

# Backpacking Practices and Backpacker's Hostels in India

Jagrati Gupta

*Student, Department of Architecture, SDPS Women's College, Indore, India*

**Abstract:** The concept of backpacker's hostels may be deemed western, but it is not new to India. Backpacker's hostels are emerging in large numbers, attracting Indian, as well as International tourists. These hostels are cheaper and more friendly than a hotel, and are preferred by young travellers. There is a need to bring back this concept in a more modern context as it can greatly benefit the tourism industry, keeping in mind the local culture of the place the hostel is being built at, so as to maximize the benefits. The changing trends in travelling are transforming the modern Indian tourism industry.

**Keywords:** Backpacker's hostel, backpacking, culture, practices, travelling, hotels

## 1. Introduction

A backpacker's hostel is a hostel that provides an affordable and interactive accommodation to travellers. Travellers can rent a bed and share a kitchen and bathrooms. Bunk beds in dormitories are common options, but a backpacker's hostel also provides private rooms. Additional accommodation, such as a common room (or a lounge), and a luggage room may also be provided. A hostel may provide its travellers the choice of staying at a single-sex dormitory or a mixed-sex dormitory, according to preference.

These hostels are very common in the cities of Australia, New Zealand, as well as in the USA and European countries. Although India might not have a culture of European/American style of backpacking, it used to have its own style in the form of chatrams (choultries) and caravanserais. Chatrams pertaining to Buddhist, Jain and Hindu temples, were free of cost and secure accommodation for travellers, pilgrims and their animals, that provided food, water, a seating space and rooms funded by a charitable association. These were spread across the southern part of India. Caravanserais were a common feature along the silk road. They helped in supporting the flow of commerce, people and information along various trade routes. A caravanserai was also built in the region of Mughal Delhi. Equivalent approaches would be dharamsalas and gurudwaras that are spread across the northern and central parts of India. The term 'dharamsala' was taken from an ancient town by the same name that was built to accommodate Tibetan refugees. While dharamsalas and gurudwaras are still in use today, chatrams and caravanserais are merely abandoned structures that have turned into ancient monuments.

It is quite obvious that the concept of backpacker's hostel has

always been there and it played a major role in helping the trade industry. In today's time, its major focus is on supporting the tourism industry.

## 2. Backpacking in India – changing trends

Travelling trends in India and the European/American cities is very different. In some western cities, it is a norm amongst the youngsters to take breaks and travel for months and even years. In such cases, common choices of places to travel include India, and Southeast Asia. While in India, travellers do not travel for such long periods of time. The difference between a traveller and a tourist plays a big role in determining the style of travelling. A tourist is someone who would prefer to stay at a luxurious resort and would only visit the famous spots at the place, while a traveller is someone who likes to explore places beyond the eminent.

Although, we cannot attach stereotypes to travellers since every traveller has a different motive, a different background and a different culture, it can be said that a vast majority of travellers have the following traits in common:

1. Their main priority is not comfort.
2. They use less money on accommodation and transportation.
3. They seek to experience and live the places they visit.
4. They take risks and love adventures.
5. They organize their trips on their own.
6. They travel for longer periods of time.
7. They are free, open-minded and independent.

Whilst travellers cannot exactly be classified, there are a few terms that have emerged with time:

### A. Drifter

These are people who do not stay at a place for too long. Their motive is to explore places and gain experience as their personal achievements. Their visits are not always planned on a prior basis and they do not have a fixed home or a job. They may work different jobs at the places they stay at.

### B. Lifestyle traveller

These travellers like to document their lives while travelling. This term emerged with the increasing use of various social media sites where people can share their experiences through photographs and videos, and in turn, earn money and get

publicity. Travelling is entirely a job or a part of their job. They may document the food, culture, monuments, modes of accommodation and transportation, etc. of the places they visit. They play a big role in representing these places.

### C. Solo traveller

As the name suggests, these travellers prefer to travel alone. The common motives behind this practice are self-exploration and attainment of peace through travelling. The young Indian traveller is still absorbing the concept of solo travelling. The practice is prominent amongst men, but as women are getting more independent and confident with time, they are getting involved now as well in great numbers, which has further contributed to the tourism industry.

The trend of travelling has entirely changed within a decade or so. The changed style of travelling with family and staying at a hotel, to travelling with friends or completely on your own while managing the finances, has had the biggest role to play in the rise of backpacker's hostels in the country.

### 3. Emergence of backpacker's hostels

As mentioned earlier, India has always had the culture of travelling, but it was after the establishment of YHAI-Youth Hostel Association of India, that backpacker's hostels came into the limelight. There are either existing hotels that are associated with YHAI or hostels constructed by YHAI. They provide very cheap accommodation to its guests in the form of dormitories and shared kitchens. Only a few of their hostels appear in the good books of travellers due to lack of hygiene & staff, improper maintenance, as well as a lack of interactive spaces.

This is where private companies come into play. To encourage more Indians to travel, and to attract more foreign travellers, the first chain of backpacker's hostels in India was laid out by an Indian brand called 'Zostel' in the year 2013 by 7 students. With active hostels operating in 34 cities of India and 2 cities of Nepal, their target audience is majorly based of young travellers from age 18 to 35. Zostel soon became a widely-known brand, encouraging various backpacker's hostel brands to emerge as well, such as Moustache hostel, Banjara Hostel, The Hosteller, Backpacker Panda, Vedanta Wake-up!, etc.

The reasons why these hostels became more popular than YHAI hostels amongst the travellers are as follows:

1. They provide a safer and cleaner accommodation.
2. They hire quality staff.
3. They provide open, interactive spaces.
4. Most of them provide restaurants/cafes in the site of the hostel.
5. Most of them provide airport pick-up service.
6. They do not place any conditions regarding membership requirement, unlike YHAI hostels.
7. They provide better staying conditions than YHAI at nearly the same price, that are in par with the western traveller's expectations.

8. They provide a more modern and colourful look that is in sync with the millennial culture.
9. Most of these hostels once used to be hotels that could not operate too well given the changing trends and needed to be transformed. This left the hostels with an advantage of being situated at prime locations.

### 4. The problems

Modern backpacking practices are fairly new to India and thus they are very different from the traditional European practices. There are differences in the way backpacker's hostels are being approached by travellers in India. For example, European style of travelling is heterogeneous in nature, in a way that travellers have access to backpacker's hostels not only in tourist destinations, but inside busy cities as well. The image is completely opposite in India where these hostels are only available in major tourist hubs, such as Jodhpur, Jaipur, Manali, Bangalore, etc. when in reality, we need these hostels in small tourist destinations, as well as in cities. Encouraging tourists to travel to lesser-known tourist spots of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, and the North-Eastern states is very important for the advancement of the tourism industry. These states have immense potential in this sector, and yet they remain overshadowed by mainstream locations.

The following facts have been derived from the 'MP Tourism - Annual Report Tourism Survey for the State of M P 2013':

1. There arises a shortage of nearly 25,000 rooms during the peak season.
2. MP boasts of 3 UNESCO World Heritage Sites, 25 wildlife sanctuaries and major pilgrimage hubs like Ujjain, Amarkantak and Omkareshwar.
3. It is a potential foreign tourist hub with around 4 lakh foreigners visiting the state every year.
4. One of the major problems include poor air & rail connectivity that results in a lack of foreign travellers. There are just 5 airports in the state.
5. Moreover, the condition of roads is so bad, it has worsened the reputation of the state as a whole.
6. MP stood at the 7th position in the year 2015 in the list of states with domestic tourist arrival and 11th in foreign tourist arrival.
7. Annual tourist growth rate:

Domestic: 13.6%

Foreign: 8.7%

It is understandable why some states flourished in the tourism sector, and why the others did not. Acknowledging these facts will help us in understanding the current scenario of tourism in our country, about the growth of this sector along different paths, which will further help us in devising solutions towards improving the conditions.

### 5. Survey analysis

A survey was needed to be conducted in order to obtain answers to some questions. A few questions were asked to

people of different age groups (ages 18-35 and ages 36-50) to maintain unbiasedness. Following were the results of the survey:

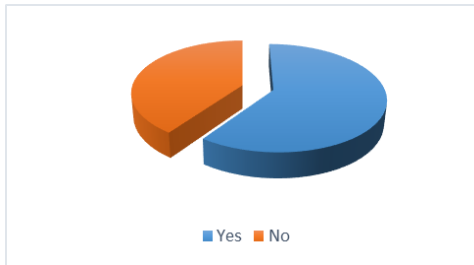


Fig. 1. Pie chart showing the response to the question “Are you aware of the concept of backpacker’s hostels?”

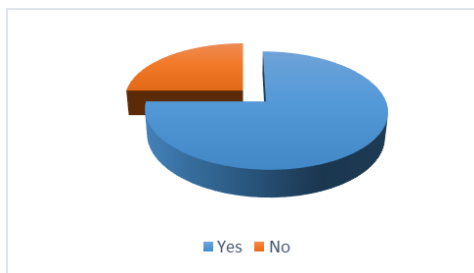


Fig. 2. Pie chart showing the response to the question “Do we need backpacker’s hostels in major Indian cities?”

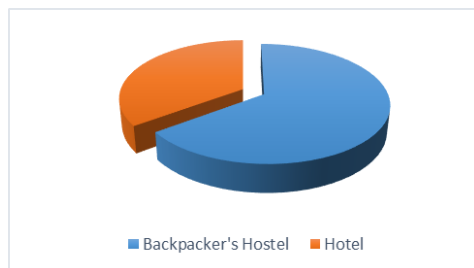


Fig. 3. Pie chart showing the response to the question “Would you rather stay at a backpacker’s hostel or a hotel?”

### 6. Backpacker’s hostels as a plausible solution

The future for backpacker’s hostels in India is surely bright given the current progress. They have completely changed the style of travelling since their emergence, that is, in merely 6 years.

We can expect the following benefits from backpacker’s hostels in the future:

1. They help in encouraging people to travel

independently, especially women, and foreign travellers who have an image of India as a risky place to visit.

2. They can help in meeting the room requirement at lesser-known places without much expense.
3. It will help in supporting local artisans as most of these hostels employ them for interior work.
4. It will help boost employment opportunities for the locals.
5. They provide a more interactive environment that acts as a medium for people of different cultures to share experiences and stories.
6. These hostels help paint a picture of the traditional, as well as modern India. This will further help foreign travellers to absorb Indian culture in a better way.
7. Backpacker’s hostels provide cheap accommodation. This helps travellers in spending money on more relevant stuff, like local food, adventure sports, clothes and handicrafts, etc.
8. If backpacker’s hostels are provided in remote areas of lesser-known states, it will persuade the governmental bodies to develop better air and rail routes along with better public facilities.

Backpacker’s hostels may not be the solution to everything, but they can help in shaping the current travelling culture in India on a large scale.

### 7. Conclusion

This paper presents an overview on backpacking practices and backpacker’s hostels in India.

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