

Tourism and the Counterculture Traveller: Reconsidering the Hippie Trail

By Trevor W. Harrison*

By the 1960s, tourism was already becoming a large commercial industry selling travel as a purchasable commodity. A subset of conventional tourists were youths from western countries who made the journey to India along what became known as the Hippie Trail, a route that partially replicated the fabled Silk Road. Termed “hippies” by the popular press, the number who made the journey is estimated as close to two million. The emergence of these countercultural travellers was the product of specific material and cultural conditions. This paper is abridged from a soon to be published book based on my own experiences and interviews with forty-eight individuals who made the journey in the 1960s and 1970s. I focus here on the socio-demographic characteristics of travellers and the cultural milieu of the time. Specifically emphasized is the mutual impact of fiction and non-fiction writings, films, and music in shaping images conducive to a desire to travel the Hippie Trail.

Introduction

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*Professor Emeritus of Sociology, University of Lethbridge, Canada.

¹*Safarnameh: Reflections on a Journey from Turkey to India in the Last Years of the Hippie Trail* (Athabasca, Alberta: Athabasca University Press). Forthcoming.

The Socio-demographics of Countercultural Travel

Many of those who made the journey to India in the 1960s and 1970s were children of the Second World War. While their parents may have spoken little of the conflict, movies, documentaries, and books provided a workable map of the world beyond one's home. This imagined world became an extension of the real world where many young people grew up.

The actualization of global travel was conditioned by the growth of transportation systems, particularly the advent of mass air travel in the 1950s. But several other important economic, socio-demographic, and cultural factors also played into western youth choosing to travel to India during the later period.

Popular depictions of the countercultural travellers are often disparaging (Rankin 2004, Theroux 2009, Tomory 1998). Only recently have more scholarly efforts been made to derive a more comprehensive description (Ireland 2017).

My own research suggests most of the travellers were in their early to mid-twenties in age, and came from White, middle- or working-class families. Though well off by the standards of the countries travelled, they came mostly from middle- and working-class backgrounds. Given their ages, most had high school educations or some partial post-secondary credentials. Males were in the majority, though the number of females on the road increased over time. Heterosexuality was the norm, though no doubt some travellers' orientations were not. (Of those I interviewed, only one was openly Gay.)

Their reasons for making the journey were various. Curiosity and a search for adventure were prime motivations among the individuals I interviewed, but others mentioned boredom or a search for spiritual enlightenment as other reasons. Several were simply at loose ends, caught between adolescence and social pressures to settle down to job and family. The period of travel was a performative act of freedom.

Some had contemplated for a long time making the journey to India, but others made the decision spontaneously. For some, travel was time-bound, while for others the trip set out upon had neither a firm duration nor precise direction. What were the underlying conditions leading to so many making the journey?

The economic period between 1945 and the mid-1970s was a Golden Age in the West. This was especially the case for North America's middle classes, while for many English and European citizens, whose countries had been scarred physically by the war, prosperity arrived a little later. One impact of this was that proportionately more North Americans travelled to India in the mid-1960s than did their counterparts in Britain and Europe, changing only later in that decade as the economies of Britain and western Europe improved.

The Golden Age coincided also throughout the West with a spike in birth rates between 1946 and 1966. The rates for the Anglo-democratic countries outside of the United Kingdom—Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States—were especially high during the postwar years and did not substantially diminish until the end of the so-called "baby boom." Many who travelled to India before 1970 were born before 1946. By contrast, most of those making the journey in the 1970s were Baby Boomers.

The likelihood of individuals making the journey was partly a product of the West's emergent socio-cultural milieu. Political scientist Ronald Inglehart (1977) argued those born after the Second World War hold different values than those born before that time. While earlier generations were driven by concerns for material survival, later generations could turn their attention to such things as autonomy, self-expression, and quality of life.

At the heart of the post-material individual is the modern conception of the self, comprised of such values as personal freedom, individualism, spontaneity, and authenticity—values central to the self-identity countercultural travellers. Newness and self-discovery/creation were paramount. The self was a project that could only be found/created through new experiences as mediated, for example, through drugs, alcohol, sex, music, or religion. But, as an all-encompassing experiential vehicle bringing together each of these modalities, travel was the means *par excellence*. Albeit unconsciously, many who travelled to various countries during the 1960s and 1970s were backstopped by a sense of material and psychological security which, when combined with the sense of immortality typical of youth, allowed for a degree of adventuring, even risk taking, impossible in previous generations.

Indeed, taking calculated risks became a necessary requirement of individual expression and personal growth. Travelling, whether to Asia or other parts of the world, became part of a coming-of-age ritual in the West, encouraged by a growing culture of travel.

The Culture of Travel

The desire to travel is as old as humanity itself. Many of humanity's earliest stories involve travel somewhere; consider Homer's *Odyssey*. While socio-economic and technical advances made distant travel possible for more people in the twentieth century, popular culture after 1945 in the form of films, literature, magazines, and music also embedded the desire. By the 1950s, travel writing had become its own genre, exemplified by the works of Jan Morris and Eric Newby. Major magazines regularly profiled far-off places. An individual I interviewed for the book recalled as a child being stimulated to travel by a photo he saw in a *National Geographic* magazine of Buddhist monks in a Tibetan monastery.

Prior to 1945, foreign travel to the Middle and Far East was largely an elite exercise, indulged in by generally well-to-do western adventurers, often British, such as Gertrude Bell, Anne and Wilfrid Blunt, Robert Byron, T. E. Lawrence, and Freya Stark. Their biographical accounts were augmented in the mid- and late-1950s by members of the so-called Oxford-Cambridge Far Eastern Expedition, Michael and Nina Marriott, Group Captain Peter Townsend, and Barbara Toy. In contrast to subsequent countercultural travellers, these early travellers made the journey heavily equipped, distanced from the peoples of the region. Nonetheless, their accounts played a role in expanding the idea of travel into places heretofore often outside the imagination of most westerners.

The emergent middle-class culture of travel was wedded not only to curiosity but also the psychological desire for freedom. Jack Kerouac's (1957) *On the Road* crafted a positive mythology about the liberating qualities of travel. The book is almost Homeric in tone, but its celebration of travel was decidedly in tune with the West's emerging cultural values. Brian Ireland and Sharif Gemie (2017) note, for example, the book's appeal to both British and North American youth.

The celebration of travel coincided with the growth of the car industry. The car came to represent a measure of prosperity and status. Roads and highways were expanded, and gas stations built. In North America, especially, suburbs and shopping malls flourished. Travelling long distances remained an anomalous, and often arduous, activity, but when such trips did occur—say, a once in a lifetime trip to New York or Los Angeles—they took on an indelible place in memory.

The car, however, was not simply an instrument of travel or a bearer of status. It spoke to the possibility of personal reinvention and freedom. Travel was a central theme of many television dramas, as no better depicted than in a popular American television series in the 1960s, *Route 66*.

The show, which ran from 1960-1964, was a sanitized version of Jack Kerouac's novel. The show's main characters (Buz and Tod) drove a red Chevrolet Corvette and each week met new and interesting characters. But mostly, the show was about the romance and excitement of travel. The point was not to get somewhere. The point was the journey itself. This theme was repeated in other television shows of the time, such as *The Fugitive*, *The Invaders*, and even *Star Trek*. Such shows, combined with numerous books, contributed to the desire for travel that emerged after the 1950s.

In short, travel to foreign places became by the 1960s valued for its own sake. It was now woven into the fabric of western culture. But it was especially woven into the emergent sense of self held by many youths who increasingly felt estranged from the dominant culture, a culture that in the words of one individual I interviewed, seemed "decadent, exploitative, and superficial."

Travel as Counterculture Expression

Many people, then as now, did not adopt countercultural values, or did so only partially. But fear and insecurity did spawn a rejection, among some, of political authority. For many, economic security—which many took for granted—was offset by threats of nuclear and conventional war, social discord, alienation, and environmental destruction; concerns that still echo. The threat of nuclear annihilation touched everyone.

While much analysis of the counterculture focuses on American youth's discontent and rejection of western values and culture, it is important to acknowledge that these responses were not confined to the United States. The year 1968 was not only seminal in the U.S., marked by protests of the Vietnam War and the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy; it holds

a special place also in European political and social history, during which student riots broke out in France and Germany, and the Soviet Union brutally put down Alexander Dubcek's reformist movement in Czechoslovakia. The counterculture, and the political rebellions it spawned, was transnational. The times did indeed seem a-changing.

Similarly, these changes drew widely from a shared cultural well of writers, poets, and musicians. Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, Arthur Rimbaud and Hermann Hesse, The Who and Jimi Hendrix fueled an idealist ethos that rejected convention in search of an authentic self, born of nature; a lifestyle woven together by a tapestry of art, music, literature, as well as love and hope, that again transcended borders. California's communes found an echo in Berlin and Munich, and in countless experiments in rural Canada. That Jim Morrison was buried in Paris' Pere Lachaise cemetery is symbolic of the cultural and international solidarity of the times.

For at least some growing up in the West's post-material, counter-cultural milieu, travel was not only a means of youthful adventure but also an individual, even libertine, political expression; while for others, albeit often unconsciously, travel also became an articulation of both an escape *from* and a search *for*.

At the same time, a desire for travel could—and did—manifest itself in numerous places. The question then is, why did so many choose India?

Hippie Orientalism

In his classic work, Palestinian literary critic Edward Said (1979) describes Orientalism as “the discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically, as a topic of learning, discovery, and practice.” In western culture, the Orient is a vast and undifferentiated area, comprising Africa, Asia, the Middle and Far East; indeed, nearly all the world outside the Occident (Europe). It is the world of the Other—a people and a place that is exotic, mysterious, and dangerous; and, in the most racist and demeaning portrayals, ignorant, untrustworthy, and cowardly—“uncivilized” in traditional western parlance.

As the twentieth century began, western audiences were already flooded with many conventional, erroneous, and thus comfortable, images of the Orient produced by writers, poets, and artists. Before 1939, these books included Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, and James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, and the films *Lives of the Bengal Lancer*, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, and *Elephant Boy*. Orientalist books and films immediately after that time include Edmund Hillary's *High Adventure*, and the films and television series *Casablanca*, *King of the Khyber Rifles*, and *Tales of the 77th Bengal Lancers*. The catalogue of Orientalist images was augmented in the 1960s and 1970s by writers such as Dervla Murphy and Paul Theroux, films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* and *The Man Who Would Be King*, and songs such as Iron Maiden's “In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida,” the Crosby, Stills, and Nash classic, “Marrakesh Express,” and Three Dog Night's “The Road to Shamballa.”

For Edward Said, Orientalism was an instrument of imperialism. For many in the West, however, “the Orient” was increasingly seen as a place not only of enormous allure but also salvation. The images prepared those who made the journey with a belief in where they were going, and the confidence and surety that the route could be traversed safely.

Easternization: The Other Side of Orientalism

As earlier mentioned, Kerouac’s *On the Road* was first and foremost a travel tale. But that book and *Dharma Bums* (1958) also echoed another theme: the growing attraction of Eastern religion and culture.

Long before western youth began travelling to India, eastern values, beliefs, and practices had already breached the West’s porous cultural walls. Sociologist Colin Campbell (2007) notes that early interest in eastern philosophies “was confined to a small, elite group of intellectuals, writers, and artists,” but grew after the 1960s “to embrace large numbers of ordinary, if generally middle-class, people.” Intellectuals, such as Aldous Huxley, prepared this embrace through the dissemination of images that meshed with the West’s growing popular culture. The result was a further enticement to western youth who already held imagined images of the lands to which they would soon travel.

The turn to the East was hugely reinforced by cultural icons such as Allan Ginsberg and the Beatles. Within the West, the exotic East became a familiar presence through such books as *Be Here Now*, written by Ram Dass (i.e., Dr. Richard Alpert). But western adopters alone did not fuel the lure of the East. The East also came to the West through literature and film, such as Satyajit Ray’s *Parash Pathar*, *Devi*, and *Charulata*, as well as the music of Ravi Shankar. Donald Redfoot (1984) notes the “Mystic East” was marketed through a series of cultural exchanges by “skillful entrepreneurs” who brought the East to the West. In turn, travellers embraced and disseminated alluring Eastern images through their own personal experiences as conveyed by word of mouth or produced in pamphlets and posters.

These collective images, part of what Brian Edwards (2005) has termed “Hippie orientalism,” were often more laudatory and accepting of the region and its peoples than found in the West’s dominant cultural discourse. At the same time, this acceptance often fell short of a genuine engagement with the East, whose depiction was often shallow and largely imaginary. Moreover, not all who made the journey embraced wholly or uncritically such images; nor continue to hold them when faced with reality.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the causal factors why many young westerners travelled overland in the 1960s and 1970s to India along the Hippie Trail. The paper highlights economic prosperity in many of the post-war countries, coincident with a rise in birth rates. But it also details the cultural factors leading to the desire for travel, and travel specifically to India; in particular, the presence of Orientalist motifs that textured both travellers' desires and experiences.

The overland route from Turkey to India became impassable in its entirety following the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the breakout of war in Afghanistan the next year. Only a few westerners—excluding thousands of foreign troops—have trekked even parts of that region since, while even fewer have left accounts. The experience of the Hippie Trail will not be replicated. It has been replaced by endless regional wars, growing economic inequality, pandemics, climate change, and the commercialization of tourism.

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