

Not so Lonely Planet

Jo Caird talks to Tom Hall, Travel Editor at Lonely Planet, about the future of the humble guidebook

It's over 30 years since Tony and Maureen Wheeler decided to drive from London to Australia via Europe and Asia and write a book about their experiences on the road in countries that many people had never even heard of.

Lonely Planet now publishes 500 titles including country and city guides, phrase books, maps and illustrated pictorials. They employ 450 people in their offices in Melbourne, London and New York, as well as 300 authors constantly updating old guides and researching and writing new ones. The company has also expanded into digital media, responding to the fast-changing world of tourism with a few forays into technology: podcasts, downloadable guides and Lonely Planet TV.

But is the company still relevant to today's travellers and is it even responsible to travel at all these days? I talked to Tom Hall, Travel Editor at Lonely Planet, and a random selection of London University students in an attempt to find out.

Of the students surveyed, almost two thirds have bought a Lonely Planet guidebook and the majority of those buy them again and again for a wide variety of trips, from weekends in New York, to months backpacking in Guatemala. Tom Hall believes that tourism has changed; we can no longer differentiate between the traveller who backpacks in developing countries and the European citybreaker, because they are now the same person. Lonely

Planet 'understand that one traveller might make many different journeys over the course of a year, or their entire life' and are changing their brand accordingly.

The latest addition to the Lonely Planet guidebook range is the Encounter series, which aims to help travellers get as full an experience out of short trips to big cities as they would out of longer, more backpack-style travel experiences. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this range is the way the company have decided to use viral marketing for the first time in order to reach this new, genre-crossing group in a new way. Hall explains that they 'want to get a bit of a buzz going' and are ready to use 'a way-out concept' - i.e. low budget YouTube-suitable clips - to get people thinking about aspects of cities that wouldn't normally register on the tourist radar.

The Encounter series is also effectively an attempt to retain as customers the travellers who used Lonely Planet guides when they were young and on a small budget but now want a more upmarket travel experience. This demographic may not buy a Lonely Planet country guide but might buy one of the Encounter series. It is interesting to note that all the Lonely Planet titles mentioned by the students surveyed were from the original range, not the Encounter series - which was launched last spring - and that the overwhelming majority were guides to developing countries.

When asked what other resources they used while abroad, several mentioned TimeOut city guides, preferring them because they 'give less of a tourist's perspective on things' and 'tell you what you want to know: the quirky places, not the tourist traps'. While Hall is confident about reaching this very demographic with the Encounter guides, it seems like Lonely Planet have quite a challenge on their hands

long-haul flights are such a menace to the environment. Hall explains that Lonely Planet offsets the carbon emissions of all its writers and employees and advises travellers to do the same via climatecare.org by following a link on Lonely Planet's website. But surely it would be better to stop flying long haul altogether? Hall feels strongly about this issue, commenting that 'Travel has really been seized



Above: a sign in Bali advertises its listing in Lonely Planet. Below left: is a fully-stocked bookshelf of guidebooks soon to be a thing of the past?

if they're going to convince people that their books are not just for backpacker-style trips.

Another potentially negative aspect of Lonely Planet guidebooks that came up in the completed surveys is the long-recognized problem of foreign destinations being 'ruined' by the arrival of travellers bearing guidebooks directing them to 'unspoilt' locations of local beauty or culture. One student commented that although she finds Lonely Planet guides useful for their maps, by following the recommendations you gain an experience that is often limited to 'honey-pot tourist sites.'

Hall's response to this trend is a general note for travellers to take responsibility for their own experiences and not rely too heavily on guidebooks. 'We want to encourage people to explore and while you can take people so far at some point it's down to individuals themselves to get on with it. I think if someone has a guidebook it should be in your bag 95% of the time.'

This issue however is of much greater importance than the irritation that travellers feel upon arriving in a supposedly 'authentic' location and finding it teeming with people exactly like them. The larger concern is for the people who are left in the 'ruined' places once all the travellers have gone home, as well as the natural environments of foreign destinations - and on a larger scale, the environment in general. Hall is very keen to emphasise the positive example that Lonely Planet tries to set, arguing that their guidebooks offer a lot of advice on travelling sustainably. But once again the onus is on the individual traveller to follow that advice as well as on governments to negotiate the 'balancing act' of tourism's pros and cons.

But how can the tourism industry, particularly the type of travel that Lonely Planet specializes in, ever hope to make itself truly sustainable when

upon by the media as the bogey-boy in this situation' and explaining that the issue is not as simple as it seems.

'Tourism is the world's largest industry; it plays a major part in the economy of developing countries. If you stopped that overnight, the effect on many economies would be catastrophic; and one of the other knock-on effects would be further environmental damage through things like mining and exploitation of natural resources [as governments turned to other forms of revenue].'

Travel has been seized upon by the media

The only solution - which is by no means a cure-all - is for individual travellers to take as much responsibility as possible for their actions, from choosing a destination where tourism is a force for good on a local level, to offsetting their carbon emissions. Lonely Planet is just one of the resources out there helping people to do that. Hall is hopeful that through further discussion and debate within the industry, particularly with the major aviation players, further steps can be taken to make sustainable travel easier.

A lot has changed since the Wheelers' first trip, both at Lonely Planet and in the tourism industry as a whole. While the company is out to make money, just like any other business, there is a real sense that they are still concerned about keeping travel a force for good in the world. Here on our not so lonely planet, that's no bad thing these days.

Overseas report

Each issue this column features a different study or work abroad experience, direct from London students on their year abroad. From Paris to Panama City, from Berlin to Beijing, they tell you what it means to live in a different culture, whether far away or close to home. In this issue, Matt Gardner reports on life in Berlin, Germany, where he is studying German and Dutch Philology at Freie Universität Berlin.

When I moved to Berlin in October, it was not without a certain sense of foreboding: my confidence in my language skills was low, I had nowhere to live and was positively envious of those to whom the year abroad was just a year off, a postponement of final year stress. Those clichéd platitudes - 'you'll have such a good time!' and 'you'll make so many new friends!' - which I encountered constantly in the run-up, usually from those who didn't have to do a year abroad, seemed to me misrepresentative and only made me worry more that my panic was abnormal.

There is a great attraction to living here, however, something that I have gradually discovered over the weeks and months. Berlin is very different from Paris or London, a much more low-key capital city experience. There is a level to Berlin operating underneath the one accessible to tourists and the hordes of Australian backpackers (ten a penny). You have to put the work in yourself, as some of the best nightlife, exhibitions and theatrical events operate by word-of-mouth and are tucked away in the most unlikely locations: when I bought tickets for the play, *The Edukators*, I was expecting West End, but found myself in what appeared to be a converted storeroom.

Even now, the East-West divide can take you by surprise: I was dismissive of it when I opted to live in a western district, but realise now that the East is a livelier and - dare I say it - more interesting place.

My language confidence has improved, mostly due to the friendly attitude towards non-natives. Reactions to my attempts to master correct word order, which before were met with plain impatience, now range from pleasant surprise to outright amusement. That said, not all non-natives are completely welcome: areas like mine (Moabit) are usually stereotyped as crime-ridden and dangerous, when the only difference that I can see is their high Turkish population.

Thus far, living here has not been particularly easy - that legendary German efficiency was sorely lacking when registering at university and with the local authorities - but it has been interesting to scrape beneath the surface and be more than a tourist.

When the public transport system went on strike last month I complained about it to a friend, which elicited the telling response 'enjoy your holiday' - which this most certainly is not.

