

Go for the good deal -- and get a dose of spirituality

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New Zealand missionaries want to host the "Chosen People" for the spiritual experience; Israeli backpackers use their services for the cheap deal. "Regardless of conflicting expectations, both sides come out ahead; the Israelis even come out with unexpected spiritual gains," says Prof. Yoel Mansfeld of the University of Haifa who studied the phenomenon.

Israeli backpackers find themselves hosted by Christian missionaries in New Zealand because of the good lodging deals that they offer; but during their stay, these Israelis also get unique spiritual experiences. This has been illustrated in a new study carried out at the University of Haifa's Center for Tourism, Pilgrimage and Recreation. "Even though the financial factor is the Israeli backpacker's main consideration, the spiritual hospitality that they encounter makes the New Zealand experience exceptional," says Prof. Yoel Mansfeld, Director of the Center for Tourism, Pilgrimage and Recreation Research who carried out the study.

Messianic Christians in New Zealand run an organization called HIT (Hosting Israeli Travelers), which organizes home hospitality for Israeli backpackers. These people open their homes to host some 2,000 Israeli backpackers each year for a token fee and sometimes free of charge. This is in accordance with their faith's attributing an elevated status to the Jewish people, and hence an unmediated meeting with a member of the "Chosen People" is considered a religio-spiritual edict. This study, which Prof. Mansfeld carried out with Prof. Alison McIntosh of the University of Waikato in New Zealand, performed in-depth interviews

on this unique hospitality arrangement with New Zealand hosts and with Israeli backpackers, in order to examine their respective expectations and actual experiences.

The results show that each side has completely different expectations from the hospitality. The hosts are mainly interested, of course, in experiencing a religio-spiritual encounter simply by means of extending assistance to the Israelis. As one of the hosts said: "The most important benefit is being able to tell my Israeli guest about my religion, about Jesus and about my love for Israel." According to Prof. Mansfeld, the hosts expressed a surprising expectation of benefiting from the arrangement by gaining knowledge about Israeli culture - but showed no real interest in explaining New Zealand culture to the Israelis in return. The Israeli tourists' main expectation is simply minimizing boarding costs, and they have no interest in gleaning any cultural benefits besides clean sheets, hot water and cordial hospitality.

The second stage of the study examined whether these expectations are realized. It turns out that the hosts achieve all their goals and feel blessed for being able to host and assist the Israeli backpacker. The backpackers' expectations on the other hand, are far from met - a conclusion that would probably not come as a surprise to the regular Israeli. Not only do they find out that some of the complimentary accommodations are very basic, but some also find out that the missionary preaching can be quite tiring.

Yet despite the occasional lack of satisfaction and unmet expectations, it seems that the Israeli backpackers still emerge spiritually uplifted from the unique connection that they make with their hosts, which is deepened as they become acquainted with more members of HIT over the course of their travels around New Zealand. This spiritual gain is expressed in a sense of nationalistic pride in their Israeli identity.

Asked what they expect from the HIT hosting network in the future, the Israeli respondents stated that those guest-houses where standards were bleak, ought to upgrade their facilities and suggested that the hosts moderate their missionary zeal.

Prof. Mansfeld summarizes the study: "It appears that despite the unique spiritual connection that is created, the Israeli backpackers are more interested in the financial aspects of the hospitality arrangements and in cutting the costs of their trip by using especially cheap accommodation options."

Provided by University of Haifa

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