

B E A C H

Is the party over? 'Gringo Trails' shows the destructiveness of world travel

By **Brooke Lefferts** • Published March 19, 2014 • FoxNews.com

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Whether they're crashing at a hostel or staying at a luxury hotel, world travelers want to experience local culture. But do they ever consider how their presence affects the places they visit?

A new documentary film, "Gringo Trails," shines a light on the dangers facing some tourist spots in developing countries when they don't control an influx of travelers.

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planning ahead is critical.”

- Pegi Vail, producer of "Gringo Trails"

The movie, which includes footage spanning three decades, was beautifully shot in several exotic locales, including the lush green Amazon jungles of South America, the arid lands of Timbuktu, Mali and the tropical beaches of Thailand.

Its director, Pegi Vail, associate director of media, culture, and history at New York University, wrote her dissertation on the gentrification of tourism in Bolivia.

“As an anthropologist, I had a desire to look at my own tribe. I’m a longtime traveler and backpacker. I wanted to make a visual ethnography of backpack culture around the world and the long-term observation of some of these places,” Vail told FoxNews.com.

Some of the film’s most powerful images compare tourist destinations in the 1980s and ’90s with how they look now. Vail found old video from other anthropologists and returned several times to spots she visited over the course of more than 20 years while working on her dissertation.

The movie opens in the Amazon jungle in Bolivia –known for its dynamic biodiversity – where too many tourists are threatening the wildlife and land in some areas. Natives and guides say the tourists need to be educated on the sights they visit to help preserve the areas.

Pictures of one Bolivian community, Incahuasi – which hosts one of the largest salt deserts in the world – show how an increase in tourism in the last decade has dramatically changed the landscape. Hundreds of buses and cars bring in 40,000 tourists each year, and they have created deep tracks in the desert, changing its formerly pristine vista. Locals complain that native animals have migrated elsewhere out of fear.

“Gringo Trails” is a compelling documentary that will make even couch potatoes want to explore its enchanting locales. Vail’s pace is quick, and she uses travel expert interviews and amusing anecdotes with seasoned tourists to move the story along.

But the film transcends entertainment; it has a message of awareness that educates its viewers. It forces even those with well-worn passports to stop and think about the economic and environmental footprint they may be leaving on their destinations.

Throughout the 80-minute film, Vail uses effective scenes of tourists making innocent mistakes that have real consequences. In one, a backpacker on a hunt for anacondas in Bolivia reaches out and touches a snake, and the guide warns that the bug repellent on her hands is toxic to the reptile.

The film’s most striking example of detrimental overcrowding is Haad Rin Beach on the Thai island of Ko Pha Ngan. Once a deserted paradise known only to locals, the island lured backpackers with its beautiful beaches and cheap prices.

The film shows a commune of about 60 Westerners who descended on the beach in 1989 and started an all-night Full Moon party. By 2000, according to the film, thousands of backpackers overtook the island for moon festivals every week.

[Lee Abbamonte](#) -- a travel expert who claims to be the youngest American to visit every country in the world – has experienced the Full Moon phenomenon and says the partying has gotten out of control.

“There were thousands of Westerners on the beach going crazy. Drugs, alcohol, garbage everywhere, people going to the bathroom in the water. At the end, the water is kind of disgusting. The business owners like it because they’re making money, but people who live on other parts of the island, they’re not seeing any financial benefit,” he told FoxNews.com.

Developing countries always run the risk of damaging their local culture and environment by courting travelers without regulation. “Seeing the changes there (in Thailand) is a precautionary tale for other emerging tourist destinations,” Vail said.

But there are some towns that are getting it right. The Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan has grown its national tourism and employs what the film calls a “high value, low impact policy” for visitors that has allowed the country to make money while maintaining control over its culture and landscape. Tourists are charged an entrance fee of about \$250 per person, which covers hotel, driver, a guide and all meals.

“I’ve been to Bhutan, their model is fantastic,” Abbamonte said. “You’re not going to Bhutan to party. You’re going for natural beauty and to see some amazing temples and Buddhist culture. Everything is preplanned and super clean and no one’s going there to mess up the environment or do something stupid.”

Vail says the purpose of her film is to enlighten tourists about their responsibility to the countries they visit.

“We were at a tipping point in tourism 30 years ago,” she said. “We didn’t have the hindsight to see what the impact was ...Thailand couldn’t have known how quickly it would grow, the numbers are so much greater than anyone anticipated. Now that we can see it, we see planning ahead is critical.”

With global travel easier and more accessible, many underdeveloped countries are tempted by tourism dollars and see them as a panacea for all their woes.

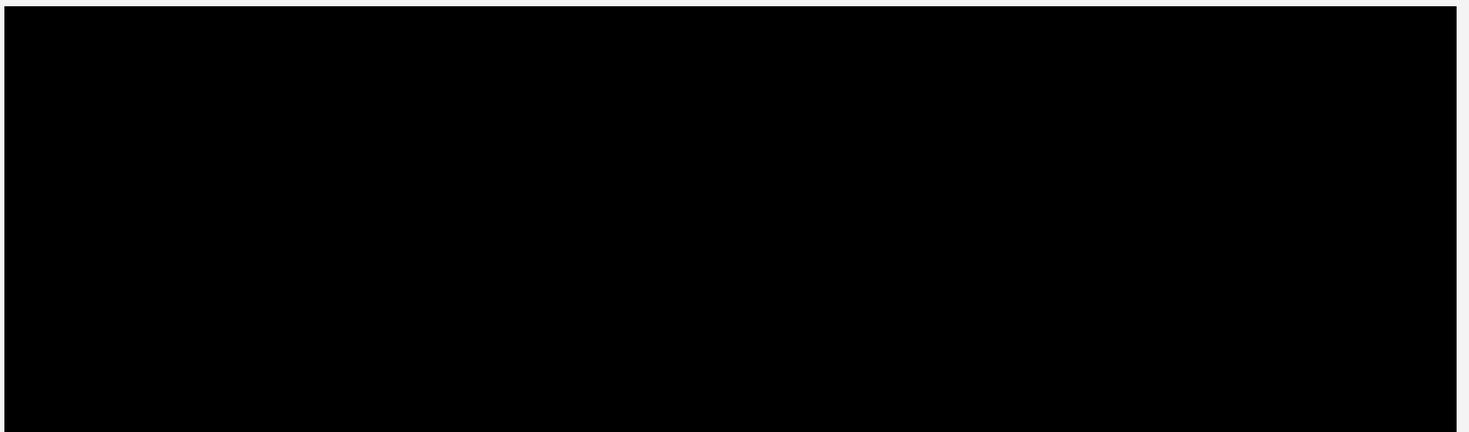
“Many countries think tourism can solve economic problems and create jobs, but not a lot of thought goes into long-term solutions and what that development means. They end up damaging the product and hurting their culture,” Dr. Kristin Lamoureux, director of tourism studies at George Washington University, told FoxNews.com.

But with a little preparation and good education, it can be a win-win for travelers and nations, said Norie Quintos, executive editor of National Geographic Traveler magazine.

“Tourists can help some of these smaller communities in developing countries by making good choices on where and how they travel,” she said.

“Travelers can refuse to go to places that don’t abide by certain standards. They can make those choices not to touch the frog, or leave garbage. Certain tour operators are very thoughtful about being carbon neutral, or not using plastic utensils, or giving appropriate gifts to locals that they need. If enough tourists do that, it encourages growth and conservation.”

Reading up on the history, culture, and ecology of a place before visiting can inform behavior and shows respect for the host country. “Travel is a continuing education ... we say the passport is the new diploma,” Quintos said.



[Gringo Trails Official Trailer](#) from [Pegi Vail](#) on [Vimeo](#).

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