

Backpacker Etiquette

The behaviour of backpackers is governed by an unwritten 'code of conduct'. This is necessary since - in hostels in particular - backpackers interact with each other at close quarters. Generally, Westerners are not used to such conditions; communal living to them being so alien the concept may as well have erupted from John Hurt's stomach.

Westerners may have experienced a derivative of this environment if, for example, they had attended boarding school, were in the military or had shared a bedroom with a sibling or partner. These, however, are instances of sharing with known persons. In hostels, it is common to share a dormitory room with complete strangers. These strangers could come from a variety of countries and hold one of a range of religious, spiritual, ethical or political beliefs. Each has his or her standards of cleanliness and hygiene. The mixture of personalities could create a harmonious environment, or a cauldron of tension and antagonism. This is where the code steps in, to ensure that the backpacker is able to show consideration to his or her fellow traveller, whilst at the same time having as much fun as possible.

The Code

1. When residing in a dormitory room ensure there is enough space for everyone's possessions.

Space in sleeping areas is often at a premium. It is therefore not a good idea to sprawl one's stuff over a vast area. If everyone does so, the floor of the room turns into a sprawling metropolis with suburbs including guide books, deodorant, knick knacks, food and clothes. Possessions can get mixed up and easily lost. This is particularly important if there are bunk beds present. There is nothing worse than having jumping down from the top bunk in the middle of the night, to go to the toilet, and having to negotiate an obstacle course of someone else's dirty underwear.



2. Treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself.

It can be argued that this can be extended to all walks of life. The concept is self explanatory, so let's give an example. Imagine a four person dorm room. It is a cold night. Three occupants have hired the hostel's bedding, which comprises thin sheets and moth eaten blankets so ancient that the druids had previously made use of them when taking their picnics at the newly constructed Stonehenge. The fourth inhabitant is the proud owner of a state of the art sleeping bag, designed by NASA scientists and capable of use in each of the four seasons and in a variety of environments. These include storms, mountains, deserts, tsunamis and Mars. Let's call this person Mr. Swank-Bag.

In the middle of the night, Mr. Swank-Bag is too hot, the NASA scientists having neglected to make the bag suitable for 'hostels'. He opens the window wide and goes back to bed. Everyone else wakes up freezing under their druid blankets, praying to the sun god to warm them up. Consequence - Mr. Swank-Bag is unpopular and the others are cold. Clearly a lose-lose scenario.

3. When retiring for the night, if others are in bed before you try to make as little noise as possible. Do not turn the light on.

This is aimed at people who go to bed in the small hours and in an intoxicated state. Admittedly, going to bed quietly in such circumstances is not an easy task and so this is all about 'best efforts'. Additionally, experienced backpackers used to the communal living have become acclimatised to the environment and not even a workman's drill in the street outside would awaken them. Nonetheless, stumbling into the room at 4 in the morning, turning on the lights and singing very badly will not make you many friends.

4. Thou shalt not steal

This one is appropriated from the Old Testament. Most backpackers are on a budget, and there is the temptation to covet the possessions of others. Not in the biblical sense, for not many backpackers take their oxen with them, but perhaps food items or hard currency. Luckily, most backpackers appreciate that their fellow travellers are in the same situation, and that stealing from them would be like taking from one's own brethren. The thieves amongst backpackers are in the minority and are generally considered to be ranked between mass murderers and corporate lawyers in the morality tables.

5. Never, never, under any circumstances, store fishing tackle in a dorm room

Fishing tackle emits an awful smell. People generally want dorm rooms to smell as pleasant as possible. The smell from the tackle permeates everything. Just don't even think about it. Or some irate backpacker may decide that the most appropriate receptacle for storing the tackle is your sleeping bag.

That'll do for now. There is a whole list of others, such as always clear up your mess when cooking in the kitchen, don't cheat when playing cards and don't pick your nose (not in public, anyway). However adhere to the five principles listed above and you'll be the most popular person in the whole hostel.