

GETTING SETTLED

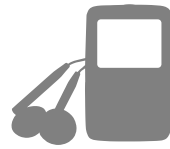
DOTDOTDASH INTERESTING THOUGHTS
COMPETITION RUNNER-UP | Jasper Garner Gore

Backpackers passing through the hostel respond with stark disbelief when I explain how difficult it is to find a free room in Melbourne. It just doesn't scan, either because they come from much larger cities, places where rentals might be pricey but are usually available, or because this information penetrates that invisible protective cloud that surrounds backpackers and prevents problems of a local origin from affecting them. Invariably, the moment a backpacker decides to rent is the moment that this cloud begins to dissipate; it is the moment when they choose to adopt a foreign country as their home. When this happens, backpackers start trading in a different currency - familiarity becomes more valuable than uncertainty, and slowly, steadily, the sense of isolation that inevitably accompanies long travel begins to crumble. That this process should be sparked by a financial decision is interesting: a traveller becomes accessible when they remove their monies from the giddy eddies of tourist industry and plant themselves in more local real estate. Less cynically, it is the decision to build a private space, a fixed space, that demystifies the traveller. They can be located, called upon, billed; they become persistent in a way that they were not before. Precisely what defines them as travellers is transience, instability. Stripped of this, backpackers become solid, available, and finally comprehensible. The shift is slow, however, and often takes the form of baffling messes and violently silly arguments as to why there is no milk.

I've worked at a backpackers on King Street now for just over a year, and this process, the change from backpacker to flatmate, never stops being curious to me. The psychological shifts involved are often surprising. I remember one traveller from Ireland whose gaunt features and lonely, even hostile bearing underwent in the space of one or maybe two months a transformation as total as it was startling. By

the end of it, he was a good natured and noticeably fatter person, living with a friend of mine, and quickly becoming a fixture. The only chartable change in that period was that he had moved into a sharehouse in North Melbourne. He was to us a different sort of person by virtue of his commitment to our tiny world. Clearly more had happened than his decision to put down roots, but, tellingly, that decision was probably what altered our relationship with him most. It made a certain localised trust possible, because the decision to inhabit, to be housed, makes someone very different seem much more familiar, especially when they are housed in similar circumstances. And there's no accident to this: these backpackers, these travellers who have spent months, sometimes years cultivating mystery, quite suddenly and violently want to be known, and that means having a home.

A backpackers isn't a home. At its best it's a stopping-off point, an easy, detached way to float between countries. At worst it's a time warp that traps people somewhere between here and there. Travellers sometimes spend months at a time in one, and it begins to wear on them. The tonic many (sometimes unconsciously) reach for is the country, or at least some kind of sunlight and manual labour. In truth it doesn't much help - backpackers on farms, in most jobs in fact, are treated so completely as second-class citizens that nothing in the work interrupts the idea that they aren't quite there. So they move out; at a certain point they have to. A place of their own is the only really lasting solution to the problem, and interestingly this process requires abandoning, or at least dampening, the sense in which someone understands themselves to be a foreign national. Partly because thinking like a tourist in the rental market is just plain dangerous, but mostly because the local identity becomes more powerful as its concerns become more overwhelming. I don't mean that people stop being from one country or another, or that their origins and culture become less defining or important. I mean that backpackers become less



deliberately foreign, that a dialogue of occupancy and habitation begins when someone does not have another home to go home to. And it's great fun to watch. Particularly because nothing annihilates hypocrisy like close quarters: patience withers in a shared laundry. And this dialogue of frustration too often has its merits, because it requires taking someone seriously, understanding them as having an effect by sharing tiny places.

Almost inevitably backpacker flatmates move on again, and the roots they've put down reveal themselves as, if not actually shallow, then at least as incapable of restraining the restlessness that started the whole thing. But that doesn't mean that a home hasn't existed for a moment, and that having and making a home doesn't transform a person, especially a person so deliberately in flux. Not that these homes are necessarily all that stable or long-lasting: building a home this way means plugging into a set of habits of cheap, shared living almost as fraught as they are imprecise. It is a commitment to living in a broom-closet with an army of relative strangers who take showers at precisely the wrong time. In fact there are very few logistical differences between a backpackers and sharehouse, with the obvious exception of privacy. But living in the former means being marked as inconsequential, regardless of the length of time spent there, and living in the latter is a social foothold, one which can be used as a lever to genuine recognition. There are whole worlds of social organisation that orbit this change in stance, communities rich with backpacker immigrants. The critical gesture required to enter them is the establishment of a home.

The idea that a home is a socially modified space rich with both internal and external struggles has been voiced often enough that it could be taken as a given. The

home as private, as protected from the pressures of observation, has not existed for a long time, if it ever did. It is not surprising that the decision to find a home, rather than accommodation, carries great strength, and has the power to modify a traveller's relationship to places and persons. But it is not enough to describe backpackers who become immigrants as falling under the control of a hybridised sharehouse idea. A backpacker is unique in that they choose, or at least choose not to leave, the place they make a home in. And so there exists a thought halfway between a contract and a ritual that allows a backpacker to plant themselves, to shed some of their sense of dislocation, and to become part of a landscape. In much the same way that there is a ritual element to young adults moving out of home, so too backpackers move out of a protective, if eventually debilitating, field of unreality. This is not to imply that backpackers are children, but that like adolescents they are required to undergo tests before they are afforded social legitimacy. And there are comprehensible rules for these tests, because this shift from traveller to flatmate is necessarily very common in a country as culturally invested in tourism and immigration as Australia is, or at least often argues that it is. These tests are both financial, as many travellers are perceived as having more income than they in fact do, and social, as suddenly the terms change in friendships that have been tentatively formed, and a reliable exit is no longer available. They are also often hideously unfair, even to those who come from relatively similar cultural economies. The gatekeeping process is continual, and almost impossible to avoid. But, if nothing else, the sharehouse situation often allows access to these gates, if not always the secret to opening them.

The question that floats through the core of this discussion, and which really needs to be addressed is this: is it really the case that backpackers becoming flatmates have changed stance, or is it simply that they become

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accessible to standards of judgement more familiar to me, and that I perceive change where all that has occurred is the emergence of a cipher, a shared experience that allows interpretative access to a previously unknown world? Certainly it would be ridiculous to claim that living in a sharehouse represents a *massive* change to a traveller's placement. After all, a sharehouse is in most respects just more of the same for a long-term backpacker. But something does change, from both ends. Something nebulous, and unstable, and something that is often disappearing even as it is identified. It is a change that belongs to an idea of settlement, that belongs simultaneously to settlers and to locals, and that requires active participation from both. It is the fact that travellers seek a situation where they can be known, even to an extent standardised, that represents their end of the bargain. For the local it is a subtle, sometimes almost invisible opening in their shield of understanding. This system is not perfect, it's frustrating and imprecise and simply cannot accommodate the impossibly huge range of experiences that international travellers encompass. But a structure exists, tied to the sinews of universities and hostels and orchards. It could use some work, certainly, but the way that backpackers make homes, and the shift in understanding that accompanies this, demonstrates how deftly knitted-together are the economics of tourism and real estate with the recognition of persons and the enabling of social access. It is partly a question of money, but more a question of commitment and translation. Until a backpacker makes a home, it is nearly impossible to know them. Often, they do not wish to be known, and it is difficult to share the riskier details of personal and cultural habits with a person who is deliberately ungrounded. It is perhaps a little sad that it is required of a traveller that they shed their

mystery, at least to an extent, before they are allowed out of the deceptive tourist enclaves that exist all over the world. But it makes possible an exchange, one that rarely dissolves into straightforward normalisation, between unknown places.

It's an obvious point, really. That travellers are made unknowable by the inaccessibility of their home, their distance from non-negotiable concerns, and that the establishing of a new home is really the establishing of a dialogue, the bridging of a gap. But the backpackers I have known, especially those who have chosen to settle in Melbourne, have illustrated to me just how porous and, more importantly, active the dialogue between travellers and locals can be. Establishing a home is a gesture, a contract, an expression of commitment that rarely goes unnoticed. And these homes, quavering and deliberate, offer a clue as to how closely a sense of legitimate existence can be wrapped up in a place and a gesture. In contexts where homes regularly appear and disappear, it is possible, sometimes, to see why they are established, and why they vanish. And though a great many backpackers do disappear, either returning to their less accidental home or disguising themselves again in a fresh destination, the impulse has been satisfied: there was the possibility of a future, as for a moment the traveller flirted with being settled, and the settlement, grudgingly or not, made room for the traveller.



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