

Book Review of O'Regan, Michael (ed.) 2023. *Backpacking Culture and Mobilities: Independent and Nomadic Travel.* Bristol and Jackson: Channel View Publications. 299 pp.



BOOK REVIEW

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Backpacking is transforming as we speak. Some of the existing definitions of backpacking are changing, as are some persistent stereotypes of the phenomenon, letting go of their grip in a world where technological innovations, the knock-on effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the fragile global political situation are manifesting in new, sometimes unexpected ways. These materializations of transformation have a profound effect on the ways we travel, how we conceive of travel, and the meanings we attach to travel. Backpacking, as a traveling culture that for many of us, opened the possibility to learn about the world through travel for extended periods of time, is part of this transformation. Following this, some of the elements of backpacking we once thought to be the very foundation of the independent, nomadic travel phenomenon have reformed and almost become unidentifiable in new manifestations of backpacking cultures.

Backpacking Culture and Mobilities: Independent and Nomadic Travel takes part in identifying and understanding this transformation by providing an extensive account of academic research on backpacking from multiple academic fields, approached from both Western and non-Western perspectives, and situated in post-pandemic times and futures. The editor of the book, Dr. Michael O'Regan, continues his internationally acknowledged work on backpacking, together with an international group of researchers who are approaching the backpacking phenomenon from their particular viewpoints and research contexts. The book is a welcome contribution to the field, enhancing researchers' and students' understanding of the historical development of backpacking research, the current state of backpacking research, and the future directions of the field. The book aims to contribute to the development of backpacking research at a conceptual, theoretical, as well as methodological level.

In practice, the book explores different dimensions of backpacking in four thematic parts. The first part focuses on ontological approaches and mobile methods in backpacking research; the second part on international backpacking; the third part on backpacker socialization, hostels, and learning; and the final part on the future

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directions for backpacking and backpacking research, as situated in a post-pandemic world. Together with illustrating the diversity of backpacking research through the contributions provided by the individual chapters, the book also provides a detailed overview of the existing backpacking research. This is done through O'Regan's contributions to the book, consisting of an introduction to backpacking and backpacking research (Chapter 1) and a systematic literature review focusing on the last three decades of research on backpacking (Chapter 2). Together, these chapters form an extensive overview of existing backpacking research that at the same time fills one of the greatest motivations for the book—to continue the valuable work of its predecessors (Hannam & Ateljevic 2008; Hannam & Diekmann 2010; Richards & Wilson 2004)—but simultaneously takes away some of the space that could have been reserved for further innovative theoretical, conceptual, methodological, and empirical research openings in the field. Nevertheless, the book succeeds in giving the stage to some of the diverse academic research on backpacking from different parts of the world, with unique research contexts and designs to investigate the phenomenon in its transformative state.

From the viewpoint of disrupting hegemonic understandings of backpacking and its meanings to its practitioners, the book's strength lies in the second part, which focuses on international backpacking. This strength stems from, firstly, the ability of the contributions—ranging from Chinese backpackers (Chapters 4 and 5) to traveling Israeli families in India (Chapter 6), Indonesian backpacking approached through cultural consumption (Chapter 7), to Iranian female solo backpackers' role and valuation in an Islamic society (Chapter 8)—to address the very problematics embedded in dominant Western imaginaries and realities of backpacking through concrete, situated, culturally specific accounts of backpacking. These accounts truly shake up persistent imaginaries of what backpacking is, or is considered to be, and allow the readers to question their own assumptions about backpacking. The other reason for this part's strength is that it provides a coherent collection of studies focusing on a particular theme, while the two other parts of the book are more fragmented and fail to form a clear focus for the reader.

This does not mean to diminish the value of the contributions present in parts one and three by any means. Instead, the contributions in part three provide valuable insights into the transformative elements of backpacking with a focus on post-journey life (Chapter 9); on the hostel as a central sociocultural space for many backpackers to reinforce and extend their traveling ideology (Chapter 10); and on resident perspectives on backpacking and its 'hedonistic events' at the nexus of backpacker tourism and party tourism, and connected to the role that backpacker lifestyle entrepreneurs play in this setting (Chapter 11). Furthermore, in part one, accompanying O'Regan's systematic literature review on backpacking, Iaquinto's methodological contribution to backpacking research that focuses on the development of mobile methods in the field (Chapter 3) is valuable. Yet, to reach one of the aims of the book—to develop the methodologies with which to investigate the evolving backpacking phenomenon—would have required Iaquinto's work to be complemented by other contributions specifically focusing on this aim. Now, when this chapter is paired with the systematic literature review by O'Regan and situated in the first part of the book, before the other empirical studies, the chapter does not have a sufficiently fertile ground to grow.

Thus, while the book succeeds in building a more complex and current picture of backpacking by simultaneously acknowledging what has been done before—and

as such stands out as a significant contribution to the field—its value remains in its individual parts. The book is not able to form a coherent entity with a clear narrative where its central themes would be in balance with one another. This might be the consequence of two main reasons. First, the book places too much emphasis on the mapping and detailed investigation of existing research on backpacking, which tires the reader before moving on to the contributions that highlight the transformation of backpacking in practice. O'Regan's valuable contributions in the book could have formed an interesting and relevant book of their own, one that would focus on mapping the existing research and paving the way for future directions in backpacking research (Chapters 1, 2, and 12). As it stands, placed within the same covers as the contributions by other authors, the structural imbalance, together with the challenges in the thematic coherence of the third part of the book, leads to the reader feeling overwhelmed. The fact that almost all of the individual contributions include an overview of backpacking with a related literature review (in a more general or specified context), the amount of literature review inside the book results in an overload for the reader and reader fatigue.

If some of the space from the literature review had been allocated to new research openings, this could have allowed for investigating some of the intriguing overlaps between backpacking and other nomadic travel phenomena that were briefly touched upon in the book but not elaborated on in more detail. Among these, I find it especially worthwhile to mention digital nomadism and the growing vanlife phenomenon, as well as their positioning in relation to the transformations taking place in backpacking cultures. Muhs, Agapito and Pereira's (2024) recent contribution on vanlife sheds light on the similarities and distinguishing factors between the parallel concepts characterizing hypermobile lifestyles, and these factors could have been one relevant focus to be added to the book. Such a focus would have further communicated the edited collection's recognition of the porous boundaries of hypermobility and hypermobile traveler identities.

Overall, *Backpacking Culture and Mobilities: Independent and Nomadic Travel* is an extensive introduction to backpacking research and the changing nature of backpacking, and it will earn its place in the field. I recommend the book to fellow researchers and students alike, who are navigating the changing world of tourism and travel mobilities.

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