How Millennials Are Changing Travel

By Amanda Machado

In the summer of 2012, at age 24, I left home to travel the world. In just over a year, I backpacked through South America, South Asia, Western Europe, and the western United States. I hiked the Inca Trail, skied the Alps, hitchhiked through Patagonia, and trekked through the Himalayas. I worked at hostels, stayed at a Buddhist monastery, and gardened at an English women's retreat center in exchange for meals and a place to sleep. And while I learned many things on the trip, what was most surprising was how many people my age were traveling just like me.

In the United States, the Boston Consulting Group reports, the millennial generation, defined as those between the ages of 16 and 34, is more interested than older generations in traveling abroad as much as possible—by a 23-percentage-point margin. The United Nations estimates that 20 percent of all international tourists, or nearly 200 million travelers, are young people, and that this demographic generates more than $180 billion in annual tourism revenue, an increase of nearly 30 percent since 2007. The UN attributes that growth both to rising incomes in emerging markets and a commitment by youth in advanced economies to "continue traveling despite economic uncertainty." We are now the fastest-growing age segment in terms of the money we spend on travel, according to American Express Business Insights.

Not only that, but we're redefining the very meaning of international travel, foregoing standard vacations in favor of extended, meaningful experiences. The World Youth Student and Educational (WYSE) Travel Confederation, which recently surveyed more than 34,000 people from 137 countries, found that young travelers are not as interested in "the traditional sun, sea and sand holidays" as previous generations are. They are spending less time in "major gateway cities" and instead exploring more remote destinations, staying in hostels instead of hotels, and choosing long-term backpacking trips instead of two-week jaunts. The study showed an increase from 2007 in young travelers taking trips (like mine) for longer than two months, with the average trip lasting 58 days.

This kind of travel did not come naturally to me. I grew up middle class in Florida in a family where "traveling" generally meant driving two hours to the nicest nearby beach. I got a passport when I was 16 so I could visit my extended family in Ecuador, and by the time I entered college, that family

reunion was still the only time I had ever been overseas. Until I discovered the backpacking scene, I always considered travel to be something reserved for the wealthy, or at least for people with far more experience abroad than I had.

But with easy access to social media and budget-travel tools like Airbnb, Couchsurfing, Skyscanner, and Lonely Planet message boards, I soon realized that long-term travel wasn't nearly as expensive or difficult as I had imagined. I funded my 15-month trip on a little more than $16,000 (that's luxurious: many backpackers I met spent half as much in the same amount of time). I saved more than half the money from a part-time job in high school, and the rest came from two years of work after college. And while there's little data on the economic backgrounds of backpackers, the people I met during my trip—waiters, teachers, seasonal workers, flight attendants, carpenters—gave me the sense that people of diverse means had done the same.

In the case of American millennials, many of us also feel like there's little reason to wait until our golden years to see the world. Our generation has arguably been hit hardest by the recession, and grown skeptical of the best-laid retirement plans. According to the Center for Retirement Research, less than a third of private-sector workers in the U.S. had defined-benefit coverage for retirement in 2010, down from 44 percent in 1995 and 88 percent in 1983. Since 1985, the number of companies offering pensions has fallen from 112,000 to 23,000. The Pew Research Center has reported that only 6 percent of millennials expect to receive the kinds of Social Security benefits that today's retirees enjoy. Half don't believe there will be money remaining in the Social Security system by the time they retire, and an additional 39 percent think these benefits will be significantly reduced. Under these circumstances, it makes sense that we'd travel now, instead of saving travel for a future that is in no way guaranteed.

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Faced with a lack of reliable, long-term employment options, a number of millennials are also using travel to take a break from job-searching and reevaluate what to do next. In 2013, at every education level, millennials aged 25 to 32 confronted a higher unemployment rate than those facing older generations, and an overall unemployment rate of more than 8 percent. Both of my traveling partners, Kevin Parine and Chelin Lauer, considered going abroad after finding limited job opportunities in their area of study. Parine graduated with a degree in geology but decided to travel after struggling to find work in his field. Lauer graduated with a degree in biology and ended up moving to South Korea to work as a science and English teacher, and then travel whenever she had the chance.

"Teaching English in Korea was the highest-paying job I could find after graduating," Lauer, 26, says.

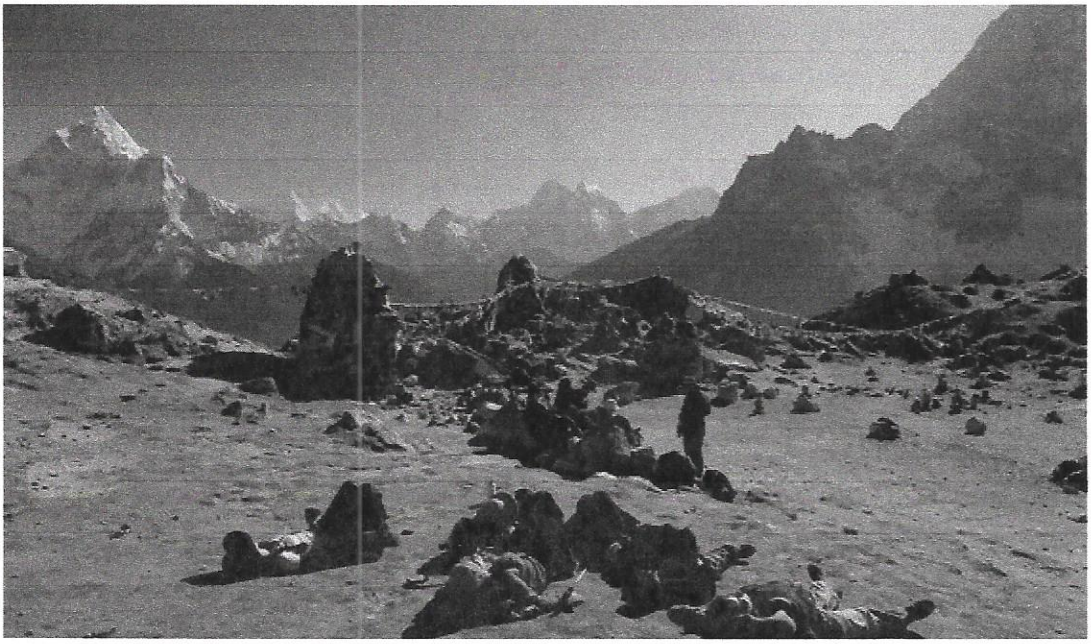
"But the flipside to a bad job market is that it gave me a chance to explore something I probably would have never done otherwise."

But even those lucky enough to find jobs may be tempted to travel by their dissatisfaction with the way the United States approaches work. While corporate profits have increased by 20 percent in the past two decades and productivity has surged, income has stagnated, suggesting people are working more and getting paid less. Forty percent of professional men and 15 percent of professional women work more than 50 hours per week, and the United States is one of only nine countries around the world that doesn't require employers to offer paid annual leave. Perhaps it's no surprise, then, that only 30 percent of American employees feel engaged at work, according to a 2013 Gallup poll. A Harris survey found that 73 percent of older workers said they never landed in the job they dreamed of when they were younger.

"We're looking at the corporate world as it is now, and this yester-year of people spending all their life working at a job they often hated, retiring, and that's it, and we're disillusioned with that," says Jessie Goldstein, 26, who recently completed a five-month road trip across the United States. After finishing a master's degree in sustainable development and getting admitted into Ph.D. programs, she decided to take the trip to figure out whether more graduate school was the right choice for her. "If I'm going to continue putting that much of my life into something, and that much effort, it better be something I'm really passionate about," she explains.

Studies indicate that millennials advocate strongly for work-life balance, and have few qualms about leaving jobs that don't meet their expectations. A 2012 Net Impact survey found that young workers are more concerned with finding happiness and fulfillment at the office than workers of past generations. The study found that 88 percent saw a "positive culture" as essential to their dream job, and that 86 percent felt the same way about work they found "interesting." Fifty-eight percent said they would stomach a 15-percent pay cut to work for an organization "with values like my own."

Travel creates time to reflect on these priorities and decide how our career choices can accommodate them. We understand that bumming around in our twenties for too long is irresponsible, but we also find it irrational to work unfulfilling jobs only to feel legitimate. And if we have the financial resources to pause, travel, and reassess, then why not take advantage of that privilege?



Young hikers in the Himalayas (Sam Hawley/Flickr)

But while long-term travel and gap years have been popular for years in countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom, the idea is still relatively new in the United States—and not yet widely accepted.

"If you were to ask older people. 'Is this a good idea, should I go do this?' the answer perceived is 'no,'" says Randall Bourquin, 25, who spent six months last year backpacking through South and Central America. "People think that there's too much opportunity cost, or that it's going to cause a speed bump in your career."

Yet according to the WYSE Travel Confederation's report, many young travelers use their extended trips not only for leisure, but also as a form of job training: 22 percent of respondents wanted to learn a language during their travels, 15 percent wanted to gain more work experience, and 15 percent wanted to study—all increases since 2007.

These skills can translate into a competitive advantage in the workplace. Elizabeth Harper, 25, discovered her career interests while backpacking in Southeast Asia. Traveling gave her time to read for pleasure, and she ended up leafing through books passed around in hostels about atrocities that had occurred in the countries she was visiting. She eventually graduated with a master's degree in international human-rights law and has since worked on human-rights issues for the United Nations and the International Commission of Jurists. Bourquin leveraged his trip into a sports-marketing job at Univision. My travels helped me obtain a summer job with Global Glimpse, an organization that takes disadvantaged students on educational trips through Nicaragua.

As a daughter of immigrants, the American Dream has played an ever-present role in my career decisions. After seeing how few options my mother had as a woman who spent a large part of her childhood in poverty, I wanted to do everything she never had the opportunity to accomplish. Growing up, that meant graduating from a prestigious university and getting a respectable job. But gradually I realized my standard definition of the American Dream was incomplete: It was not only about obtaining education and a good job, but also about focusing on how my career choices contributed to my overall well-being. It was about gaining experiences outside my career, like travel, that would have otherwise been unavailable to me.

For me and many others millennials, *this* was the opportunity we worked hard to achieve: the opportunity to have options—to have time to reflect, and to experience the world in a way many generations before us never could.

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