jungles and swamps searching for (and, it turns out, harassing) unique wildlife, comparing oneself to Indiana Jones as one heads out on a guided boat trip with dozens of other tourist boats, and claims to be inspired to come to a remote Amazonian landscape because of a survival tale written by a hapless traveler who got desperately lost in the jungle several decades ago. All of these things take place with an apparent obliviousness to the staged authenticity at the heart of these tourism economies, as well as the invisible privileges that



FIGURE 1. Haad Rin Beach, 1979. Photo by Costas Christ.



FIGURE 2. Haad Rin Beach party aftermath, 2010. Still photo from *Gringo Trails*.

allow these young people to be there pursuing their pleasures in the first place. The irony is that all these people set out to find something unique “before it disappears,” but that they are the very agents of destruction to these unique places.

It is an unflattering portrayal, and it evokes Pogo’s famous observation that “we have met the enemy and he is us!” The strength of the images alone—the camera gets close and lingers on people’s attempts to turn what can be quite mundane into memorable experiences of adventure and excess—makes this film worthy to show to my middle-class American undergraduates, from the introductory level on up, precisely because many of them have been on or will soon strike out for the Gringo Trail themselves. The film raises many useful questions for classroom exploration about the intersections of adventure, globalization, power, and the ethics of travel.

In addition to its *bon vivants*, the Gringo Trail has its enablers, refugees, and casualties, as well as locals, and Vail introduces them to us as well through interviews. Many of them are ambivalent about the Trail and their involvement in it. The *enablers* include travel writers for guidebooks like *Lonely Planet*, including one who knows full well that her inclusion of a unique place could lead to its ruin (but it seems she regretfully just cannot resist; she says she writes a couple of pages about it in an attempt to educate her readers). Or those travelers who succeeded in getting off the trail—finding a new beach not yet sullied by backpackers, for example—only to learn the discovery opened a spigot soon after that first visit. One of the ways the film diverges from its mostly observational and interview-based format is the insertion of short-staged travel stories and reflections (in the style of Moth Radio Hour storytelling) by well-known travel writers and bloggers, and these stories tend to express similar ambivalence. The *refugees* are the disillusioned, especially those tired of the perpetual immaturity of the roving party. Or those

who develop a critical awareness that, as one young woman who went to Timbuktu in Mali learned, the romantic visions she held about the place are inaccurate. Timbuktu, she realizes, is really “empty, desolate, and poor”; she has no real social role there, and the local people wonder why she is there in the first place. The *casualties* tend to be the local villagers and community leaders who either lost—or, more likely, never had—any control over the waves of young people, hotels, and restaurants that were to come. But Vail is smart to show us that “the locals” are not a monolithic category, and we meet various locals, such as the Director of Bhutan’s National Museum and a village leader in the Amazonian village of San José Uchupiamonas, who articulate a vision of tourism as a practical and effective economic development strategy when it is planned and managed under deliberate local control.

The film’s conclusions about the Gringo Trail seem ambivalent as well. On the one hand, it recognizes the hydra-like inevitability of the Trail: as one interviewee observes, once a place becomes a scene, it “transforms, burns itself out . . . and then comes back in another place.” On the other hand, it offers a vague hopefulness (mostly expressed in the last third of the film) that things could get better if these young people get “education”; if governments step up their regulatory power *before* things get out of control; and if communities can gain control over tourism by implementing community-based ecotourism projects. Along these lines, Bhutan is held up as an example of a nation that is going about it the “right” way by placing strict controls on tourists, and an Inter-American Development Bank–sponsored indigenous tourism project in Bolivia’s Madidi National Park is held up as a promising response at the community level. Here again there are opportunities for classroom debate. Is Bhutan’s approach of letting in only wealthy foreigners the solution? It has dealt with backpacker tourism by *not* allowing in the low-budget backpackers in the first place, charging its tourists \$250 a day to be there. And what should we make about the research that has demonstrated that bank-funded indigenous community-based projects are *not* such facile solutions after all, but highly fragile and contingent given fundamental structural inequalities and internal complexities, dilemmas, and disagreements sometimes provoked by the project itself (Allison Johnston, “Indigenous Peoples and Ecotourism: Bringing Indigenous Knowledge and Rights into the Sustainability Equation,” *Tourism Recreation Research* 25:2(2000):89–96; Luis Vivanco, “The Prospects and Dilemmas of Certifying Indigenous Tourism,” *Quality Control and Ecotourism Certification*, R. Black and A. Crabtree, eds., CAB International, 2007:218–240). Most of us who are tourism

scholars would want to *start* our investigations, not *end* them, with these questions. But as expressed at the outset, this film's primary contribution is not so much to nuanced anthropological debate as it is an attempt to

broadcast and provoke critical awareness about an urgent transnational dynamic that produces a number of difficult problems in some of the world's most interesting and fragile places.