

# Youth hostels face tough times—but they are perfect for authentic, spontaneous experiences, says researcher

October 11 2023, by Michael O'Regan

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When the New Zealand branch of the Youth Hostel Association (YHA) [collapsed](#) in 2021 and the country's 11 hostels were forced to close, staff

and punters alike were shocked. General manager Simon Cartwright cited the pandemic as the primary cause of the downturn in tourism revenues and the association's financial woes. "YHA," he said, "has been a cornerstone of youth travel in New Zealand for 89 years."

Similar [feelings](#) of nostalgia and sadness have beset generations of intrepid domestic travelers in the UK, since the England and Wales branch of the association [announced](#), in June 2023, that it would be [selling](#) off 20 of its remaining 150 hostels. "Is there any map symbol more reassuring to a wet and weary walker," asked one journalist bemoaning this news, than the YHA's "red triangle?" What will those weary walkers do without them, was their worry.

YHA hostels were once celebrated as the very [antithesis of the hotel](#). They were [communal spaces](#) catering to [young people](#) on small budgets.

My research [shows](#) that a thriving backpacking hostel ignites authentic, spontaneous interactions between strangers. A genuine sense of camaraderie—that transcends backgrounds, borders and cultures—can be fostered within its bounds.

## **A potted history of the youth hostel**

Two Germans, Richard Shirmann, a teacher, and Wilhelm Munker, a conservationist, are credited with founding the first youth hostel, in Germany, in 1912. Shirmann had been taking his students on hiking trips, as part of the long-standing German tradition of *Wanderlust*, along the Rhine river, organizing temporary local accommodation along the way.

The Hungarian tourism scholar Gabriella Nagy [recounts](#) how during one particular eight-day excursion, his group got caught in a storm and were refused shelter by a farmer. Spending the night in a school, instead,

Shirrmann dreamed up the idea of every village having "a friendly youth hostel," as he later wrote, to "welcome all young Germans who loved walking."

Several experiments later, Shirrmann [opened](#) a permanent facility in the [Burg Altena](#), in North Rhine-Westphalia. Rooms in this 12th-century castle were furnished with triple bunk beds. You could wash and cook on site. You could also gather in the common rooms to sing and talk and play. This system pioneered the principles of self-help and cooperation that would go on to characterize the youth hostel movement.

Schirrmann's concept of creating a network of safe and welcoming places for young travelers led to the establishment of the Deutsches Jugendherbergswerk (German Youth Hostel Association) in 1919. The idea made its way across Europe and the Channel. And in 1930, the Youth Hostel Association (YHA) was [established](#) in England and Wales. The stated purpose was: "To help all, but especially young people, to a greater knowledge, use and love of the countryside, particularly by providing hostels or other accommodation for them on their travels."

Research has [shown](#) how the movement's romantic, anti-urban ideals found echoes within British walking and back-to-the-land [traditions](#). In 1939, the England and Wales branch of the YHA had expanded to [300 hostels](#). And after the second world war, support from the [Ministry of Education](#) saw it grow to over [200,000 members](#) by 1950.

## **1960s counterculture: A challenge the movement**

During what British cultural historian Arthur Marwick has called the ["long sixties"](#), the [profound shifts](#) that reshaped western European and north American societal attitudes led to an explosion of youth travel across the world. YHA hostels, though, could not keep up.

With hostel stays largely structured around [booze bans, curfews and chores](#), the YHA appeared old-fashioned and [out of date](#). By contrast, a new, more commercially focused breed of hostels was emerging that understood young travelers' changing needs.

Independent [guesthouses and hostels](#) emerged on the hippie trail, including the [Pudding Shop](#) in [Istanbul](#) and Mumbai's [New Vasantashram](#). They offered visitors greater freedom and more privacy, with [longer opening hours](#) and more flexible sleeping arrangements. On site, travelers could buy cheap food, bus tickets, packaged trips and tours, alcohol and even [hashish](#).

The independent hostel continued to evolve. During the 1980s, Australian establishments started catering specifically to international budget backpackers. These were designed to provide a more relaxed stay—with communal areas, bars, cinema rooms and spaces for working, eating and hanging out together. The concept then [made its way](#) across Europe, Asia, South America and the UK.

The YHA, however, continued to [struggle](#) to keep up [with the times](#). Today, it faces considerable [financial and market pressure](#). The brand remains largely [invisible](#) to many travelers, as entrepreneurs, [venture capitalists](#), [hotel groups](#) and [hostel chains](#) drive innovation and development.

Unlike hotels, which prioritize convenience and comfort, a hostel is what sociologist Ray Oldenburg terms a "[third place](#)". It is designed to [be fun](#), to foster connection and interaction, to offer both [escape and sociability](#). Oldenburg suggests that in order to facilitate this kind of conviviality and playfulness—a space for community and conversations without purpose—you need an ["appreciation of human personality and individuality."](#)

For the YHA to find relevance, it could renew its focus on [the outdoors](#). It could better cater to wild campers, [solo travelers](#), touring cyclists and "van-lifers"—those who share a deep passion for exploration and adventure. Crucially, its hostels could play a key role in blurring class lines and connecting us to both [each other](#) and the places we visit.

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