Pleasure and Danger on the Gringo Trail: An Ethnography of Bolivian Party Hostels

by

Lilly Fink Shapiro
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Introduction

I owe my first exposure to the party hostel world to a nineteen-year-old Swedish woman whom my brother and I met at the top of Macchu Picchu. Like us, she had arrived from Cuzco, Peru, and she was raving about a hostel there. Ben and I were eager to hear more about it, as we were not satisfied with our hostel in Cuzco and were planning to move to a new one when we returned. Our new friend was delighted to provide a detailed account of Loki hostel, which I later learned was arguably the most popular chain of hostels in the Andes. She painted a picture of a very social environment where all the guests are young people. She described the hostel as clean, inexpensive, and equipped with hot water, free internet, luggage storage, and just about every other modern amenity a South American hostel can offer. We were intrigued—Loki seemed to have everything we were looking for in a hostel, and at a good price. Changing the subject, Ben and I asked if she had eaten in any of our favorite restaurants in Cuzco. She had not, she replied, as she ate most of her meals in the hostel. Each evening, she told us, Loki hostel served a delicious, cheap buffet dinner. It was clear that she preferred to eat there with all the other young people rather than go out to a restaurant. "And oh, the hostel has a great bar, too."

When Ben and I returned to Cuzco a few days later, we contacted our Macchu Picchu friend and learned that she had relocated to what she claimed was an equally awesome hostel. Looking for a place to sleep with some (hopefully) hot water, we went to her new hostel, The Point, where we were greeted by a notably upbeat,
young, English speaking woman. She welcomed us in a sing-song, energetic voice, and before we even introduced ourselves, she declared that we HAD to come to the hostel that night for the NINJA PARTY! I noticed a printed, laminated bold message taped to the receptionist desk reading: “Don’t stay here if you want to sleep.”

In English, we told the receptionist that we were looking for our Swedish friend, Marieke. The woman looked behind her to scan the colorful dry erase board which had the names of all the current guests organized neatly according to rooms with funky theme names. Both Ben and I were struck by the resemblance of this hostel to our freshman year college dorms. Marieke was staying in the “V.I.P” room, but we joined her and a group of her friends who were hanging out in the bar sharing ham and cheese paninis. The bar seemed full. Some people were eating grilled sandwiches, hamburgers, or french fries, many were drinking beer, and others were playing pool. It was 7 PM, and the five people at our table were still in their pajamas. They complained that they were all horribly hung over from the hostel party the night before. But it was a blast, they assured us, and one girl laughingly told us about how she had been so drunk, she passed out in the hallway and ended up sleeping there all night! Another young Swedish woman, who had been traveling in South America for several months, told us that Point hostels are a chain. She proudly reeled off the names of all of the South American cities she had visited in which she had stayed in these hostels. “It’s exhausting,” she conceded, “but soooo fun.”

Having already spent five months in Bolivia, I was used to conducting my life in Spanish. Without hesitation, I ordered un sándwich. The gringo bar waiter seemed surprised and he responded in English. Our friends told us that some of the staff did
not even speak Spanish, but that this caused no problems because Spanish was never used or needed within the hostel.

As we were eating our “gringo food,” two twenty-something blond women entered the bar, both dressed head-to-toe as ninja turtles. Their obviously homemade shells were fashioned out of some kind of plastic and cardboard packaging and were intricately painted to look like turtles. They wore bright green tights and short green dresses, and their legs, arms, and faces were all painted green. Each wore a different colored strip of fabric tied around her head, with two golf ball sized holes for her eyes. At that point I realized: this was the beginning of the ninja party.

The hostel was fully booked for the night, but Ben and I had already quietly confided to each other that we did not want to stay there. We said goodbye to our new friends from the bar and set off with our backpacks in downtown Cuzco to look for another hostel.

**Choosing to Study Party Hostels**

Throughout the six months I spent in Bolivia, I was on the lookout for a subject that intrigued me sufficiently to conduct field research and ultimately write an anthropology thesis about it. I found myself drawn to potential topics that seemed distinctly "Bolivian." I flirted with ideas of studying indigenous wedding celebrations or examining the drastically different ways in which Bolivians display wealth. Although I was interested in these topics, I do not speak Quechua or Aymara, nor had I done preliminary library research on indigenous Bolivian cultures. As a twenty-year old American college student, I began to feel uncomfortable with the
idea of researching indigenous Bolivian culture and my original ideas increasingly struck me as voyeuristic.

I was overwhelmed with curiosity after my first exposure to a party hostel in Cuzco, but I initially resisted adopting the topic for thesis research because studying English-speaking foreigners did not seem “anthropological” enough to me; American and European backpackers seemed insufficiently exotic subjects. Historically, anthropologists have constructed their subject as the “Other”: strange, distant, exotic people about whom they know little before their research. Although this attitude has changed considerably over the last decades, its lingering force made me question the anthropological value of studying people so like myself. As I let myself explore the possibility, I realized that as an ambivalent potential “insider” to the scene, I had more to bring to an ethnography of party hostels than I could have brought to studying the wedding practices of indigenous women in rural Bolivia. Following the relativist approach of suspending judgment, I did my best to contain my condescension and set out to understand party hostels from the viewpoints of those who participate in them.

There is a constitutive tension in anthropological knowledge between familiarity and estrangement, the close and the distant. When the object is “foreign” to the anthropologist, she needs to make it “familiar,” and when it is “native,” she needs to make it strange. The party hostel phenomenon struck me at once as familiar and strange, mundane and perplexing, obvious and enigmatic. In part, I was granted a level of automatic, “insider” acceptance because my demographic profile as a twenty-year old American college student was similar to that of many of my subjects, and my
extroverted personality and fluency in backpacker subculture enabled me to easily socialize and fit in with the hostel guests. At the same time, although I was also traveling with a backpack and ‘consuming’ a kind of South American experience, I also felt in many ways like an “outsider.” I felt somewhat uncomfortable about the party hostel scene, and taking on the role of an ethnographer allowed me to legitimize my personal disposition by redefining my purpose there in terms of work as opposed to play. Once embraced, that role further distanced me from the scene. Sarah Thornton (1996) had a similar experience when she was conducting ethnographic fieldwork in clubs and raves. She writes:

I was working in a cultural space in which everyone else was at their leisure…Not only did I have intent and purposes that were alien to the rest of the crowd, but also for the most part I tried to maintain an analytical frame of mind that is truly anathema to the 'lose yourself' ethos of clubs and raves (2).

As both participant and observer, ambivalent insider and self-defined outsider, I sampled the pleasures of the backpacker hostel scene while also trying to critically analyze them.

**Research Context and Methodology**

I did the bulk of my fieldwork research in July 2008 while I was living in Bolivian party hostels as a participant-observer. I slept in the communal dorm rooms with the other backpackers, ate in the hostel bars, and socialized with the guests. I conducted interviews with three hostel owners, and also spoke with guests, bar workers, receptionists, and the Bolivian cooking and cleaning staff. The conversations with Bolivians took place in Spanish, and I spoke English with the
hostel owners and backpackers. I usually carried my notebook with me in and around the hostels, jotting down notes whether I was in my dorm room, the hostel bar or game room. I took detailed notes during interviews, and whenever possible, went to an internet café immediately afterwards to type up my notes and impressions while they were still fresh. I documented as much as I could through photography, capturing spaces within the hostels, the behavior of guest, and the printed informational notices on the walls.

I always disclosed my research intentions, and it was widely known within the hostel that I was conducting an anthropological project. When I explained my thesis project to hostel guests, they sometimes responded by saying “you’re kidding,” and then followed up with expressions of extreme interest and agreed that there would be much to say about these places. The general consensus was that studying party hostels was a “cool” thing to do. Depending on the situation and to whom I was talking, I had to customize my account of what I was doing in a way that connected to my audience. Sharing my project with an Australian backpacker at the bar contrasted sharply with standing in the hostel kitchen at 7 AM explaining to the Bolivian cooks why I was interested in talking with them about their experiences working at the hostel. The five months I had spent in Cochabamba, Bolivia prior to undertaking field work greatly enhanced my ability to interact with the locals and understand the role of the hostel in relation to the city of La Paz.
Party Hostels and Backpacker Subculture

An inexpensive bed is the appeal of a conventional hostel in South America. By sacrificing the personal privacy and extra conveniences of a hotel, a hostel is able to offer economical accommodations. Hostel bathrooms are usually communal, as are the sleeping rooms, which are often furnished with bunk beds. In stark contrast to the traditional hostel which serves as a base for exploration, party hostels attract guests because of the activities ensuing within the hostel itself. Party hostels in Bolivia market a unique social experience that combines partying and easy access to alcohol and certain illegal drugs, all of which are accessible in an English-speaking environment that guarantees safety, a comfortable bed, clean water, and familiar foods. There are three party hostels in Bolivia, all of which are located in the capital city of La Paz. Significantly larger than most South American hostels, Bolivian party hostels are foreign-owned, serve food, promote social life through a lively bar, and offer other services like laundry, travel information, and communal lounges.

European backpackers, especially English and Irish, constitute the largest percentage of hostel guests, followed by Americans, Australians and New Zealanders (Kiwis). Compared to neighboring Andean countries, there are fewer Americans in Bolivia because it is more complicated and expensive for Americans to obtain a Bolivian visa. Evo Morales, the president of Bolivia, instituted a policy in January of
2008 which restricted visits by Americans to a maximum of three months and required them to pay one hundred dollars (cash) upon arrival.¹

“Backpacking” is a distinct form of travel. Literally, it means that the traveler carries all of her possessions in a bag with shoulder straps, but it also implies a generation and an attitude with which one approaches travel. In Murphy and Pearce’s (1995) definition:

Backpackers are travelers who exhibit a preference for budget accommodation; an emphasis on meeting other people (locals and travelers); an independently organized and flexible travel schedule; longer rather than brief holidays; and an emphasis on informal and participatory recreation activities (829).

According to O’Reilly (2006), the value backpackers place on spontaneity and serendipity distinguishes them from other travelers. They travel with low levels of advanced planning, no fixed timetable, and an openness to change or plan their itinerary. Traveling with a backpack crosses boundaries of nationality, language, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, but not differences in age. While there is no absolute boundary, backpackers are generally between 15-29 years of age, the majority of whom are between 18-25 (Murphy and Pearce). Largely restricted to a particular class and age group, backpacking must be understood as a class-generational practice.

Backpackers generally set off with the goal of seeing as much as possible. Some emphasize the urgency in traveling at this stage in their life, before they settle down with a career or a family, or lose their appetite for adventurous travel. Loker-Murphy and Pearce (1995: 829) cite seven categories of youth travelers: Moratorium

¹Evo Morales did not support President Bush, and created these regulations in response to the U.S. border policy. It is notoriously extremely difficult for Bolivians to obtain a U.S. visa. My Bolivian host father, a well known lawyer, used his influence to extend my visa.
travelers, ascetic travelers, adventurers, goal-directed travelers, party travelers, alternative travelers, and Peter Pan travelers. My work primarily focuses on youth in two of their categories: "the party travelers" who "see the whole trip as a large party and opportunity to meet new people and to do things one would never dare to do at home" and “alternative travelers” among whom, according to the authors, drug consumption is popular. Guests at the party hostels in La Paz fit primarily within these two categories; or more precisely, as I will argue, they blur the boundaries between them.

Throughout my thesis, I use the word *gringo*. A gringo is a non-native Spanish speaker, and the term is used most commonly to refer to foreigners in Latin America. Anglophones and Hispanophones disagree over the connotations of the word. The American Heritage Dictionary states that gringo is a "disparaging term." The definition continues: "In Latin America the word *gringo* is an offensive term for a foreigner, particularly an American or English person." However, native English speakers and Spanish speakers disagree on whether the word is derogatory. A Spanish dictionary, Real Academia Española, defines gringo as "a foreigner, especially one that speaks English or another language that is not Spanish." According to this definition, the term is not pejorative, which is consistent with my experience in Bolivia. Various dictionaries note that the specific connotations of the word differ from country to country; In Mexico, referring to someone as a gringo may be offensive, whereas it is a neutral, descriptive term in Bolivia. Urban Dictionary.com includes several definitions of gringo. One contributor wrote: "it isn't a hateful term but it can be used hatefully. It also represents

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2 My Bolivian friends even referred to me affectionately as "gringuita."
behavior and attitudes Latinos consider to be "American"

Backpackers in South America have re-appropriated and embraced the word as a way to identify themselves. Eating in a local restaurant and asking the waiter to withhold the raw lettuce from my order could come off as rude, but when I apologize for my "gringo stomach" it dispels any awkwardness. The Adventure Brew hostel playfully advertised salsa classes with the slogan: "quit looking like such a gringo on the dance floor!" “Casa de la gringa,” home of the gringo, is the name of a backpacker’s hostel in Cuzco, Peru. A popular on-the-road book among backpackers in South America is Mark Mann's *The Gringo Trail* (2002). The book is a humorous travelogue recounting the drug-filled backpacking journey that Mark and his two friends took through South America. Throughout my thesis, I employ the term *gringo* as a neutral synonym for foreigner in Latin America.

**Organization and Goals of the Study**

In this ethnography of consumption practices of backpackers in Bolivia, I pursue issues in the analysis of youth cultures, middle-class formation, and capitalist globalization. I focus specifically on youthful consumers, situating their travel abroad and consumption practices within frames of hedonism and class status. I will examine the evolving meanings of “authenticity,” as organized “adventure” and partying have become dominant activities in this modality of travel. Attention to the “culture” of party hostels provides a basis for this exploration.
While patterns of material consumption and ownership still retain meaningful class connotations, I argue that certain “must-have” experiences are replacing objects in the formation of middle class identity. Experience is increasingly marketed as a consumable product. Guide books, study abroad programs, tourism packages, and local establishments such as party hostels promote the value of exotic experiences abroad. The marketing of popular backpacker activities in Bolivia suggest a promise to get the traveler completely out of her zone of comfort through providing access to “primitive” cultures, extreme urban poverty, and high-risk adventures in unmanaged wilderness. Also guaranteed, is that at the end of the day, the traveler can return to her comfort zone in a safe hostel, with a comfortable bed and a warm shower.

An historical examination of the values and tenets of an earlier backpacker subculture, in conjunction with an ethnographic study of contemporary backpackers suggest a shift in the meanings of backpacking. I will highlight the continuities, changes, and contradictory aspects of the current modality of backpacking. I argue that a burgeoning tourism industry aimed at backpackers as a potentially lucrative segment is absorbing this once “alternative” form of travel into mainstream culture. Backpacking is becoming its own niche market within the array of niches that now comprise mass tourism. Even backpacker engagements with risk taking and adventure are largely planned and organized in a way that clashes with older concepts of “authentic” travel.

In the first chapter, I will historically contextualize my project, linking modern backpacking with earlier practices of middle-class travel. Employing Pierre Bourdieu’s model of class and “cultural capital,” I examine the role of travel and
“experiential education” in distinguishing middle-class subjects. Backpacking, in this perspective, involves a particular form of socially valued knowledge. In contrast to other modes of travel, backpacking subculture places value on the exploration of foreign places by means that are non-commercialized, unstructured, and “authentic.”

The second chapter is largely ethnographic, and presented in a tripartite structure: one section for each hostel, with each segment serving to highlight a different aspect of backpacker subculture and hostel life. Themes such as the atmosphere of excess, “risky fun”, adventure, and drugs will be analyzed through a narrative framework, from the consumer’s point of view.

The mainstreaming, commodification, and contradictions of the backpacker experience are the central themes of chapter three. I examine the role of Lonely Planet, hostel networks, travel websites, and word of mouth communication in the formation of the gringo trail. The La Paz party hostels become a break from backpacking, offering the most comfortable facilities in the Andes. From a marketing perspective, we see how these hostels attract clientele through a promise of partying and relaxation.

Although my analytic model sorts travelers into differentiated categories, in reality, people inevitably shift back and forth across what are fluid boundaries. I am most interested in examining the internal differentiations within middle-class youth culture; privileged youth from the global West and North travel in a variety of different ways and negotiate a range of meanings and pleasures from their experiences abroad. For all the similarities between my subjects and me, before I
stumbled onto the gringo trail, my travel experience was very different from the one I
document.

One of the challenges of ethnography is to negotiate between the
universalizing and the particularizing. Although my project is based on particular set
of circumstances, I believe that the implications of my research stretch beyond
backpackers in La Paz, Bolivia; the literature on tourism suggests that developments
similar to those I studied are underway in backpacker communities all over the world.

Throughout the period of my ethnographic research and writing I have
remained acutely aware that the people I am writing about may read my work. This
is both nerve-wracking and exciting. I know that my own personal choices and
preferences both overlap with and diverge from those I have studied, and I am also
eternally cognizant that this thesis focuses predominantly on people who are my age
and who share similar levels of education and wealth. Our commonality enhances my
sense of accountability and responsibility. I hope that this analysis promotes
additional dialogue among my peers so that each of us is empowered to make
informed choices when we travel.
Chapter One:
Youth Travel, Cultural Capital, and Class Formation

International travel has long been associated with education and class status. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, young, upper-class, European men embarked on “Grand Tours” across Europe, which became a symbol of both wealth and social prestige. The “Tour,” which typically lasted from several months to several years, was meant to expose young men to the culture, art, and architecture of France, Italy and other historically important sites. Over time, a Grand Tour travel circuit emerged: London, Paris, Rome, Venice, and Florence were compulsory destinations. Many traveled to the Netherlands, some to Switzerland and Germany, and a very few adventurers made it to Spain, Greece, or Turkey (Sorabella 2001, Löfgren, 1999).

Advancements in rail transit during the Victorian Era lowered transportation costs, making travel affordable to middle-class Europeans for the first time. Over the next century, improved transportation technologies expanded the map of accessible destinations, and the emergence of travel organizations made it possible for middle-class women to independently travel abroad (Löfgren:163). European travel became a marker of class status on both sides of the Atlantic. In the 1960s and 70s, it became popular for middle and upper class North American and European youth to

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3 Unlike the privileged youth who embarked on The Grand Tour, working class young men in the 19th century followed a travel circuit in search of work. Although this travel, “tramping,” was fueled by economic compulsion as opposed to leisure, Adler [1985] cited in Murphy and Pearce (1995), asserts that it still offered an opportunity for sightseeing, adventure, and education.
travel through Europe on their own, without parental supervision. Because of the route’s similarities to the Grand Tour, it was sometimes referred to as the “New Grand Tour” (Alderson 1971) and nicknamed the “hippie trail” in reference to its most visible travelers. The youth who embarked on the “New Grand Tour” in the 1970s set the precedent for contemporary forms of backpacking; they traveled on low budgets, preferred to stay in youth hostels, and carried all of their belongings in a backpack. Lonely Planet Publications, arguably the crux of modern-day backpacking, was created after Tony and Maureen Wheeler returned from a backpacking trip in the ‘70s, and published a guide to traveling the “hippie trail” on a low budget.

While themes of adventure were present in Victorian travel, the emphasis fell on the acquisition of “cultural capital” through direct encounter with Art and Culture. Contemporary youth travelers, by contrast, are more concerned with gaining a “subcultural capital” of adventurous leisure than with exposure to more traditional forms of cultivation and refinement. For the young people who embarked on Grand Tours and traveled during the Victorian Era, travel was largely an adult-supervised or family affair. The opportunity to travel, moreover, was largely restricted to men, who were often accompanied by an adult mentor or authority figure. Over the course of the twentieth century, the emergence of middle-class youth cultures that placed increasing emphasis on personal autonomy and self expression, resulted in young people traveling on their own. By the 1960s, travel had become a specifically youthful practice that was pursued largely without adult supervision, and that was

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4 My parents, Rick Steves, and Bill Bryson all backpacked through Europe in the 1970s.
enabled by a network of new institutions, such as hostels, Euro passes, and alternative guidebooks.

Culturally legitimized travel activities and destinations were once limited to visits to such sites as European museums, cathedrals, and ancient ruins. But over the postwar decades of the twentieth century, travelers’ geographic destinations expanded to include the “third world,” and “hanging out” in a foreign country became an acceptable, even praiseworthy activity. The increasing value placed on the global “South” stems from a historical trajectory in which European destinations were viewed as educational repositories of civilized history, while the “third world” preserved “primitive” humanity. In Romantic versions of this opposition, travel to a non-Western destination such as Asia, South America, and Africa was linked to liberationist narratives of self discovery and inflected with countercultural Bohemian values. The backpackers on the “hippie trail” of the 1970’s rejected the material comforts and relative luxury Victorian travelers had required. In contrast, they valued “roughing it” and, in an imagined identification with less privileged migrants, they valorized the art of moving around with few possessions. These remain important tenets in contemporary backpacking subculture. Over the years, middle-class travel has become less associated with Victorian values of restraint and cultural refinement, and increasingly tied to fun and leisure. Family vacations reflect this transition: Compare the trip of a wealthy nineteenth century family touring European museums, to a middle class family in the twentieth century, piling in the station wagon to drive somewhere “fun.” What has persisted is an association of leisured travel with
middle-class identities; shifts in travel practices reflect and express shifts in how the class imagines itself.

Centuries after the Grand Tour, international travel opportunities are still largely limited to middle and upper class consumers. Regardless of how well a backpacker can budget her funds, travel requires fiscal capital. Whereas for North Americans the ability to travel once meant having enough money to buy a trans-Atlantic boat ticket or a train seat, the limiting material factor today is the price of an international plane ticket. Spending time abroad perpetuates the cycle of class accessibility and restriction through the accruement of what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) calls cultural capital.

Cultural capital refers to socially valued knowledge, competence, and educational achievements on which claims to class status are made. In contrast to property, cultural capital must be reproduced within each generation, and has been critical to the formation of the new middle classes, whose status is grounded in claims to special, socially valued knowledge. In her book about what she calls the professional middle class, Barbara Ehrenreich (1989:12) stresses the generational tensions involved in reproducing this form of capital; she defines the professional middle class as: “all those people whose economic and social status is based on education, rather than on the ownership of capital or property.” In the context of increasingly precarious class conditions, even a young person raised in a wealthy family must take part in what Sue Heath (2007) calls the “economy of experience” to personally cement her own claim to cultural capital and class status. Heath points to the increased number of gap year students who travel during the year between high
school and college (“gap-packing”) as one index “…that middle class families are no longer able to guarantee their former competitive advantage and that the pressures to maintain their class position are a source of much anxiety” (2007:91).

Academic degrees, the certified form of cultural capital, are central to the identity of the new middle class. What constitutes a valued education, however, is volatile and changing. Though Bourdieu argued that middle-class status was grounded in knowledge of traditional high culture, such claims have become increasingly less significant, and may be displaced by a variety of other cultural experiences. Nevertheless, there are continuities in the ways that claims to “distinction” are made. Bourdieu points to the value of first-hand exposure to art and culture as a mark of “taste,” in contrast to knowledge gathered from books. Travel abroad is a demonstration of such taste for direct cultural engagement, and thus can operate as cultural capital, whether or not traditional high culture is what the traveler consumes.

Experience abroad is presumed to offer opportunities to gain knowledge that will complement formal education and training. The Grand Tour was understood as a finishing touch to traditional education, likely to increase one’s sophistication, worldliness and social awareness (Loker Murphy and Pearce, 1995:820). In his 1998 article *Checking out the Planet: Global Representations/Local Identities and Youth Travel*, Luke Desforges describes a woman in her mid-twenties who valued visiting shanty towns in Lima because the experience added to the knowledge that she gained studying urban geography in school (Desforges 1998:178). Whether the backpacker is studying Spanish and learning about Bolivian culture, or staying in an English-
speaking party hostel and doing cocaine, the experience of traveling abroad to a
developing country is assumed to be educational. The backpacker is presumed to
return home from her privileged travels having gained a worldly perspective and
cultural capital.

Middle-class position always depends on both economic and cultural capital,
although the relative value attributed to these may vary for different factions of the
class. Moreover, the knowledges valued by middle class people take different forms.
For example, professionals are more likely to value high-cultural knowledge than
either managers (whose expertise is in statistical knowledge) or a conservative
politician claiming to be “one of the people.”

Before diving into this project, I did not think about my own South American trip in terms of ‘stoking up on cultural
capital’ (Munt 1994:109) to later turn into economic capital (Skelton and Valentine
1998:176). Reflecting back on my decisions, I realize that I implicitly valued the

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5 In an interview on September 25, 2008 with CBS news anchor Katie Couric, Alaska Governor and
then Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin was asked why she had never held a passport nor traveled
outside of the USA until a year before the election. Palin answered,

“I’m not one of those who maybe came from a background of, you know, kids who perhaps graduate
college and their parents give them a passport and give them a backpack and say go off and travel the
world. No, I’ve worked all my life...I was not a part of, I guess, that culture... The way that I have
understood the world is through education, through books.”

Governor Palin’s reference to ‘those kids who are given a passport when they graduate college’
supports my assertion that travel is restricted to privileged youth, and embodies an intra-class
disputation based on the portrayal of professionals as the “cultural elite.” Despite her considerable
economic capital, Palin pursued a populist strategy, appealing to ‘just folks,’ in contrast to the “cultural
elite.” In fact, many of the supposedly “privileged youth” who go abroad may be less wealthy than
Palin, but are likely to come from professional families that value (and depend on) cultural capital for
their status and mobility. As someone in a potential position to make foreign policy decisions,
Governor Palin was highly criticized for her implied belief that travel abroad was not educational.
Instead, her statement suggested that experience abroad is indulgent and unnecessary, and that she
would be well qualified to make effective foreign policy decisions based upon her learning from
books. Palin displaces attention from her own economic wealth when she presents cultural
sophistication as an elite marker.
capital of intercultural knowledge I expected to gain from the six months I spent in Bolivia.

Educational achievement and knowledge are immaterial and cannot directly be purchased. However, access to elite education institutions requires money, which restricts this type of capital to social classes that can afford it. Moreover, although cultural capital cannot be reproduced directly, being raised in a family where education is valued will make attending college seem “natural,” necessary, and realistically achievable. Education and international exposure are status symbols that require discipline and time, the availability of which is also influenced by class resources. The more restricted access to such knowledge and education, the higher its value will be. For example, a degree from Harvard University carries more cultural capital than a degree from Ohio State University because Harvard has stricter admission policies, more rigorous academic requirements, and more expensive tuition. Backpacking through South America builds cultural capital in a different way than does elite education or exposure to “high” culture (art, music, architecture). Backpacking is a kind of “subcultural education” that unfolds outside the institutions of “legitimate” culture. In an increasingly competitive academic environment, travel may also be seen as a way of enhancing one’s attractiveness to universities, a strategy evident in the practice of the gap year.

A gap year refers to the span of time during which some students choose to travel, work, or volunteer abroad after high school and before college. Comparing the Grand Tour with today’s gap year experience, Heath writes: “Once regarded as a

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6 A gap year is especially common among British students. The number of pre-university gap year students is estimated to be around 45,000 plus, per annum (Heath 2007:89)
fairly ‘alternative’ activity, pursued by a small minority of relatively privileged young people, taking ‘time out’ before engaging in more settled activities is now increasingly commonplace, yet nonetheless remains strongly associated with more privileged groups of students in pursuit of horizon-broadening experiences” (2007:100). A British gap year organization, Year Out Group, states on their website:

A well-structured year out can be part of the lifelong education process and can make a significant contribution to an individual's personal development. Employers and university staff increasingly attach importance to evidence of enterprise, maturity and sustained commitment both within and outside formal education…you are more likely to succeed at university and will acquire knowledge and experience that will give you the edge over those that go straight to university when it comes to applying for a job (http://www.yearoutgroup.org/Benefits-of-a-Structured-Year-Out.html).

Heath (2007: 94) identifies major claims of gap years:

The gap year provides opportunity for self-reflection, self-development and personal enrichment…‘gappers’ adapt particularly well to university life, and are less distracted from the freedoms of university life…and acquire ‘soft skills’ that are not necessarily acquired during formal education, such as communication skills, organizational skills, and team working skills.

By promoting and selling the gap year travel experience as a ticket to gaining a sense of self identity, these organizations turn the experience into a desirable commodity. For a price, one can buy an experience that can be converted into cultural capital and, hopefully, college admission and increased employability.

Young people are heavily targeted by commercial and other discourses encouraging them to travel overseas. Despite the uncertainty of my plans, my decision to take an academic leave of absence and buy a plane ticket to Bolivia was undoubtedly in response to my own desire to avoid the highly planned, hermetic
experience marketed by the study abroad programs. I was hesitant to travel with a
group of Americans on a study abroad program, and did not want my experience and
exposure to be defined by someone else or pre-determined by collective needs and
structure. A crafted cultural experience struck me as “inauthentic.” North American
and Western European Universities increasingly encourage students to study abroad,
often boasting the percentages of their students who travel to another part of the
world for a semester. ⁷ Wesleyan University’s Office of International Studies website
lists the assumed benefits of going abroad:

…exposure to another culture, increased knowledge of both yourself
and the world, a chance to study your fields of interest from a different
perspective, the opportunity to develop or improve your fluency in
another language, perhaps the experience of fieldwork and/or thesis
research, and of course seeing the world, making new friends, and
having a great time
(http://www.wesleyan.edu/ois/studyabroad/decide.html).

Whereas a privileged middle-class education was once associated with
exposure to “legitimate” European high culture and art, the valued cultural
experiences today are more diffuse and dispersed. Bourdieu’s model of cultural
capital assumes a unified cultural hierarchy, where “high” correlates with
“legitimate.” By contrast, the concept of subcultural capital implies a de-centered
cultural field shaped by multiple systems of value or taste hierarchies. Contemporary
backpackers are not consuming Bourdieu’s notion of High Culture, but rather a form
of what Sarah Thornton (1996) has called “youth subcultural capital.” Thornton
coined the term to describe the system of judgment she encountered in her
ethnographic work about club culture. In the club scene, “hipness” and “coolness”

⁷ There is far less of an emphasis for students in developing countries to study abroad because it is
economically unfeasible.
translate into subcultural capital, just as dyed hair, living in a *rat hole*, and immersing oneself in urban decay bestow subcultural capital in the punk scene (Traber, 2001). Imagined as ‘anti-bourgeois” rebellions, a variety of middle-class youth subcultures are rooted in diverse forms of subcultural capital. Organic food, obscure music, veganism, and liberalism are components of an influential subculture at Wesleyan University.

Similarly, backpackers and party hostel guests constitute a subculture that has its own sense of hierarchy and set of values. One shared backpacker value is frugality with money. The backpacker relationship to money is formed in opposition to the bourgeois norm. Whereas the display of wealth through conspicuous consumption is one index of success in middle class life, a visible lack of money expresses a rejection of “mainstream” values that increases one’s status as a backpacker. In theory, backpackers travel as cheaply as possible to minimize their consumption of the ‘Other’ and to keep with the local economy (Desforges 1998:183). “Roughing it” on a low budget requires relative deprivation and endurance of hardships, which also contributes to the “rite of passage” aspect of independent travel for many young people. While traveling on a budget is still valued today, I will argue that the party hostel strand of contemporary backpackers has obscured the older meanings of the practice by giving it a more explicitly consumerist slant.

A backpacker in Bolivia may still display her subcultural capital by taking the inexpensive local public transit system, rejecting a taxi that costs ten times as much.8 Since no map or documentation of the La Paz *truffi* and *micro* (van/bus) routes exist,

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8 Still, a taxi ride in La Paz rarely costs more than one US dollar.
the mere act of using the public transit system demonstrates a degree of insider knowledge of the city and an ability to navigate the maze-like truffí routes. Only an experienced backpacker with language proficiency and in-depth knowledge of the local community will be able to display her subcultural capital by utilizing the system.

Interaction with the local people and immersion in the local culture are also valued in backpacker subculture. They are instantiated in such acts as speaking Spanish, buying food from market vendors, and frequenting locally-owned businesses. While some contemporary youth travelers do engage with Bolivians in these ways, in my research I focus on backpackers whose exposure to local culture is through foreign-owned, commodified experiences. Backpackers who stay in party hostels have little interaction with Bolivians, but display their imaginary unity with the locals through consumption of local clothing and goods. With regard to backpackers in India, Elsrud (2001:612) asserts that within the backpacker value system, a pair of locally bought Indian pants or shirt testifies to the adventurous spirit of the traveler.³ Elsrud continues: “just as a business meeting at home requires shirt, tie, skirt or blouse, a gathering of experienced travelers has its clothing requirements as well.” Backpacker style in Bolivia is a fusion of hi-tech travel gear (quick dry, zip off, wrinkle free, compactable) and locally made clothing (wool mitten, hats, llama

³ While traveling in Peru, my brother and I met a group of three Scandinavian backpackers who were clad head to toe in local clothing. It was common to see gringos incorporate one or two local clothing items into their wardrobe, but these backpackers were unusual because their every clothing item and accessory (shirts, pants, sweaters, shoes, bags, wallets, belts, notebooks, backpacks, etc) appeared to be made in Peru or Bolivia. My brother and I speculated that they must have had all of their belongings stolen, but we later learned that they intentionally started the backpacking trip without any possessions. Their goal was to accumulate purely locally made items throughout the journey.
Footwear
Hiking boots, flip flops, or sturdy sandals ("Jesus creepers")

Pants (1 of 2 possibilities)
1) Quick dry, synthetic zip off pants, often with cargo pockets
2) "Happy pants" (Cotton striped colorful pants, Drawstring waist, 2 cargo pockets on side with wooden button. Tie string at bottom). Sold in markets all over Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, and parts of Argentina

“A Touch of llamita”
An Andean accessory, usually made of lana (sheep) or alpaca, and almost always has at least one llamita (llama) on it. Includes hats, scarves, legwarmers, sweaters, mittens, socks.

Jewelry
Handmade string bracelets and necklaces are usually bought from Argentine/Chilean hippies (artesanos) on the street.

Backpack
The only form of acceptable luggage. 100% of backpackers carry an internal frame backpack, and often a hi-performance day pack as well. The brand of one’s backpack can be an indicator of her nationality (Quechua is a French company, Patagonia is commonly worn by Americans, etc)

Fleece/Soft Shell Jacket
Worn especially when traveling (buses, planes, etc).

In addition to contributing to one’s on-the-road identity, locally-made items can retain powerful meaning when brought back home. The alpaca mittens I wear around the Wesleyan University campus are a constant reminder of my time abroad. I wear them
for warmth and sentimental value; they make me think of the market in Cochabamba where I bought them, and of my Bolivian sister who was with me. To my peers, the woven mittens symbolize successful cultural immersion; a reminder of the cultural capital I gained while abroad.

Like other subcultural practices, backpacking from party hostel to party hostel is still conceptualized as “non-mainstream,” even as it is constructed through increasingly rationalized market procedures (the La Paz hostels are broadly similar to one another, albeit with some differentiations). Notions of mainstream are always constructed, whether to claim or repudiate an association with the category. Relatively easy accessibility contributes to making cultural phenomena “mainstream,” in contrast to more restricted, subcultural experiences that require less common forms of knowledge and taste (Thornton). In the contemporary era of niche marketing, consumers are commonly addressed not as wanting to belong to the mainstream, but as wanting to distinguish themselves from it. I examine how backpacking in Bolivia and staying in party hostels continues to garner an alternative reputation, even as these experiences are made relatively accessible.

Niche marketing offers consumers a relatively accessible version of narrowly defined tastes. The commercial form of a specific taste is often appropriated from a subcultural, or “alternative” formation. Those who identify with the “original” subculture may resent the perceived incursion of an imagined mainstream into their practices. For example, wearing a cool, alternative, vintage T-shirt once signified possession of hipster subcultural tastes, and was restricted to a person willing to pick through second hand shops, thrift stores, or maybe a relative’s closet. But as soon as
stores like Urban Outfitters began mass marketing “alternative,” and “edgy,” urban looks, a consumer without subcultural knowledge could easily buy the product from an accessible retail store. Urban Outfitters enables a wider group of consumers to look “alternative” and “cool” without having to sift through old clothes or possess specialty knowledge of “socially restricted” tastes (Bourdieu, 1984). According to subculture theory, such popularization or mainstreaming reduces the distinctive value of the style.\(^{10}\)

In subcultural ideologies, what defines the real or genuine members of a subculture is “authenticity” (Muggleton: 2000:78). Within many subcultures, the “authentic” corresponds to the “elite.” The “authentic hipster” or connoisseur may occasionally shop at Urban Outfitters, but authentic taste is displayed by putting a look together oneself, as opposed to purchasing it ready-made. The true hipster will condescend to the wannabe who buys whole outfits at Urban Outfitters, just as the “authentic alternative backpacker” may feel ambivalent or guilty about enjoying a party hostel, even if it is packaged as an “alternative” experience.

Authenticity is central to backpacker ideology. Travelers face the anxiety that the places they visit are not ‘really’ different, that they are not the ‘real’ India or the ‘real’ Bolivia. John Frow calls this ‘authentication;’ the ascription of authenticity to places by labeling them as ‘traditional’ or ‘natural’ (1991; cited in Desforges 1998:181). The perceived threat of an “inauthentic” experience is heightened by commodification; backpackers fear that what they are consuming is a commodity

\(^{10}\) The commodification of the hipster aesthetic is especially offensive, as a principle of hipster subculture revolves around an anti-consumerism ideology (hence the used and vintage clothes).
manufactured for tourists as opposed to ‘the real thing.’ Identifying oneself as a “backpacker” is meant to denote authenticity, as opposed to more conventional labels like the “tourist” or the “traveler.” In theory, backpackers go to ‘real’ places which are geared towards locals, not to commercialized environments which are designed for tourists. My fieldwork in La Paz points to a contradiction in contemporary backpacker theory and practice. In La Paz and other backpacker destinations around the world, a burgeoning niche market infrastructure replaces more direct encounters with the offer of fabricated ‘authentic’ experiences.

By commodifying subcultural tastes and providing easy access to a formerly restricted experience, the backpacking industry plays a role comparable to that of a clothing store like Urban Outfitters. Both the “authentic hipster” and the “authentic backpacker” possess restricted knowledge of “rare” tastes and practices. Before the existence of a gringo-friendly infrastructure, backpackers were required to possess specialty knowledge and skills in order to successfully travel in a place like La Paz. Now, by contrast, the ‘average’ backpacker can consume the ‘alternative’ experience offered by party hostels even without Spanish fluency or local knowledge. Party hostels enable a broader public to more easily access a once “restricted” backpacking experience, which may result in the self-identified sub-culturalist thinking that the hostels are diluting the “authentic” valued style or experience. Both Urban Outfitters and party hostels absorb “subcultural” tastes, and transform them into commodities to be made available to wider, more heterogeneous mainstream markets.

From the era of the Grand Tour, world travel has been linked to a status transition in the lives of young people, serving as a catalyst for personal development,
identity transformation, increased independence, social maturity, and cultural capital through experiential education (Desforges, Elsrud, Maoz, Adkins, Murphy). In both historic and contemporary modes of youth travel, the trip requires the young adult to venture far from home, to an exotic destination. Travel fantasies play a role in imagining and encountering the ‘third world’ as a playground where self identity transformations can occur. O’Reilly (2007:1003) suggests, “Explorers are thought of as intrepid and brave, who physically move across vast distances of space with adventure, and excitement. The explorer is imagined as the lone individual pitting himself against the forces of nature, savage “Others”, and his own physical and psychological limits.” As an outlet for youth travelers to develop self identity, backpacking becomes a resource for ‘telling a story about themselves to themselves’ (Desforges 1998:189). Desforges continues,

Travel provides the potential for a new form of identity, allowing individuals to define themselves according to personal experiences of the world. By redefining the foundations of their selfhood, they attempt to shift away from the identity they share with others and to find space for a new individualized identity.

International youth travel most frequently occurs at some point during the time between the end of formal education and the beginning of full time employment, as part of the transition between school and work (Adkins and Grant 2007:189). Taking “time off” or “time out” to travel is prevalent among young people both during and after a college education. It is also common to travel in between life stages, whether it is between jobs, after a divorce, or spawned by a mid-life crisis. Gap years and semesters away from college extend the educational stage, delay entrance into the workforce, and put off “adulthood.” Whether prolonging school or
postponing work, both cases extend the transition between youth and adulthood, when individuals have the freedom to find out about themselves and the world before ‘settling down’ into adult life (Desforges 1998: 190).\(^{11}\)

The transitional nature of most trips abroad together with the constant spatial movement inherent in backpacking, position backpacking as a kind of self-designed rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood. In his work, *The Rites of Passage* (1909, transl 1960), Arnold Van Gennep introduced the term “liminality,” referring to the transitional stage in ritualized passage from one social status to another. Such passages, Van Gennep argued, could be reduced to three distinct phases: separation, liminality/transition, and reincorporation. Victor Turner (1967) further elaborated Van Gennep’s tri-partite scheme, characterizing the middle period as a temporary escape from “structured” social life, emphasizing its opposition to both the old status left behind and the new status that lies ahead. The liminal phase is an interval between states when one is neither here nor there. For contemporary, middle-class youth, international travel is a kind of rite of passage. Although there is no formal reincorporation, the time spent abroad may be analyzed as a protracted liminal phase. Indeed, best-selling non-fiction comedy writer Bill Bryson, published a book about backpacking in Europe. Its title highlights the liminal nature of travel abroad: *Neither Here nor There: Travel in Europe* (Bryson, 1991).

Foucault's concept of a *heterotopia* (1967) is helpful to explain the feeling of liminality that foreigners may feel in Bolivia. A heterotopia is a space that is

\(^{11}\)While such extended transitions have long been part of a ‘standard narrative’ of privileged youth, the transition to adulthood has been contracting for the poor, who increasingly find themselves positioned as adults by the justice system.
simultaneously mythic and real, and is a neutral zone beyond the authority of
traditional social structures and power relations. Much like the nature of most
backpacking trips, it is associated with a break in traditional time. Located in a
developing country that is its own kind of mythical space for westerners, I argue that
party hostel environments are a kind of heterotopia. Once in the heterotopia of a
party hostel, serious students and professionals have no reservations about getting
sloppy drunk at 8 PM, or dancing half nude on top of the bar. Furthermore, I would
suggest that the status of being unreachable and inaccessible by modern technology
(cell phones, email, radio) in a foreign country also contribute to a feeling of
liminality, liberation, and being "off the map." Backpacking is a kind of “time out”
from the structures spaces and routines of normal life.

Perceived both as heterotopia and as liminality, backpacking is a practice in
which subjects challenge themselves in ways they would not do at home.
Participation in risky and adventurous activities on the road is partly constitutive of
an authentic backpacker identity and is consistent with the “ordeal” or “test” aspect of
liminality (O'Reilly, Elsrud, Maoz). In addition, a “backpacker” distinguishes herself
from an institutionalized traveler—such as a “tourist”— based on willingness to take
risks, pursue adventure, and embrace serendipity. Someone who takes advantage of
the opportunity to swim with piranhas gains subcultural status, whereas the
backpacker who declines the opportunity to swim and stays in the boat, does not. By
engaging in a risky activity, travelers demonstrate subcultural capital to themselves
and others, conveying that they are both brave and competent (Elsrud 2001:608). In
addition, participation in activities that are perceived as dangerous increases the
imagined and sought after exotification of third world destinations, while it simultaneously echoes colonial explorations in which progress was symbolized by risk and adventure.

Many young adults from middle-class backgrounds have never faced meaningful danger, adventure, or risk, and have spent the majority of their lives in safe, adult-supervised institutions with regulated schedules. A teenager’s day is generally created without her input, and defined by her high school class schedule and after school activities. In addition to being confined temporally, teenagers are typically constrained spatially, as institutional schedules regulate where they go as well as when. Therefore, to youth travelers, part of the appeal of backpacking is the newfound freedom from authority, flexibility to create their own schedule (or lack-thereof) and ability to be responsible for their own physical movement. In his ethnography *Street Corner Society*, William Whyte (1943) explains how his own middle class background contributed to his interest in studying an Italian Slum as a young adult.”

My home life had been very happy and intellectually stimulating—but without adventure. I had never had to struggle over anything. I knew lots of nice people, but almost all of them came from good, solid middle-class backgrounds like my own. In college, of course, I was associating with middle-class students and middle-class professors. I knew nothing about the slums…I knew nothing about the life in the factories, fields, or mines—except what I had gotten out of books. So I came to feel that I was a pretty dull fellow (281).

Perhaps middle-class backpackers from around the world come to Bolivia in search of challenge and adventure because of their relatively safe, stable, and supervised upbringing. Risk-taking is associated with a specifically youthful pleasure, as if one is postponing "real life" filled with adult responsibilities. Young
people often differentiate themselves from an imagined adult world by inverting normative behavior and rejecting bourgeois models of decorum and restraint. Catering to this niche-market, the most popular tourist activities in Bolivia all incorporate an element of physical exertion; they place the body in extreme situations, whether on a mountain top or in a bar. The experience offered by party hostels parallels practices of “Spring Break,” encouraging a kind of “risky” fun and pleasure experience for youth. In the following chapter, I will further explore these aspects of party hostel subculture.
Chapter two:
Backpackers and the Consumption of Adventure

Arriving at Loki hostel in La Paz to conduct field research felt dramatically different from what I had experienced months earlier when, together with my brother, I had gone to visit a friend at The Point party hostel in Cuzco, Peru. My intention to conduct fieldwork immediately caused me to feel more like a participant-observer than a participant. Even though I was also living and traveling in South America with a backpack, I felt distanced from the backpacker "scene." A week earlier I had been traveling in the Bolivian Amazon with two friends, Nat and Olli. They were both aware of my plans to study party hostels in La Paz, and the three of us viewed both the people who stayed in them and the venues themselves with condescension. The three of us spoke Spanish and maneuvered comfortably in venues where there was no English; confident that our individual experiences traveling in Bolivia were more authentic than those being had by the party hostel clientele. Our plan was to travel back to La Paz together from the Amazon, then go our separate ways: I would begin research in the hostels, Nat would catch a bus back to Cochabamba, and Olli would make his way to Lima. However, curiosity and the appeal of postponing long, cold
bus rides led Nat and Olli to decide to stay a night with me at Loki hostel in La Paz.

The three of us shared a taxi from the La Paz airport to the hostel. I knew, from months living in Bolivia, that as a general rule a taxi driver needs an address, not just the name of a hostel. As we piled into the taxi with our backpacks, I frantically searched for the slip of paper with the Loki address. But to our great surprise, the taxi driver knew the exact location of Loki Hostel and did not need the address. All the gringos want to be taken there, he said. In retrospect, this interchange is even more notable, considering that Loki had only been open for sixteen months, and that the hostel exterior is not particularly distinguishable in size or style from its surroundings. The building does not call attention to itself. "Loki hostel" is painted in white letters on the side of the red building. Perhaps most noteworthy are the massive, heavy, wooden entrance doors. Walking through the doors to enter the hostel, one has a sense of crossing a powerful threshold that symbolizes the separation between the outside world from the inside.

Figure 2 Exterior of Loki Hostel
The receptionist greeted us in perfect English, and the hostel was buzzing with backpackers conversing in English. I was shocked. I felt as if I were no longer in South America, but had somehow stepped through a portal into an English-speaking enclave. I had become accustomed to the casual organization and lack of efficiency that characterize most Bolivian establishments, and right away I took note of how well-run this hostel seemed to be. The receptionist had received our online reservation and had three freshly-made beds waiting for us. Our names were already written on the dry-erase board behind the desk. The friendly receptionist gave each of us a “Loki hostel” wristband, and instructed us to wear them at all times in the hostel. Like the taxi driver who safely deposited us at Loki, everything about our arrival at this hostel was smooth and affirming. The implicit message was that having had the wisdom to come there, now all needs would be attended to and desires fulfilled. From the outset, the hostel struck us as an “all inclusive resort” for backpackers.

Nat, Olli, and I were shown to our dorm room, where we dropped off our backpacks and secured our valuables in the lockers provided. The number of beds in each room varied, but a typical dorm room had six to twelve beds. The large majority of Loki hostel rooms were dorm style, although there were also a few private rooms available. The fewer beds in a room, the more expensive the stay. We knew we had roommates because their belongings were strewn all over the room. I noticed an ipod and speakers deposited casually and openly on one of the beds. Hypothetically, anyone from the hostel could have entered our room since the door did not lock. Modeling the behavior of our roommates, we, too, left our belongings in the open
room and walked upstairs to the hostel bar.

Upon entering the bar, we each recognized individuals we had met during our travels. Nat and I chatted with three backpackers (two Irish, one Aussi) we had met on our Pampas tour in the Amazon, and Olli reunited with three Brits with whom he had previously traveled but had not seen for a couple of weeks. We all commented on how remarkable it was to meet one another again, there, in the Loki bar.

We had agreed in advance to leave the hostel and go out to lunch in La Paz, but the temptation to remain in the Loki bar and order a comfort food lunch with our friends was too attractive to pass up. We were embarrassed to be ordering gringo food in the hostel after having made fun from afar of the kids who eat their meals there and never leave. But despite ourselves, there we were. We inhaled an Irish breakfast with a side of French fries at 1 PM as our first meal in La Paz. Over the next several days of my stay in Loki hostel, I continued to recognize other backpackers I had seen in Rurrenebaque (Amazon). The pull of the gringo trail was very strong, and I found myself right in the heart of it.

The voices of Johnny Cash, Tom Petty, and Bob Dylan were booming from the bar. Nat was sick with a stomach bug, so Olli and I went together to the bar that night. It was my first night at Loki, and I really appreciated how Olli’s company and extroverted energy made it easier for me to strike up conversations with strangers. He and I joked that we were a shmoozing team, sometimes picking out an interesting looking backpacker from across the bar and making it our goal to get to know that person. I did not take notes that night while socializing in the bar, but two conversations stuck out:
Around 8 PM, we met a thirty-year old English woman who had several empty glasses in front of her and was already swaying on her bar stool. She was thrilled to talk to (at) us about turning thirty, her breast operation, tampons, and her life as a sex addict. She needed little encouragement to share, which she did in a very loud voice. A man who seemed to be with the intoxicated woman invited the two of us to Vivian's. "What is Vivian's?" I naively asked him. He described that it is a place to buy cocaine, good stuff that is not mixed with speed. Again, without encouragement or prompting by us, he told us about his visit to San Pedro prison, and how he had bought coke from the inmates. He urged us a second time to come out with them, saying "You can order coke with your beer!"

By 11PM, the bar was packed full of bodies, everyone standing up and bumping into each other. That's when I met Osgur O Ciardha, the Irish owner and manager of Loki, La Paz. Osgur is 29 years old and has a shaved head with a wild blond mohawk running down the middle.¹² I felt that a positive interaction with Osgur was crucial to the success of my project and the opportunity to continue field research in his hostel. Holding a drink and leaning against the bar, I casually introduced myself to him. My goals were to succinctly explain my project, gain permission to do research inside his hostel, and be cool and likeable while doing it. To my relief, Osgur was warm, encouraging, and supportive. He told me the location of his office in the hostel, and invited me to talk to him anytime.

¹² Inspired by Osgur’s mohawk, there is a popular facebook group called “I got a mohawk in Loki La Paz.” The group’s description: “To all the punters, who for whatever reason got Mohawks in Loki La Paz.”
Nat and Olli were long gone, and after several days at Loki, I checked myself into The Adventure Brew hostel. I already knew two things about this hostel: guests get a free pancake breakfast and a complimentary home brewed beer from the on-site micro-brewery. Unlike the seemingly impenetrable front doors of Loki, the Adventure Brew hostel's facade is made of glass, and the reception area is visible from the street.

Again, I opted to stay in the cheapest dorm room. Adventure Brew charged 55 Bs ($7USD) per night, significantly more than the 40 Bs ($5USD) at Loki. Considering that it was one of the most expensive hostels I had stayed in, I was surprised and a little bit confused when the receptionist handed me a stack of blankets and sheets for me to make my own bed. The hostel has two locations: the main building where I checked-in, and "the annex" which is located a block and a half away. A Bolivian doorman accompanied me to the annex, where I would sleep. In total, the hostel has 120 beds.
Six bunk beds were crowded into my room. After finding a nook for my backpack, I read the dry erase board in the hallway with hostel announcements:

TONIGHT! Traffic light party! It's your chance to flirt outrageously! (Or not!) Drinks promotions throughout the night! Get your green, orange, or red sticker with your free beer. GREEN- Up for it! ORANGE- maybe, convince me! RED- no frikin chance! Free condom with every pint!

I continued walking down the hallway and another sign caught my attention. This one asked me please not to make a lot of noise in the morning because some "guests have just arrived from a 20 hour bus ride... and the rest are suffering from a hangover."
I invited my friend Nalina to join me at the Adventure Brew bar that night. Nalina is an Irish student who was living in Bolivia for a year and studying at the University in La Paz. She could easily fit in and socialize with the crowd at the hostel bar, but she had a very different relationship with the country than most of the hostel guests. Nalina and I knew each other because she had lived with my Bolivian host family in Cochabamba before I had arrived. We contrasted ourselves from the hostel guests, joking (but seriously) that due to the combination of our Spanish fluency, Bolivian boyfriends, and knowledge of Bolivian culture, we were superior to them. Nevertheless, we had no trouble mixing easily with the other guests at the bar.

The Adventure Brew hostel bar is located on the top floor of the hostel's main building. It's an asymmetrical, six-sided space that has one entire wall made of windows that provide a sweeping view of La Paz. Natural light drenches the space. Unlike Loki, where you can spend all day in the hostel bar and forget you are in Bolivia, the Adventure Brew bar embraces its location in La Paz, with the panoramic
view of the city as its highlight. Three 8-foot long wooden picnic tables match the shiny wood floor and railing. The bar has the outdoorsy feel of a mountain resort mixed with a modern, urban space. Small candles on each table create a homey glow, and a metallic sign advertising "Saya Beer" adorns the lime green wall. A flat screen television is suspended in the corner, and three colorful 1 ft x 2 ft chalk boards hang behind the bar, advertising special drinks and happy hour. Like Loki, the hostel offers a dinner buffet every night, but the bar has limited hours and it does not constitute the spatial center of the hostel. Architecturally, the building is significantly more open onto the landscape of La Paz than the other hostels. The physical layout of each hostel seems to parallel its respective level of interaction with the outside world.

Figure 5 The Adventure Brew Hostel bar

Nalina and I sat with three English gap year students and an American backpacker from California. Of course we all talked about our respective trips, and within minutes discovered that one of the English students had met a friend of mine from high school on a farm in Argentina. While this was undoubtedly a coincidence, I had become used to such connections. Travelers of diverse nationalities recognized
each other all the time on the gringo trail.

One of the bar workers, a gringo in his twenties named Rosco, approached our table holding name tags and colorful markers. The color in which we wrote our names would signify what color stoplight we would be for the night. Rosco asked me,

"What color do you want?"
"Orange," I responded.
“Okay then.” He said, and handed me a green marker.

Around 11 PM, Rosco announced "free shots!" and we were all served a neon green alcoholic substance in a small shot glass. Shortly after, someone at my table ordered a pitcher of beer, which meant that we each received a free condom.

The condoms were individually wrapped in colorful origami-like cardboard pouches that advertised Gravity Assisted Mountain Biking as the place to go for biking down the World's Most Dangerous Road.

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The "Death Road" is perhaps the most popular backpacker activity in La Paz, and Gravity Assisted Mountain Biking is the leading outfitter and guide, offering a dangerous and scenic 64 km downhill ride to Coroico. There is an average of one hundred motor fatalities a year, and countless crosses dot the side of the road to mark where people have slipped off the cliff to their death. The same road that has been a source of recurrent tragedy for Bolivians is now marketed as an exciting, high risk bike circuit for backpackers. Farmers who live in Coroico and in the Yungas have been risking their lives for years out of necessity. Although they have no choice but to travel on this road to sell their goods in La Paz, but they do not seek or receive

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13 There are over eight motor fatalities per month.
recognition or commendation for their bravery. But when gringo backpackers
complete the trip, they are certified as courageous and rewarded with a T-shirt that
reads: “I’ve survived the world’s most dangerous road.” As Frank Furedi (1997)
remarked, “to be at risk is no longer about what you do, but who you are.” The
guidebook, Lonely Planet Bolivia, has a special section entitled “The World's Most
Dangerous Road:”

It's official: The road between La Paz and Coroico is 'the World's Most
Dangerous Road' (WMDR), according to an Inter-American
Development Bank (IDB) report. Given the number of fatal accidents
that occur on it, the moniker is well deserved. An average of twenty-six vehicles per year disappear over the edge into the great abyss. Those up for an adrenaline rush will be in their element, but if
you're unnerved by a gravel track just 3.2 m wide-just enough for one
vehicle- sheer 600m drops, hulking rock overhangs, and waterfalls that spill across and erode the highway, your best bet is to bury your head
and not look till its over...Many agencies offering the La Cumbre to
Coroico mountain bike plunge give travelers the t-shirts boasting about surviving the road. To date, eight people - although numbers vary according to who you talk to- have died doing the 64 km trip (with a 3600 m vertical drop), and readers have reported close encounters and nasty incidents (2007, 77-78).

Figure 6: The World’s Most Dangerous Road

It is no coincidence that the Adventure Brew hostel passed out condoms
advertising for Gravity Assisted Mountain Biking. The hostel and the tour company
promote each other because they are co-owned. The Gravity Assisted website
advertises for the Adventure Brew hostel on the bottom of every page. As I became more familiar with the popular gringo backpacker restaurants, night clubs, hostels, and tour companies, I learned that these businesses are all connected by a network of foreign owners.

Framed posters for the English-owned Oliver's Travels pub adorn the walls of Loki. The brochure for the British Curry House (also English-owned) can be found next to the reception desk at each hostel. The popular nightclub, RamJam, is owned by Remo, the co-owner of Adventure Brew hostel. A sign at the Adventure Brew book exchange reads “If you can’t find what you are looking for here, you should check out the awesome book exchange at Gravity Assisted.” Gringo hostel workers get discounts at the Dutch-owned Sol y Luna bar. Flyers and posters for Orange Club litter Loki hostel, which is co-owned by Rick of Sol y Luna and The Star of India. The same English-owned tour company, Kanoo Tours, has a booth inside each of the three hostels, and on busy nights, Loki contracts a private bus to Orange Club.

I later learned that the foreigners who own these micro businesses catering to backpackers are all friends and have monthly "meetings." As Davie, the owner of Wild Rover, described the meetings, the woman working behind the bar choked on her drink. "Meetings?!" she exclaimed, "more like you all get shit faced together once a month." Grinning, Davie agreed, but insisted that they do make some real decisions. For example, as a group, they decided to raise the price of beer. This inter-connected web of foreign-owned, gringo-friendly establishments dominates the La Paz tourist information: they are recommended by Wikipedia's travel site (Wiki
Travel), promoted in the Loki hostel travel guide, and many are featured in Lonely Planet.

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Although I appreciated the novelty of the local microbrewery and the excitement of the other guests, I do not enjoy beer, and was physically unable to finish my glass. Luckily, my new friends were happy to share my beer, and they included me in the table drinking game even though I wasn't drinking. Destiny's Child was playing in the background, and I was still examining the packaging of my new backpacker-friendly "Death Road" condom.

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The Gravity Assisted condoms simultaneously promote drinking, sex and extreme adventure travel, all activities with an element of risk that appeal to backpacker markets. Biking down the World's Most Dangerous Road involves a conscious decision to put oneself in physical danger. Backpackers distinguish themselves from other travelers by actively courting risk instead of taking strategic steps to avoid it (Adkins: 2007 190). Whereas a primary concern for most travelers is staying safe on the road, backpackers intentionally expose themselves to dangerous situations. Adventurous travel adds to a narrative of excitement and unpredictability, a willful departure from what they may perceive as the safe, boring, restrictive routines of middle class life. In her analysis, Risk Creation in Traveling, Torun Elsrud (2001:598) writes: “When taking risks, life is carved out rather than merely lived in the imprints of others.” For many backpackers, biking down the “death road”
is a meaningful act of self creation, and signifies that rather than allowing life to pass
them by, they are actively embracing it.

Another famous attraction on the gringo trail is a visit to the working mines in
Potosi. The tour promises that the visitor will experience the actual, dangerous
working conditions of the miners; those who take the tour must crawl though
underground passages, climb down shaky ladders, and risk exposure to potentially
harmful (deadly) gases.14 Lonely Planet’s description of the Potosi mine tour
incorporates quintessential elements to titillate any backpacker:

A visit to the cooperative mines will almost surely be one of the most
memorable experiences you’ll have in Bolivia, providing an
opportunity to witness working conditions that are the most grueling
imaginable. You may be left stunned and/or ill…Mine visits aren’t
easy, and the low ceilings and steep, muddy passageways are best
visited in your worst clothes. You’ll feel both cold and hot at times,
there will likely be a bit of crawling through narrow shafts and the
altitude can be extremely taxing…You’ll be exposed to noxious
chemicals and gases, including silica dust (the cause of silicosis),
arsenic gas, and acetylene vapors, as well as asbestos deposits.
Anyone with doubts or medical problems should avoid these tours.
The plus side is that you can speak with the friendly miners, who will
share their insights and opinions about their difficult lot (2007: 265-
266).

Below this description is a small text box reading WARNING!:

The cooperatives are not museums, but working mines are fairly
nightmarish places. Anyone planning to take a tour needs to realize
that there are risks involved…Accidents can also happen—explosions,
falling rocks, runaway trolleys, etc…Visiting the mines is a serious
decision. If you’re undeterred, you’ll have an eye opening and
unforgettable experience.

14 I went on this tour in July, 2008. I was given special clothes to wear, and a helmet with a headlamp
attached. The three of us in my tour group brought coca leaves, dynamite, and soft drinks to the
miners as gifts. At the end of the tour, the guide insisted that we QUICKLY take pictures of ourselves
holding a stick of ignited dynamite. At the last possible minute, he took off running with the dynamite
to drop it before the explosion. I will not forget the feeling of the intense pressure and noise of
exploding dynamite, nor the extreme discomfort of breathing such poisonous air for hours.
Just as surviving the death road bike tour has become a status symbol among backpackers in Bolivia, enduring a life-threatening Potosi mine tour is also a form of symbolic capital in backpacker subculture. Even the image of working-class suffering has become a commodity for middle-class consumption, an ultimate form of what Marx (1867) called commodity fetishism. In addition to risking exposure to real danger, the attraction of visiting the mine includes fascination with the “Other.” The miners’ lives, so drastically different from the lives of most visitors, are packaged as exotic and appealing. For many tourists in a poor country like Bolivia, the stereotype of the despondent native connotes authenticity. The experience of working class conditions offered by the tour delivers a commodified version of the “real Bolivia” sought out by many tourists.

Perhaps it is a similar desire to consume a subordinated “Other” which draws backpackers in La Paz to visit San Pedro prison, the largest jail in Bolivia, where 75 percent of the inmates have allegedly committed a drug-related offense. Tourists were once officially allowed to visit the jail, but those tours were stopped because many visitors were coming to buy cocaine. Presently, backpackers continue to visit the prison, and apparently are able to enter as long as they offer the guards a sufficient bribe. The element of illegality lends such visits an additional frisson of danger, which contributes to the effect of authenticity. Both the mine tour and a visit to the prison have enhanced value as “the real Bolivia” as opposed to more overtly constructed performances.

A "jungle tour" in the Bolivian Amazon is also high on the backpacker's agenda. Backpackers are drawn to the opportunity to swim with piranhas and
alligators, and tramp through the swampy wetlands in rubber boots looking for anaconda snakes.15 Climbing the Huayna Potosi, a 6,088 meter snow covered mountain that takes 2-3 days to summit is also a top backpacker activity outside of La Paz. The climb requires the use of ice axes, specialized cold-weather gear, altitude medicine, ropes and harnesses.16 Part of the allure and challenge of climbing this mountain is being able to function at such extreme altitude. The Huayna Potosi is Bolivia’s fourth highest peak. To put this in perspective, 6088 meters is higher than all of the peaks in the alps, and all of the mountains in the United States with the exception of Alaska’s Mt. McKinley. While each of the aforementioned activities requires the backpacker proactively to seek out risky, dangerous situations, they are part of the expanding market of commercially packaged “adventure.” Backpacker businesses, such as Gravity Assisted Mountain Biking, transform adventure into a commodity available for purchase, thereby redefining the notion of an “authentic experience.” Walking down the popular backpacker streets in La Paz, one is bombarded with posters, pamphlets, and tour agencies offering Amazon tours and mountain treks.

While there is undoubtedly an element of excess in biking down the death road, touring a working mine, or putting oneself in other “extreme” situations, a softer environment of excess is offered by the hostels themselves. Party hostels challenge backpackers in more hedonistic ways, creating a space for promiscuous sex, illicit

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15 Piranhas are able to sense blood in the water, and are attracted to it because it is a potential source of meat. I went on this jungle tour, but it was recommended that I not swim with the piranhas because I was menstruating that day.
16 I climbed this in June, 2008. It was breathtakingly (literally) beautiful and extremely challenging, but due to the serious possibility that I was about to suffer frostbite in my extremities, I had to descend on the third day at 4 AM.
drugs, binge drinking, and hard partying. Whether testing the body through demonstrations of skill and courage or through excessive consumption, risky behaviors become meaningful modes of self expression. The La Paz hostels market themselves as a reward for getting through the dangerous ordeals that take place outside the hostel. Like the brave warrior who celebrates his exploits by getting drunk after the battle, the adventurous tourist earns the right to hedonistic indulgence.17

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I had not planned to go out that night beyond the Adventure Brew bar, but a couple of my new friends convinced me to accompany them to a local nightclub, Mongo’s. In the interests of research, I went along. We danced until three in the morning. As I nursed one beer all night, I watched the crowd down one after another. The California guy provocatively removed his shirt and danced on top of a bar table. The next time I looked in that direction, he was making out with someone he had just met at the bar. A German girl from the hostel was so inebriated that she had trouble standing up and seemed not to recognize me anymore.

Figure 7 (Left): A hostel guest dancing at Mongo's (Right): Shirtless men in the Loki Hostel bar.

17 The very name “Loki” evokes Valhalla, the Norse heaven for warriors.
I ran into the German girl the next morning in the hostel bathroom, and asked:
"How are you...better than last night?" She paused, and looked up, as if trying to remember. "OK. Why...? Did I see you last night?" I also saw Rosco in the morning. When I asked how he was doing, he responded, "Horrible. So hungover. I drank so much last night that my teeth were floating." Another couple, seeing me in the morning, doubted that I had gone out the night before: "But you're not hungover?! You look way too good to be hungover," The woman said incredulously. The fact that I chose not to ingest as much alcohol as I was physically capable created a level of distance between me and the party hostel clientele.

Looking forward to the publicized "free pancake breakfast," I sleepily wandered into the annex kitchen, still wearing my pajamas. My morning attire fit in with that of the other exhausted backpackers who sat around the table drinking tea, eating pancakes, and chatting. The breakfast scene was smaller and a more unified dynamic compared to Loki or Wild Rover. Gathered around a table in the hostel kitchen, guests were engaged and had a seemingly genuine interest in each other. I was introduced to everyone at the table, and was offered more pancakes smothered with dulce de leche than I could eat. An Israeli backpacker told us about his experience volunteering for a month at a wildlife reserve in Villa Tunari. Two American students had just finished their study abroad program in Chile, and were now traveling for a few weeks before returning home.

I appreciated eating breakfast in a location other than the bar and I was struck

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18 Dulce de Leche literally translates as "sweet milk." It is a delicious, caramel-like spread that originated in Argentina, and is popular in many parts of Central and South America.
19 The wildlife reserve in Chapare is called ‘Parque Machia.’
by how the context of the space influenced the social dynamic. The physical position of the bar within the hostel reflects and reinforces its importance. At Loki and Wild Rover, the bar is the central point of the hostel, both socially and architecturally. One cannot walk to a guest room, the computers, or the bathroom without passing the bar. This layout appears to promote spending large amounts of time there, and encourages drinking at all hours of the day and night. In contrast, at Adventure Brew hostel, the bar is not the first place guests stumble into in the morning, and accordingly, drinking is less dominant. Unlike Wild Rover, the kitchen at Adventure Brew is open for use by the guests, and there is much less physical separation between where the Bolivian staff prepare the food and the area where the backpackers eat. Just as the Adventure Brew Bar is designed to embrace the La Paz skyline, the open kitchen decreases both the spatial and social distance between the Bolivian staff and the gringo guests.

A Bolivian teenager, Willhy, cooks pancakes for the guests every morning. When breakfast was over, I lingered in the kitchen while he was cleaning up to ask him questions about the hostel and his experience working there. I took notes while he mopped the floor, washed dishes, and sponged the tables. Referring to the backpackers, Willhy told me "they all drink a lot, they wake up with a head ache…they drink so much!"20 When I asked about the drug scene at the hostel, Willhy first quietly said "yes"...then "I don't know..." He turned back to the sink and resumed washing dishes. I took that as a cue that he was not comfortable talking about drugs within the hostel with me. His ambivalence suggested that although he had more to say, he was reluctant to share it with me, an outsider.

Even though Adventure Brew markets itself as a party hostel, it also seems to

20 "Toman muchos, se levanta con dolor de cabeza, tanto chupan!"
be differentiated in some respects from Loki and Wild Rover. Referring to Loki, an Adventure Brew bar worker said: "It's never a break over there. They go out every night, get smashed, sleep the whole day, then start all over again the next night. They barely leave the hostel." Adventure Brew’s relatively more restrained style may be a result of its part local ownership. Reflecting on the differences between the hostels, Remo, a Bolivian co-owner of the Adventure Brew hostel, explained: "Adventure Brew is a party hostel, but it's in the middle…it's not to the extreme."  

Remo was friendly and interested in my research, and agreed to meet with me for an interview in the hostel bar. Although I had been told that he spoke English, we conducted the interview in Spanish. We spoke about the insular aspect of the hostel, and I shared my impression of the hostel as a gringo bubble in the heart of La Paz. Remo agreed with that characterization to some extent, but insisted that there is meaningful interaction between the hostel and the outside world. "We have more Bolivian culture at this hostel because we are 50 percent Bolivian" he told me. For example, the name of the hostel's home brew, Saya Beer, is a reference to a Bolivian dance style, Saya.

![Saya Beer sign](image)

Figure 8 A sign for the local homebrew, “Saya Beer.”

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21 “pero intermedio...es un party hostel pero no es extremo”...
Before it became The Adventure Brew Hostel for backpackers, the space was a hotel for Pacenos (people from La Paz). In April of 2006, Remo and Dave (Kiwi co-owner of Gravity Assisted Mountain Biking) remade the hostel and targeted backpackers as guests under the motto "Bed, Bikes, and BBQ." Presently, the hostel caters exclusively to foreigners, and Bolivians are not allowed to stay there. According to Remo, this is because Bolivians and gringos have different values. For example, even though the Adventure Brew hostel is expensive compared to other lodging options in the city, the rooms do not have televisions. The gringos have no interest in television, whereas a Bolivian who paid this much for a room would expect a television. Laughing, Remo continued: "Bolivians wouldn't want to drink or eat at the bar...they would go out, where it is cheaper!" People accuse them of being racist for not letting in Bolivians. "But it's not racist," Remo assured me, "it just wouldn't work."

In the early weeks of the Adventure Brew hostel, Remo said, they tried playing Bolivian music in the bar, but the guests didn't like it. "It doesn't interest them. They only want gringo music." Equally unpopular were the Bolivian dishes (picante de pollo, silpancho, sopa de mani) that they initially tried serving at the buffet bar dinners. "They don't want to eat silpancho or piquemacho. Only one in twenty backpackers asks for Comida Boliviana (Bolivian food)."

At the beginning of the interview, I told Remo that I was going to Tiawanaku

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22 Silpancho and Piquemacho are traditional Bolivian dishes. Silpancho is a typical dish from Cochabamba, consisting of rice, potatoes, and fried milanesa meat, with a fried egg and chopped vegetables served on top. Piquemacho small pieces of assorted meat (chorizo, beef, sausage, hot dog, utter) served over a bed of French fries. Onions, peppers, hard boiled egg, ketchup, mustard, and mayonnaise are sprinkled on top.
later that night to celebrate the winter solstice and the Aymara New Year. On this night, thousands of Bolivians go to the historic site of Tiwanaku, (outside of La Paz) and wait all night for the sunrise. The Aymara people are one of Bolivia's largest indigenous populations, and that night, June 20th, was the most important night of the year for them. Continuing to reflect on most guests desire for familiarity, Remo referred to my upcoming visit to Tiwanaku as something "they" would never do. "For example, they don't go to Tiwanaku," he said, “they are traveling to get to know people who are like themselves... They want to travel, but they feel lonely, so they stay in familiar places."

When I asked Remo if there were many drugs in the hostel, he told me in a more serious tone that they do not permit people with drugs to enter. "We have to have control. We have to take care of them. We are like their parents, and sometimes there are problems." He continued, "They think they will stay one day, and they stay here three. It's a community, it's safe."
Brushing my teeth on Saturday morning at the Wild Rover hostel, I couldn't help but notice a colorful sign taped to the mirror in front of me: "JUNGLE PARTY! SAT NIGHT!" When I walked upstairs towards the bar, I passed two more handwritten signs advertising the jungle party, then another when I checked my email. The party was that night in the Wild Rover bar.

Two women entered my room in their jungle costumes. They wore cut up green t-shirts, green leggings, and Rambo style headbands. The green face paint, they explained, was leftover from when they were in Thailand. Felix, an Irish gap year student who had been traveling for eleven months chimed in from his top bunk: "I can't dress up tonight because I dressed up soooo many nights in Cuzco...I almost
won best costume, but was robbed by a guy who actually travels with a superman costume. I spent three hours making an eye patch!" My prediction was confirmed when he told me that this all took place at his hostel, Loki. Felix had ended up staying at Loki Cuzco for two weeks. He explained that he had intended to work at the hostel, but ended up just drinking and partying the whole time. Felix's experience is extremely common. The receptionists at Wild Rover told me that most guests end up staying at the hostel for a few more days or even weeks longer than they originally planned.23

Felix became both my friend and a primary informant. He had been backpacking for almost a year, seeking out party hostels all over South America. I came to regard Felix as a seasoned, party hostel expert, and I believe he would say the same thing about himself. He seemed both amused and intrigued by my project, and was always happy to share personal stories with me and explain the intricacies of party hostel life and culture. Felix referred to them as "super hostels" because the establishment provides everything, so you never have to leave.

Around 10:30 PM I decided to walk upstairs to the jungle party. I had nothing jungle-themed to wear, and had not convinced myself to spend all day making a costume in the name of research. Before I went up to the bar, I had a conversation with Felix:

"So is it a party hostel faux pas to go to a theme party without being dressed up?"
"No, but you'll just be that lame American researcher chick." he smiled from his top bunk.

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23 Another Wesleyan friend who coincidentally stayed in Wild Rover confessed to me that she had intended to stay there for only 2 nights, but ended up staying there for two weeks.
"Ok, Ok." I said, and dug through my backpack to find my horribly un-sexy mesh bug shirt that I had brought to wear in the Amazon for insect protection. Looking through the mesh fabric of my beekeeper-style shirt, I walked up to the jungle party.

About fifty percent of the people in the bar were in costume. Most of the women were wearing suggestive jungle costumes, with low cut, cleavage-exposing T-shirts, short green skirts, dainty wings, and heavy makeup. I felt a little underdressed in my bug shirt, and noted that no one commented on it the entire night! I realized that my refusal to take the costume requirement seriously isolated me. I shared a table with a group of friendly Dutch backpackers who spoke beautiful English and who had wrapped leaves in their hair. I watched another table play a drinking game called "ring of fire," but was not invited to join and never understood the rules. In search of people to talk to, I joined a group of Belgians in a game of pool. When I asked an Australian backpacker how long he had been staying at the hostel, he responded, “You could cut my liver in half and count the rings.”

Figure 9  Wild Rover Jungle Party (Center): Dutch backpackers (note the gringo uniform alpaca sweater on the right)
The morning after the jungle party, I had no idea of the time when I awoke. The room was pitch black, and the majority of my roommates were still asleep. Not wanting to challenge dorm room hostel etiquette by turning on the lights, I used my headlamp flashlight to get dressed and gather my belongings in the dark room. It felt like 8:00 am, but I later learned that it was already noon. I wondered at what time it would be okay to turn on the dorm room light. I was getting in the rhythm of party hostel life, but I hated how just being in the hostel made me feel lazy. Even though I was "hanging out with a purpose," I felt guilty spending so much time on my bunk in the hostel when I could be out exploring La Paz. At least Felix was usually there with me, always ready to chat.

He indulged me with story after story, many of them focused around drugs. Felix enjoyed having me as an audience for recounting his backpacking drug adventures. He told me, "In Cuzco, we'd be up till the next day drinking beer and doing lines." He ended one story by describing how he stumbled back to Loki at six in the morning. He told me about a local drug dealer in Cuzco who sold coke to the gringos inside the hostel, and was later barred from entering. Felix kept a journal of his year of travel, but bragged that he only had blank pages to show for his weeks in Cuzco. "The Australians are the craziest," he told me, "coke is so expensive in Australia, so they come here and go fucking insane for it." Later, our Australian roommate asked us if we minded if he did coke in the room. Preparing to do a line, he told us,

"I met some hippies in the witches market who sold me a lot of stuff. I can give ya their number if ya want."
"Yeah, well, if it's any good." Felix answered
"Yeah, sure man. I'll let you know how it goes tonight."
I told Felix that one thing I didn't yet understand about party hostel life was how guests hook up in the hostel, since everyone sleeps in communal dorm rooms. "People just have sex in the dorm rooms. You go in in the middle of the night. In Cuzco there was an American girl who became known as 'that American girl' because she moaned so loudly. Some people just have no respect for themselves. Pretty funny though."  

La Paz has two famous coke bars: *Vivian’s*, and *Bar 36*. Felix told me that La Paz is "crazzzzy"*, and said that he has been hearing about Bar 36 since he was in Columbia. As if doing cocaine were something we all had in common, my roommates openly discussed the Bolivian cocaine price and quality.

Drugs use is prevalent among backpackers in all of the La Paz party hostels. Months after she had stopped working at Loki, I interviewed Catherine, a 21 year old Irish woman who had lived and worked there for a month. When I asked her about

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24 Felix’s remarks as well as the Loki t-shirt suggest a misogynous double-standard surrounding sex. While men proudly publicize their sexual exploits, a woman who inadvertently vocally broadcasts her activities becomes an object of mockery.
drugs, she said: "There's a big drug scene at Loki. It's cocaine. At first I was shocked by it, but it became normal being around it all the time. I got used to it. If people aren't doing outdoorsy stuff in La Paz, they get stuck here because of drugs..." I asked her where they do the drugs. "They go to Bar 36, Vivian's," she replied, “and lock the door and do it in the rooms. It gives Loki a reputation, and people tell their friends about it...if a Bolivian person comes in the hostel, we have to check their ID because there have been problems in the past with drug dealers coming in and selling directly to guests.” Catherine told me about an Australian backpacker at Loki earlier that year who became so drunk/high, that he fell off the balcony and died.

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Bolivia is one of the top three coca producing countries in the world, which has given the country a reputation among backpackers as a haven for cheap, easily accessible drugs (http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/09/20080916-4.html). Cultivation of the coca plant has been central to Bolivian culture for thousands of years. The cultural importance of chewing coca leaves and drinking coca tea gives the plant a role in Bolivia similar to that of cheese in France. Coca leaves are grown in various regions of the country, and vendors are ubiquitous in the streets and markets. The coca leaf is believed to have medicinal healing properties, and chewing it helps to overcome hunger and thirst. Men working inside the Potosi

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25 Bolivia’s reputation for coca extends far beyond backpacker networks, and is taken seriously by neighboring countries. In July, 2008 I traveled from Bolivia to Argentina by bus (over 50 hours). Getting off of the bus to walk across the border was a memorable experience, although the first hour of my bus ride in Argentina proved to be even more notable. Since my bus had just come from the Bolivian border, we had to pass through several drug check points. Seemingly every twenty minutes, everyone had to get off of the bus so that officials could search the vehicle and rifle through our personal luggage. We stopped four or five times in total, and I remember wincing with annoyance each time the officers took apart my carefully packed backpack.
mines usually chew at least a bag of coca everyday, and foreigners are served coca tea to overcome altitude sickness. The coca leaf is also the raw material used to make Cocaine. In Bolivia, the cultivation of the coca plant is legal; the production of cocaine is not. The Bolivian president, Evo Morales, supports the continued cultivation of coca and supports development of further legal ways to process it. Morales says: "the coca leaf is not cocaine."26

Drug use is stigmatized and taboo in Bolivian society, and cocaine consumption is not common among Bolivians. Bolivian cocaine is almost entirely consumed by foreigners and exported to foreign markets. For some backpackers, experimenting with drugs becomes part of their adventurous identity and adds to the “transgressive pleasures” of the trip. While drug use might be consistent with analysis of a South American adventure as an escape from "real life" and "real responsibilities,” it is a ubiquitous feature of youth cultures at home as well as abroad. Darya Moaz’s study about Israeli backpackers in India (2007) found that many were not interested in visiting the local historical and cultural sites, preferring instead to rest and do drugs, what Moaz referred to as “doing nothing.”27 For example, Moaz

26 “La hoja de coca no es droga.” T-shirts printed with this slogan are popular among backpackers, many of whom are drug users and wear the shirt ironically.
27 Israeli backpackers have made a splash on the gringo trail, and many hostels and restaurants now cater to an Israeli clientele. Menus, signs, and package tour deals printed in Hebrew hang in the windows of backpacker businesses, and even in the most remote location one might find an enterprising vendor with a falafel cart, selling pita, hummus, and tahini sandwiches to homesick Israeli backpackers. A famous website, (http://www.gringo.co.il/), written in Hebrew by and for Israelis is extremely influential in determining the routes of Israeli backpackers. In contrast to the majority of backpackers who were students prior to backpacking, Israelis commonly travel for several month or a year after spending several years in the highly disciplined and structured environment of army. In part, Israelis are motivated to use drugs and “do nothing” because they want to experience a forbidden thing that was not allowed in Israel, and certainly not in the army (Moaz, 128-129). In addition to the party hostels featured in this thesis, there are well known Israeli hostels, where almost one hundred percent of the guests are Israeli.
interviewed a backpacker who stayed in close proximity to the Taj Mahal for ten days, but never went to see it.

Drug use reflects and reinforces the value placed on “doing nothing” in youth travel. “Doing nothing” is an inversion of time; instead of making productive use of time, backpackers valorize what looks like wasting it, and refuse to establish a schedule. This cultivated "purposelessness" distinguishes them from the compulsive productivity of the bourgeois tourist, who is preoccupied with seeing sites and visiting museums. A common criticism of the busy tourist is that she is so preoccupied with checking activities off of her list, that she misses the feel of the place, which would require her to build in unstructured time. In contrast, the backpacker who just hangs out and “does nothing,” can supposedly absorb a more “authentic” sense of a place. A backpacker may prefer to pass the afternoon on a park bench, while the industrious tourist rushes around visiting museums, treating leisure as a form of work.

Since the hippie trail of the 1970s, hanging out has been a mainstay of backpacker practice. But whereas that used to imply immersion in the local culture, super hostels have changed the experience by creating irresistibly hermetic places to hang out. While it is tempting to romanticize a past backpacker subculture that was solely focused on learning about the ‘Other’, part of the travel experience has always included getting to know ‘the backpacker subculture.’ But with increasing organization and rationalization, the balance is shifting increasingly. For many contemporary backpackers, the primary cultural exposure is to backpacker subculture as opposed to the local culture. Party hostel guests experience differing degrees of
ambivalence towards this situation, depending on the degree to which they adhere to the ideals of authenticity celebrated in the older backpacker ideology.

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One evening while I was sitting at the Loki hostel bar, I overheard this conversation between two Irish backpackers:

#1: “What are you up to?”
#2: “I’m just gonna sit.”
#1:”Have you left the hostel all day?”
#2: “No, I don’t like La Paz very much. It’s not very nice….It’s full of ice cream shops and cinemas.”
#1: Yeah, you’re right.”

After hearing so much about the popular coke dens, Bar 36 and Vivian’s, I decided that I should visit at least one of them in the interest of my research. I asked a Scottish backpacker working behind the bar for the address of one of the coke dens, making it clear that my intentions were purely academic. He hesitated, then leaned closer to me and lowered his voice: "We're supposed to act like we don't know anything about that. But I'll give ya the address, just be quiet about it." He pulled out a red and white flyer from behind the bar. It read:

ROUTE 36. 100% bolivian experience. The night at its highest paint.28

A simple map on the back consisted of five labeled streets and a bold X printed on calle Ecuador. My friends Paola and Daniel agreed to accompany me, and at 1:00 in the morning, we piled into a taxi. Perhaps Bar36 had recently changed addresses, or we went at the wrong hour, because we were greeted by an abandoned

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28 It is unclear if “paint” is a typo, or a bad translation. Perhaps it is meant to be “point?”
looking graffiti-filled metal door that was locked with a chain. When I told Felix the next morning about my failed attempt to go to Bar36, he laughed at me; I probably went waaaay too early, he said.

I met Davie, the owner of Wild Rover one Sunday night when he was drinking a beer and chatting with an Australian friend at the bar. The Aussie was reminding Davie of what had happened the night before, of which Davie had no apparent recollection. I took the empty seat next to Davie, and introduced myself, purposefully mentioning Osgur’s name a couple of times because I thought my acquaintance with him might increase his trust me in. I asked Davie if we could meet for an informal interview the following morning. He shifted in his seat, glanced at his friend, and told me that might be a little bit early. “How about noon?” I suggested. Again, he laughed, but agreed to meet then.

The next day, when I went to Davie’s office at noon, the door was still shut and there were no signs of life. Since he lives in the hostel, the staff know when he is awake because he comes to the hostel bar for breakfast. I asked the gringo bar manager if she had seen Davie yet that day. My question made her laugh. “I know Davie,” she assured me, “and he won’t be up for several more hours.” Another bar worker confirmed this, saying that he had worked there several months and had not once seen Davie awake before 3PM. I was annoyed at having to wait all day, but I was also pleased with how this story was consistent with the hostel’s reputation. As it turned out, Davie did not wake up until 5 PM. When he came to his office that evening, he looked at me sheepishly and muttered “sorry.” Once he showed up,
Davie was extremely warm, friendly, and willing to speak candidly about everything I asked.

Davie had plenty to say on the topic of drugs in the hostel: "Drugs are a big problem here. But it is good that there are drug dens [Bar 36 and Vivian's] because they go there, and there are no drugs in the hostel. We have a really strict no drug policy. Three people died in Cuzco in the last two years because of coke overdoses." He went on to tell me about how Bar36 often changes location because it is frequently shut down.

"When Vivian's and Bar 36 got shut down, all day the dealers hung around here [the hostel]. I told them not to come back, and they didn't. The hostel doesn't promote or give out the address."

He explained that Vivian's is owned by a famous prostitute, and it is her daughter who owns Bar 36. Davie mentioned that the drug den owners have a powerful influence over the police, although I did not understand the details and did not press him for information. Consequences of being caught with illegal cocaine in Bolivia vary. "Once, the police came to Vivian's and robbed all the gringos. Then they left, but didn't shut the place down" he told me.

I could not help but notice the inconsistency between Wild Rover's drug policy as articulated by Davie and the actual practice within the hostel. The hostel officially has a "strict drug policy," but in reality, someone was doing coke in my room the day before. The hostel has a policy that they do not promote or give out the address of the coke dens, yet I easily obtained the information the first time I asked.
Bar 36 is famous among backpackers all over South America, but few Pacenos know of its existence. For example, my friend Paola, a 23 year old Bolivian-American who lives in La Paz, is extremely familiar with La Paz nightlife and the local social scene, but neither she nor her Bolivian friends had ever heard of Bar36 or Vivian’s. Their lack of awareness is indicative of the degree of separation and disconnect between the backpacker community and the community of La Paz. As we’ve seen, the evolution of backpacker subculture has included local connection as one of the key values. However, the more recent developments prioritize separation. Backpackers share La Paz with Pacenos, but the sphere in which they operate provides an experience of a very different city. In the next chapter, I explore the tensions and incongruities between the inherited backpacker ideology and contemporary practices of youth travel.
Chapter three:  
The Hostel as a Home Away from Home

As we have seen, established global traveler routes have been common for centuries. The typical itinerary for the Grand Tour in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries became the basis for the “hippie trail” in the 1970s. “The banana pancake trail” refers to the many restaurants and cafes in South East Asia that attract tourists by serving banana pancakes. Today, the well-trodden route through South America is known as “the gringo trail.” Guidebooks, internet resources, word of mouth communication, and hostel networks all map out the gringo trail. It is becoming increasingly difficult for backpackers to travel "off the beaten path," when almost all of the information sources point travelers in the same direction. The gringo trail is so powerful that it may override alternative, less predictable backpacking routes. Not everyone on the gringo trail intends to follow it, but once on, it can be hard to get off. Melissa Silverman, a Wesleyan student who backpacked for four months in South America, noted its social benefits: “There is a trail, and you really do run into people. You can really make plans to meet up with people in another place because you will all be going there."

In this chapter I look at how the gringo trail contributes to the mainstreaming and commodification of backpacker experiences. Backpacker tourism in South America is shifting away from an emphasis on qualitative experiences and is increasingly focused on quantitative values. Many backpackers define a country by four or five noteworthy tourist attractions, reducing the country to a list of places to
visit, and experiences to be had. After a visit to Machu Picchu, that site and the experience that accompanies it can be checked off the list. The very language backpackers use to talk about their travel experience reinforces its commodity character. Thus backpackers talk about "doing" a country, which entails visiting all of the destinations on the gringo trail and participating in the popular activities offered in each place. Someone who visited Peru and Colombia might say, "I did Peru and Colombia." A backpacker on her way to southern Argentina might say "I haven't done Patagonia yet." Someone who visited the Bolivian Salt Flats, but missed going to Lake Titicaca and Potosi might not claim to have “done” Bolivia. "Doing a country" does not imply tasting the local foods, listening to the national music, or learning the country's language. It is a quantitative value determined by how many places are visited rather than a measure of the way they are visited.

The idiom “to do a country,” moreover, implicitly links touristic consumption with a kind of masculine, sexual possession and conquest; it is an assertion of power and control. Both the quantification of experiences and the language of aggressive conquest and objectification clash with the value placed on authenticity in backpacker ideology. “Doing” a country implies taking possession, as opposed to a more submissive immersion in a place that is associated with authenticity. “Authenticity” implies a qualitative value, evoking a positively valorized intensity of experiencing a place. In contrast, “doing a country” suggests a more superficial exposure. Luke Desforges writes about this tension between commodification and authenticity:

Independent travelers do obviously rely on the tourism economy to some extent, but their desire to consume the Other ‘authentically’ by cutting down on commodification is an example of the power their
‘framing’ of the world holds to ‘shape culture and nature to its own needs.’ …Even as backpackers seek an authentic experience by cutting down on commodification, the very power they wield in determining which places are brought into the tourism economy, shows their ability to commodify and set the terms of their relationship with the Other…‘Collecting places’ is a way of framing the ‘Third World’ as a place where individual knowledge and personal experience can be gained through travel (1998:183).

Foreign guidebooks are ubiquitous in South America, and it would be unusual to find a traveler without one. Seventy-five percent owned by BBC Worldwide, Lonely Planet publications dominate the tourist information about Bolivia, and are hugely popular publications in other countries as well. Judging by its ubiquity in bookstores and the entry provided in Wikipedia, Lonely Planet is one of the largest travel guidebook publishers in the world and produced the first series of travel books aimed at backpackers and low-budget travelers. As of 2008, it had published about 500 titles in eight languages, with annual sales of more than six million guidebooks (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lonely_planet). 29 Ten of Lonely Planet's guidebooks have sold over one million copies each including Australia, New Zealand, Thailand and India. Lonely Planet has the power to significantly alter local landscapes by singling them out for description. Writing favorably about a small town may radically transform its identity by attracting hundreds of foreign visitors.30 Similarly, a two-

29 My citation of Wikipedia is an example of one phenomenon that I am analyzing—the speeded up, globalized transfer of information.

30 Lonely Planet exerts tremendous influence over an entire country’s tourism industry. In the case of Myanmar (Burma), Lonely Planet guidebooks became a source of controversy when The Burma campaign for human rights and democracy in Burma called for a consumer boycott of Lonely Planet guide books in February, 2008:

"As part of the Tourism Boycott, the Burma Campaign is calling for a consumer boycott of Lonely Planet guide books until the company withdraws its guide to Burma. Lonely Planet publishes a guide to Myanmar (Burma) and actively promotes tourism to Burma, despite knowing the many ways that tourism lends support to the brutal dictatorship in Burma."
sentence critical review of a tourist restaurant may quickly put the restaurant out of business.

In the *Lonely Planet* guide to Peru, Loki Backpackers hostel is the first listing under “Budget Accommodations” in Cuzco:

**Loki Backpackers Hostel**: This is where the party’s at! Expats have rescued this 450-year-old national monument from near ruin, then transformed it into a jovial place to put down your rucksack for a few days. There are basically furnished private rooms and mixed or single-sex dormitories. Amenities include a shared kitchen, hot showers and free internet access. (2007:244).

I remember searching the travel section of three different bookstores in Cincinnati, Ohio before I went to Bolivia. I knew *Lonely Planet* would be a source of information, but I was surprised to find that it was virtually the only one. In contrast, there existed numerous guidebooks dedicated specifically to neighboring countries such as Peru, Argentina, Chile, and Brazil but this was not the case for Bolivia. I had hoped to buy an alternative guidebook, but settled for *Lonely Planet* when it emerged as my only option. The lack of variety in Bolivian travel guides is not a reflection of the inventory of Cincinnati bookstores, but an indication of *Lonely Planet*’s monopoly on Bolivian travel information. Eli Scherer, a friend from Wesleyan who *Lonely Planet* chose to continue printing the guide, responding:

"*Lonely Planet*'s Myanmar (Burma) guide outlines the arguments both for and against visiting the country: without such information it's entirely possible that travelers will make the decision to visit Burma without even being aware of the boycott...For those who do decide to go, *Lonely Planet*'s guidebook is one of only a very few sources of information that enables travelers to maximize their support for the local population, and minimize the prospect of any money which they might spend going to the military regime...Make no mistake: our decision to publish is not a show of support for the current regime and we fully support the restoration of democracy in Burma. We do not, however, believe you create new freedoms by stifling information or banning books"
spent two months in Bolivia, joked about the *Lonely Planet* guide: "Everyone called it the Bible. We would say, “Hey man, are you bringing the Bible, or should I?” My Bolivian host family in Cochabamba loved to poke fun at all the gringos who come to Bolivia with that same edition of *Lonely Planet*, the one with the sail boat photo on the front cover.

Backpackers who travel to numerous South American countries do not have room to carry (or time to read) a separate book for each country and most opt for the all encompassing *Lonely Planet* guidebook: *South America on a Shoestring*. This book has a condensed, short section addressed to every South American country. Due to space constraints, the authors must selectively choose what places and information are included in the final book. For example, the *Lonely Planet* Bolivia book features eighteen restaurants and cafes in Cochabamba, whereas the *South America on a Shoestring* publication only includes eight. The sites, destinations, hostels, restaurants, and activities that are featured in the abridged *Lonely Planet* guide closely parallel the gringo trail. The majority of visitors to Bolivia all use one publication as their primary information source, and therefore they inevitably all frequent the same venues. Our first night in Potosi, a friend and I read a mouthwatering restaurant review in our *Lonely Planet* guide, and decided to eat there. When we walked in, we immediately noticed that same guidebook perched on several of the tables of other gringo diners. Over time, when I chose to follow *Lonely Planet*'s recommendation for a hostel, restaurant, or tour, I came to expect to find myself in the company of other gringos.
The lack of written information about travel in Bolivia is one indicator of the country's fledgling tourism industry. Backpackers dominate the tourism industry in Bolivia more so than in neighboring countries like Peru, Chile, and Argentina where the tourism industry is more developed and caters to visitors of diverse ages and incomes. Most visitors to Bolivia, by contrast, are young adult backpackers on limited budgets. I became acutely aware of this when my family visited me in Bolivia in April, 2008. My parents, brothers, and I traveled to some of the most touristy--and spectacular--destinations in Bolivia: we took a three day tour of the salt flats, and stayed several nights on Isla del Sol, the most visited island on Lake Titicaca. None of us knew beforehand that my middle-aged parents would be an anomaly. Despite carrying backpacks, my parents stuck out as virtually the only middle aged foreign visitors in those parts of Bolivia. “It suddenly dawned on me,” remarked my mother, Elaine Fink, “that out of the ten land cruisers full of tourists in the salt flats, Bob [my father] and I were the only people over the age of thirty.”

While *Lonely Planet* guidebooks drive the formation of the gringo trail through written text, the role of casual, spoken interactions among backpackers is also extremely influential. Although backpackers communicate with each other through a variety of mediums such as online message boards, internet sites, and travel blogs, face to face conversations remain the most meaningful (Murphy, 2000). In her article, *Exploring the Social Interactions of Backpackers*, Laurie Murphy quantitatively measures how frequently information by other backpackers influences touristic decisions:
Murphy continues:

"In exploring the 'goals' or reasons for interacting with other backpackers, it was evident that travel routes and experiences are a common topic for conversation. In general it appears the initial conversation focuses on where people have been and/or are going to and where they are from...Hostels are the most common setting in which social situations involving backpackers occur. It is important for hostels to recognize the important role they play in stimulating and encouraging the flow of word-of-mouth promotion among backpackers. To merely provide shared facilities and common areas does not automatically provide an environment that fosters social interaction" (55, 62).

Large hostels, such as the “super hostels” in La Paz, create social spaces and activities that facilitate information sharing. Remarkably, the popularity of these hostels stems almost entirely from word-of-mouth communication among backpackers. The existence of large-scale party hostels in the Andes is a very recent phenomenon; all of them have opened in the last five years. The Adventure Brew hostel, the oldest of the Bolivian party hostels, has been open since April of 2006. Loki La Paz opened in March of 2007, and Wild Rover followed in October. The Adventure Brew hostel is listed in the Bolivia Lonely Planet guide, but Loki and Wild
Rover are not yet featured presumably because they opened too close to the publication of the most recent guide (April, 2007) to be included. I suspect that Loki and Wild Rover hostels will be featured in the next (7th) edition of the *Lonely Planet* Bolivia guide, which is scheduled to come out in April, 2010.

A backpacker’s degree of reliance on *Lonely Planet* has status implications and provides a means to distinguish ‘newbies’ from more experienced travelers. The latter rely increasingly on word of mouth information, while the former depend on *Lonely Planet*. Melissa explained,

> When we were backpacker newbies, we used *Lonely Planet (South America on a Shoestring)* a lot. But after a while we stopped using it, and listened to people. People know, and I think it is better to ask people where to stay.

To promote the hostel when it first opened, Wild Rover charged one dollar per night for the first two weeks of business. This bargain price that was circulated by word of mouth turned out to be an extremely successful strategy. Davie of Wild Rover emphasized the hostel’s success with minimal promotional efforts, exclaiming with his hands in the air, "and we only got a website three weeks ago!" From the time of its opening in October 2007, every bed reportedly has been booked each night. International hostel booking websites are also major contributors to the gringo trail and hostel popularity. Hostelbookers.com and hostelworld.com are extremely popular sites that index and rate the best hostels in countries all over the world.
Predictably, when La Paz, Bolivia is searched on hostelworld.com, the first three hostels that are listed are Adventure Brew, Wild Rover, and Loki.\textsuperscript{31}

For many travelers, a trip to South America is a break in space and time from their ordinary lives. Thousands of miles away from home, responsibilities are suspended and cultural rules and boundaries can be transgressed. Temporarily freed from the routines and restrictions of mundane life and licensed to pursue fun and excitement, youthful travelers are disposed to engage in a variety of risky behaviors, as we have seen. When abroad, even the seemingly most unlikely candidate may choose to bike down the \textit{World’s Most Dangerous Road} or consume heavy drugs in a carefree manner. As Melissa commented, “backpacking kind of puts you in another mindset. You think you're going to live another lifestyle when you go back to your home life but you forget. You do things when you're backpacking that you wouldn’t normally do.”

The hostels offer themselves to backpackers as a unique venue to relax and recharge after such rigorous, sometimes stressful traveling. When the entire travel experience is viewed as a break from mundane life, then hostels, in effect, provide a break or respite from the demands of the original break. Both the backpacking trip as a whole as well as the relation of the gringo trail activities to the hostels are structured by oppositions between work and play. The “work” aspect of the trip is made up of the “must-do,” gringo trail backpacker activities. As we saw in chapter two, adventurous bike rides, exposure to “authentic” working mines, and exploration of the Amazon are experiences for which backpackers supposedly come to South

\textsuperscript{31} In fact, Wild Rover hostel was identified as the “Best Hostel in Bolivia” in 2008.
America. However, even the most adventurous travel, if it becomes too tightly regimented and obligatory, can lose its playful, expressive, “liminal” character and begin to feel like work or school. Travel itself risks becoming a form of the routinized, “structured” existence one was escaping. Party hostels help balance the relationship between work and play by providing festive environments devoted to parties and relaxation. The chart below illustrates the operation of the work/play dichotomy:

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 11**

The hostels market themselves as an alternative to the more challenging, stressful experience of traveling in South America, functioning in the role of weekend leisure activities that refresh and invigorate you to go back to work on Monday.
Once at a super hostel, a guest can take a break from the demands of trying to navigate a foreign country and culture in a foreign language. Hostels offer the taste of familiar foods, and a chance to let down one’s guard, and feel secure that one’s belongings are safe. As they sleep in comfortable beds, take hot showers, and find that toilet paper is provided, hostel guests can relax and recharge in a home-like environment before going back to the challenge of traveling. While staying at the hostel, there is no pressure to see sights, take tours, or snap the perfect picture. It is not only okay to chill, relax, and do nothing, indeed, the hostel even encourages guests to do just that. The hostels offer a haven of leisure in a country that otherwise requires travelers to be indefatigably wary and alert and which does not cater to Western tastes.

The fourth and newest Loki hostel, *Loki del Mar*, opened in Mancora, Peru, November, 2008. In promotion materials, it encourages backpackers to come to the hostel to relax, party, and take a break:

With a prime plot of land stretching from the main drag to the beach, we have designed and built a new hostel, giving backpackers the perfect place to take that well deserved break from their travels.

Sitting on the beautiful beach front of Mancora, with a meandering path through a shaded grove, sits the latest and most innovative Loki Hostel. If you have stayed with us in any of our other hostels you

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32 In October, 2008, I received an email from my friend Tom, an Israeli backpacker who I met on an organic (WWOOF) farm in Santa Cruz, Bolivia. Although he was still traveling through South America and therefore on a kind of “break” from his life in Israel, he wrote me that he needed a break: “I'm still traveling in "sud america" at the moment im in equador but i think before you even read it i will be in colombia for the rest of my trip (three month). I think its about time for me to sit on some caribbean beach with a coconut in one hand and a joint in the other. any way its nice around here but i start to fill a bit tired from the latin mentality end from being a tourist that they try to rip off in any chance they have, but most of all i miss doing something, i miss work with my hands you know me, im a "farmer.""

33 There is a facebook group called “*fuck college, go to Mancora.*”
would have appreciated the hot showers, comfortable beds, and great atmosphere in the bars. All these services and more that have made Loki synonymous with excellence in Hostels: Free Internet, Wifi, Delicious Free Breakfasts, games room, TV room, Live Sports Coverage, Lockers with sockets.

Imagine all this with the beach on your doorstep. Imagine a poolside bar serving refreshing drinks and delicious hot and cold snacks and meals as well as ice creams. All for backpacker prices!

If you check out the photos, you can tell that we aren't kidding. This is the pinnacle of what we have learned in setting up the previous 3 hostels.

Mancora is ideally located on Peru's northern coast, close to Piura and Tumbes airports and only 2 hours short of the Ecuadorian border. Busses go daily from Lima and its worth the trip. It's year round sun, unbelievable sea-food, a great surf break and a great attitude to life is a refreshing break in your travels.

This is where you get off the Gringo Trail, breathe in deeply and relax. This is where your order a Tequila Sunrise or Sex on the Beach and immerse your toes in the pool while bronzed bodies submerge and emerge. This is where you let nothing but the waves and the occasional seabirds call invade your senses (emphasis added).

Figure 15 Loki hostel in Mâncora, Peru. Opened November, 2008.

34 I find this painfully ironic since Loki hostel is a place to get on the gringo trail, not off!
The “home away from home” environment offered by the hostels is not a new concept. There are striking similarities between the experience offered by Loki and that offered for a cruise with the Orient Line in 1896:

The bustle and fatigue of long railway journeys, the discomfort of land hotels, with their poor food and insanitary surroundings, do not exist for them. Their stately ship anchors in the harbor of some foreign city in the early morning, and after an English breakfast on board, they go ashore to explore the sights of the place. They have ample leisure and opportunity of doing so, and after a long day’s sightseeing, it is with a sense of relief that they find themselves once more occupying their accustomed seats at the dinner-table surrounded by the familiar faces of their friends. They explore oceans, islands, and cities, and feel all the time they are at home (Löfgren: 162).

The photo and description of the Loki Mâncona hostel have more in common with images of a high-end resort than a hostel. Historically, backpackers have distinguished themselves from conventional tourists through the value they place on a non-institutionalized, “off the beaten path” form of travel. However, on the basis of my exposure to the gringo trail and the La Paz backpacker scene, the mainstreamed practice of backpacking is becoming one niche within the array of niches that today comprise mass tourism. In all aspects -- except for the age of their clientele -- “super hostels” operate as relatively luxurious, all-inclusive resorts, similar to those traditionally marketed to a less rugged tourist. Like a luxury hotel, the hostels are designed to attract guests by providing a hermetic leisure environment. As Davie of Wild Rover put it:

The idea is to get the guests not to leave the hostel, so they spend more money on food, drinks, and laundry. We want to make everything as easy as possible. The location of the hostel needs to be good, but not too good. In Cuzco, the location is too good so people go out all the time. Here, it is perfect because you have to take taxis everywhere for
food, drink, etc...so people leave less…Yeah, it’s a bubble. You trap people in here, Get ‘em drunk and hung-over. The altitude helps, too.

As islands of Western comforts, party hostels become a temporary full-service “home” for backpackers in Bolivia. The “super hostels” in La Paz attract backpackers who might not have come to Bolivia, had there not been a comfortable, safe, home-like base from which to experience the country. Osgur of Loki described how party hostels have altered the backpacker scene in La Paz:

It used to be just people travelling with one pair of pants, one mumu type of shirt that can be washed and dried in ten minutes, one pair of running shoes...that are probably made from a tire they found in the Amazon...But now we get people traveling with several pairs of shoes, maybe a nice dress or two to go out, women with makeup....People who before would not have come to La Paz, now stay longer because it is comfortable.

If they partake of the party hostel scene, visiting La Paz no longer requires that backpackers speak Spanish, tolerate cold showers, eat Bolivian food, or worry about whether their chosen lodging is safe. Safety is a primary concern for many people in selecting a hostel. Melissa observed:

These [super] hostels make you feel really safe. You are in a poor country and things happen. I liked that my whole backpack could fit in the locker at Wild Rover. One of the reasons it felt safe was probably because the hostels are racist and don’t open the door for everyone. They look to see if it is a white backpacker or a Bolivian at the door before they let you in.

Individual storage lockers in each dorm room promote a sense of safety in the hostel. There are enough individual units for every person in the room, although the size of the locker varies, and backpackers must provide their own locks. The lockers
at Wild Rover and Adventure Brew are big enough to hold an entire backpack, while the Loki storage space is the size of a shoe box, and can only accommodate valuables such as passport, money, and electronics. The Loki wristband also fosters a feeling of safety by visibly distinguishing hostel guests from outsiders. Another, more controversial, tactic is the policy of not allowing Bolivians admittance to the hostel with the exception of those who are employed as cooks and maids. Davie told me:

It is isolated, and we don’t let in Bolivian people. It's bad to say it, but they steal…A Bolivian worker quits every week, so we have ads every Sunday in the paper. I think they [Bolivians] find it hard working for a gringo, because they actually have to work…but also… they keep getting fired.

Proving his point, he told me that the (Bolivian) hostel chef was given 3000 Bolivianos (Bs) to supply the hostel kitchen with food for the week. Davie eventually found out that the chef only bought 1000 Bs worth of food, and kept the leftover 2000 Bs. As a result, Davie continued, they search the bags of the cleaning staff before they go home each night because they can not be trusted. I asked Davie how much the hostel pays its workers, and how that compares to other jobs. “Minimum wage is 500 Bs/month.” He told me. “We pay double. And they get a free lunch, and can take showers here. The reception staff gets triple minimum wage, and they stay here for a long time.”

The emphasis on safety is especially notable, as it clashes with the backpacker ideology of adventure and risk. Safety and comfort would seem to be the diametric

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35 Roughly, 3000 Bolivianos = 415 US dollars.
36 I wondered how long can be a long time when the hostel itself had been open for less than a year.
opposite of adventurous risk-taking, yet backpackers seem to value both extremes, highlighting the oppositions between relaxation (play) and exertion (work) within the vacation experience. Whereas risking their safety to crawl through the working mines of Potosi is popular among backpackers, taking a chance on safety by choosing local lodging with looser security is not. An Irish backpacker in the Adventure Brew Hostel put it this way:

It [backpacking] is quite easy in a way, and is its own micro world...people say that they want to go to Bolivia, but not all the way. You want to feel safe. You want to experience different cultures, but you want to do it from the comfort of your own hostel. It's kind of like watching it on T.V.

Some backpackers, however, expressed a sense of discomfort about staying in these hostels and professed to find the whole experience of speaking English in a gringo owned hostel very strange, implicitly acknowledging the deviation from backpacker values. An English gap year student said to me:

Oh! You're the anthropology student! Well you can quote me. I don't like this place because no one leaves. You can just say here playing pool all day... and everyone gets up really late.

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The first day I entered the Loki bar I noticed a petite woman with a shaved head sitting alone at the bar and working on a laptop. Nat, Olli, and I had joked that I was too late because another anthropologist had beat me to studying the hostel. Coincidentally, this woman, Andrea, moved into my room the next day, and she quickly became my closest friend at the hostel. Andrea, who was Italian, felt more comfortable speaking Spanish than English, so we always conversed with each other in Spanish. Besides, she said, “why would I speak English when I come to South
We stood out as the only people in the hostel who spoke Spanish besides the maids and the cooks. A certified psychologist, she was frequently at her computer communicating through email with her patients in Italy.

Andrea was different from the rest of the hostel clientele in several respects. She was older, Italian (a minority nationality in the party hostels), and had no hair. But even more notable than her nationality, age, or hairstyle, was her way of being in La Paz. Andrea went out to museums and concerts in La Paz, and explored the city in a different way than most of the guests. Her goal was to taste at least one new Bolivian food every day, and she would go out looking for something she had never seen or tried before, often reporting back to me later. Andrea frequently asked me about my project, and I shared my observations, experiences, and interview notes with her.

Andrea was highly critical of the hostel; she did not approve of English as the universal language, she felt there was too much emphasis on drinking, and she found the hostel too insular. She complained that the hostel tried to charge her for extra drinks she had not ordered, and thought it was outrageous when the hostel almost lost her backpack after storing it for her. Still, despite all of her criticisms and negative impressions, she chose to stay there. “Loki is comfortable,” she explained. “There is free wifi, hot showers, free tea, and a clean place to study and work.”

Like Andrea, not all guests are drawn to party hostels by the party atmosphere. Some tolerate the excesses because they appreciate the material

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37 Her favorite Bolivian food discovery was *api*, a sweet, hot drink made from blue or white corn.
comforts and conveniences as well as the sense of safety the hostel provides. Indeed, some owners try to avoid or minimize the party reputation, to avoid pigeon-holing the venues as catering to one lifestyle. Osgur articulated in an email, “I loathe the term [party hostel] because we try and provide for all tastes and budgets.” Emphasizing the facilities at Loki as a pull factor for guests, Osgur explained: "Before we opened, La Paz hostels only offered electric showers." The hostel’s plumbing system amazingly produces strong water pressure, unlimited and truly HOT water as opposed to the lukewarm or cold water that one comes to expect from the majority of Bolivian showers. The impressive water temperature and pressure of the showers at the La Paz party hostels are common conversation topics among guests. As former backpackers themselves, the hostel owners, must understand the value of a hot shower to a backpacker who has had access only to cold water and has spent the night on freezing mountain bus rides.

Besides the notable shower pressure and water temperature at Loki, the entire bathroom facility was remarkably clean compared to most Bolivian accommodations. Posted signs in every Loki bathroom read: “Does this bathroom need cleaning? Let reception know and we will be happy to see to it!” The management of the party hostels attend relentlessly to every detail, the result of which is a qualitative impact on the total lodging experience. For example, the bathrooms at each of the party hostels were dependably stocked with toilet paper, which is uncommon in many

38 Most shower water in Bolivia is heated electrically, by small, electric hot water heaters that are built-in to the showerhead. Exposed water or current in a wet environment can be dangerous, and would probably not pass safety regulations in the United States.
39 My first shower in Loki hostel was undoubtedly the best shower I had had in months, and I remember indulging myself by standing in the steamy water much longer than I usually would have.
Bolivian hostels and public spaces. Backpackers become accustomed to carrying their own supply on the road, making the endless free toilet paper in the hostel bathrooms a notable luxury.

The Loki website advertises the hostel as “A fun, comfortable and safe place where we can meet other travelers with good quality services that are sometimes hard to find in South America.” Super hostels have identified the comforts backpackers seek, and have converted them into consumable products. As the opening page of the Loki hostel travel guide boasts, “Loki offers fun quality services and high standards of cleanliness -- all affordable to the average backpacker." The Loki hostel amenities are listed on the website:

- Friendly Local and Well-Travelled Staff to give you the low down on La Paz.
- Best Nightly Feeds in town, something different every night.
- Best Party nights in the Andes.
- Incredible Period Bar which happens to be the World’s Highest Irish Owned bar.
- Common Areas to meet fellow backpackers.
- Book the World’s Most Dangerous Road trip with us!
- Real Hot Showers to warm you on those cold Andean Nights.
- TV Room to chill out.
- No Curfew so you can stay out ALL night if you want.⁴⁰
- Free Internet
- Cheap international phone-calls so you can ring your mam and tell her you’re ok!
- Free Luggage Storage.
- Comfortable beds with Real Duvets to wrap up in.
- Free Continental Breakfast to get you going in the morning.
- Breakfast menu.
- Airport Pickup for peace of mind

The ambience and physical environment that exists within a hostel can figure prominently in stimulating social interactions among backpackers. Comfortable furnishings and home-like touches create a friendly atmosphere and promote the

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⁴⁰ Some hostels in South America DO have curfews, requiring all guests to be in by a certain time.
likelihood that guests will spend time together in the common spaces. Amenities such as duvets and pool tables help eliminate or minimize the impersonal feeling and convey a more welcoming atmosphere (Murphy, 2001:62-65). In addition to pool tables, each hostel offered a “lounge” room with a television, selection of movies and comfortable furniture. The Loki lounge even offers video games, beanbags, an array of American magazines, and “the world’s highest oxygen bar.” The Wild Rover website attracts clientele by emphasizing both the hostel’s party atmosphere as well as its attractive accommodations:

South America's ciudad mas loco now has a hostel to match. Irish owned Wild Rover has everything you need to enjoy La Paz. Once home to Bolivia's presidents, our 120 year old house has been renovated from top to bottom to give you all the facilities that are hard to find in Bolivia, in a safe and cosy environment.

So after that white knuckle Bolivian bus ride, check-in and chill out with us. Enjoy a nice hot shower and then relax in our sunny courtyard or get down to some good sleep in the most comfortable and warm beds in S.A. (guaranteed), with our special winter/summer duvets.

However, just in case you think we've gone soft, all that relaxation is only there so you have the energy to hit the beers with us in our in-house Irish bar. Watch your favorite sports (unless it's curling), on our plasma TV, meet like-minded travelers, shoot some pool on Bolivia's only good pool table and enjoy our great food during the day and our nightly drinks specials to your favorite tunes, before we take you out on the town to tear up some dance floors.

The successful fusion of partying and comfort is evident in details such as the Wild Rover’s Hangover menu and the Loki hostel reviews written by backpackers:
Tully Firbank 15 November 2007
I had arrived in the most horrific mood as my travel to Peru had been an absolute nightmare and on top of that my airline had lost all of my luggage. The guy on the desk at Loki was amazing in helping me call the airline to find out more info and was really helpful. Straight after I hit the bar to drown my sorrows and met some really cool people and hung out at the really fun bar...definitely lifted my spirits!! ...It was so nice to be able to sleep in a comfy bed in a cute and clean room and the showers were pretty decent too. I recommend anyone to stay here for sure and would definitely stay here again.

Anthony Haniff December 2007
Great place to go if you’re up to party!!! Toilets spotlessly clean and many of them, in case you get a sudden bout of gut rot!!! Staff very friendly and helpful!!

Elaine Horan July 27th 2008
Absolutely brilliant hostel had great fun in the bar!!!! Rooms were very clean, beds comfy and location was great. Met some great people

Tim Waters March 14 2007
Woah, thought we were back in New Zealand, this place is well nice, with proper showers (no electronic units taped on here!) … and upon check in the fella at the desk kindly told us of all the latest football scores in the premiership and UEFA cup -what a guy!!
Since budgeting has historically been a tenet of backpacker subculture, I was surprised at the lavishness with which the majority of the hostel guests spent money at the bar. It was common to buy several drinks a night, and many guests also ate meals in the hostel bar, where food is significantly more expensive than the Bolivian options sold right outside the door. Still, backpackers eagerly paid the higher price for food and alcohol as well as other amenities that were similarly overpriced such as the hostel run laundry service. As Remo of Adventure Brew told me, “all of the backpackers that come here [the hostel] have money!”\textsuperscript{41 42}

Spending money in the hostel is even celebrated and rewarded. A printed sign hangs behind the Loki reception desk: “Biggest Bills Hall of Fame.” The names of six guests who spent the most money (in Bolivianos) are listed, as well as how many days they stayed at Loki hostel, and the amounts of their final bills. The creation of a “Hall of Fame” competition based on money spent reflects the financial resources of the guests, and demonstrates that for Loki guests, spending money is regarded as a sport. This conspicuous spending highlights the divide between the party hostel world and its surrounding backdrop of La Paz. Situated within the poorest country in South America, the hostel exudes an atmosphere of wealth and consumerist excess.

\textsuperscript{41} “Todos que vienen aquí tienen plata!”

\textsuperscript{42} Heath (2007:98) supports Remo’s observation in her analysis of the population who travels internationally: “The majority of students who are likely to consider …the potential of these [abroad] opportunities...are likely to come from well informed, middle class families.”
The plush accommodations offered by the La Paz hostels also clash with the backpacker value of “roughing it.” An English speaking hostel with luxurious beds, piping hot showers, laundry service, pool tables, and gringo comfort food can hardly be considered adventurous travel. Wild Rover boasts that it even has a “JUST FOR GIRLS MAKE UP ROOM: hair dryers, flat irons and all the comforts you crave.”

Sue Heath characterizes the hostel clientele as:

‘nomads from affluence: middle-class travelers-- often students who seek the excitement of the original hippy trail but without the risk and
insecurity that was traditionally associated with it. To cater to this new group, an alternative infrastructure has gradually emerged that parallels in segregated form some of the characteristics of the 'mass tourist' infrastructure; backpacker hostels, transport and leisure activities targeted specifically at backpackers, and bars, restaurants, and clubs that similarly cater specifically for this group. Independent travel has arguably become a commodified and sanitized mass experience for budget travelers (2007:97).

Can we still call this kind of traveler a backpacker? As we have seen, the contemporary practice of backpacking in South America is suffused with paradoxes and contradictions. Backpackers are defined -- and may define themselves -- as people who travel on alternative, off-the-beaten path routes, but the reality is that there is a well trodden backpacker trail. Backpackers allegedly value contact with the local people, but increasingly, they choose distance from the “Other” in the thriving party hostels; even leaving the hostel and ‘going out’ in La Paz often actually means frequenting another foreign-owned business operated in collaboration with the hostel owners. Backpackers travel on a budget, yet are willing to shell out money for fancy drinks, drugs, and tourism packages. The values once associated with mobile young people who explore new places and carry a backpack have become obscured in the party hostel strand of modern backpackers.

While the “party atmosphere” is not for everyone, the La Paz hostels capitalize on it as a major, featured attraction. The contemporary backpacker associates the adventurous activities located outside the hostel with “work,” whereas the hostel and all that takes place within its walls is considered “play.” Providing a festive environment which counterbalances the more serious and rugged aspects of travel, the hostels create an opportunity to “party hard” and relax from the exertion of difficult travel and simultaneously to take a break from the strains of traveling.
Conclusion

For youth travelers today, a trip abroad carries many of the same meanings as it did in the past. Travel abroad is still regarded as an educational pursuit, continues to be associated with the accrual of cultural capital, and retains the character of a rite of passage. The motivations that draw youth to leave home and travel abroad today have broad similarities with those that have driven such trips in the past: the promise of adventure, the appeal of “Otherness,” and the opportunity for personal development and growth. While much has remained the same, the particulars of travel have changed significantly over the centuries, as well as over the past decades. In part, the changes stem from advancements in technology, the expansion of the travel industry, and shifts in middle-class values and trajectories. The prolongation of youth among the middle-classes enables young people to interrupt formal schooling or suspend school to work transitions with the experiential education of travel; moreover, increased competition for “qualifications” encourages them to travel at increasingly young ages, as evidenced in the growth of the gap year phenomenon. The emergence of super hostels in the Andean region both reflect and encourage youthful travel. For example, gap year students are the youngest backpackers on the gringo trail and require the extra support of a more “hands on” tourism industry.

My examination of the La Paz hostels and the commercialization of backpacker infrastructure suggests that elements of backpacker subculture are being absorbed into more widely accessible forms of travel. The growing super hostel
industry in conjunction with gringo-friendly businesses, *Lonely Planet* guidebooks and other online and word-of-mouth networking sources have firmly planted La Paz on the gringo trail. Just as La Paz has become a more reachable destination, backpacking itself has become an increasingly mainstream commercial youth practice. (O’Reilly 2006:1006). But the market has not totally colonized backpacker culture. On the contrary, the very efforts to commercially appropriate the subculture have generated new practices. In subcultural theory, when a once “distinctive” subcultural experience becomes part of the mainstream, the elites move on. For example, when a wider clientele begins to frequent an elite Manhattan night club, the original crowd finds a new club.

Like the downtown Manhattan socialites who are always one step ahead of the imagined masses, “elite backpackers” who seek to honor and preserve the values of a historical backpacker subculture are finding new ways to distinguish themselves. As hostels have lost their association with authenticity and an alternative lifestyle, new travel practices are emerging. The CouchSurfing International project, for example, offers a non-commodified abroad experience that is increasingly being embraced as an authentic mode of travel. As its website broadcasts, “CouchSurfing is a worldwide network for making connections between travelers and the local communities they visit…” With over one million members located in 232 countries around the globe, CouchSurfing is a free hospitality network based on the principle that “surfers” can sleep on the couch of a “host” in another city or in a different part of the world.\(^{43}\) The system is based on reciprocity: “surfers” (travelers looking for accommodation) are

\(^{43}\) I have been a member of the CouchSurfing network since December, 2007. I have not yet surfed or hosted, although I am eager to do so!
also “hosts” (people at home who are willing to accommodate a surfer). Anyone who creates a personal account and profile on couchsurfing.com can be a host or a surfer. The CouchSurfing website was originally launched in January 2004, but shut down due to technical difficulties and database loss. Members formed a CouchSurfing collective, and the website was resurrected in July, 2006, under the name CouchSurfing 2.0. Since then, membership has grown rapidly and the site has drawn attention from international media. The website lays out the official CouchSurfing mission:

CouchSurfing seeks to internationally network people and places, create educational exchanges, raise collective consciousness, spread tolerance, and facilitate cultural understanding.

As a community we strive to do our individual and collective parts to make the world a better place, and we believe that the surfing of couches is a means to accomplish this goal. CouchSurfing isn't about the furniture- it's not just about finding free accommodations around the world- it's about participating in creating a better world. We strive to make a better world by opening our homes, our hearts, and our lives. We open our minds and welcome the knowledge that cultural exchange makes available. We create deep and meaningful connections that cross oceans, continents and cultures. CouchSurfing wants to change not only the way we travel, but how we relate to the world!

CouchSurfing is one solution for people who want to avoid the gringo trail and are seeking a non-commodified form of travel. When she was traveling for several months after studying abroad in Ecuador, Latona Giwa, 21, chose to CouchSurf from Ecuador to Mexico. Elaborating on why she made this decision, Latona wrote me:

I decided to CouchSurf as much as possible during my travels for several reasons…my initial reason for CouchSurfing was that I didn't have much money (I traveled from Ecuador to Mexico over 5 months on much less than $1000). But my secondary reason was that I wanted
real contact with the local people in the areas that I visited. Staying at hostels and doing touristy things only exposes you to tourists and tourism employees. CouchSurfing lets you engage with local people and their families to see how they live their daily lives. Instead of visiting tourist spots, we visited the places that our CouchSurfing hosts enjoy going to-- a totally different experience. That reason eventually became my primary reason and that is why I will CouchSurf again when I travel. I formed relationships with my hosts and learned a lot about their lives. Instead of consuming falsified productions of ‘local life’, I can participate in and engage with real human beings while they live their lives. I recommend it to anyone!

Sleeping or “surfing” in a local person’s home insures interaction with the host community, requires a degree of fluency in the local language and culture, promises an “off the beaten path” experience, and is free of charge. The website states:

The goal of CouchSurfing has never been about money. The site is free to all members and supported only with donations and verifications. We are not now, nor have we ever pursued financial gain; we only strive to make the site self-sustaining.

In contrast to lodging experience grounded in for-profit monetary exchange and an impersonal consumer-marketer relationship, CouchSurfing thrives on trust and envisions travel as a means of producing social relationships. The growing popularity of the CouchSurfing project demonstrates “alternative” travel is still very much alive, and that consumers have agency; travelers are not cogs in the wheel positioned by the tourism industry.

There is a long history of middle class consumption of “Otherness.” While it is important to acknowledge the often asymmetric relationship between visitors and hosts in a country like Bolivia, I do not believe that travel is uniformly or inherently oppressive. My goal is not to demonize those who stay in party hostels, and I am not advocating that young people stop enjoying them. I do, however, wish to emphasize
that there are many ways to travel and explore, and different investments yield contrasting rewards. Party hostels and organized adventure offer conveniences and social assets, but to take advantage of those benefits, travelers must compromise their ability to find an authentic and personalized experience outside of the trends of the consumer market. There are other ways to be in Bolivia outside of “doing Bolivia,” and I would like to encourage young people to seek them.

For young people who have traveled to international backpacker hotspots, (Australia, Southeast Asia, South America, Europe) this ethnography may have provoked memories of experiences abroad, whether they participated in such scenes or avoided them. For others who have no personal exposure to the backpacker subculture, I hope to have persuasively presented the critical importance of the variety of choices to be made when “going abroad” today.

Before I went to South America, I knew nothing of the gringo trail and had never heard of party hostels. The fact that someone went to a far away place used to automatically impress me because I made what I now realize were false assumptions about their experience -- the language proficiency they must have gained, the local customs they surely learned, the challenges they faced in learning to negotiate cultural differences. After my exposure to party hostels and the booming infrastructure of purchasable experiences, I am more skeptical about such trips. I now know that the value is not in an exotic destination, but in the choices that are made along the way.
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