

Here Come the Tourists!

"Give me the t-shirt," the woman said to the tourist. The small village in the Amazon was almost filled with beggars. It was hard to believe that. The community began its ecotourism project in 1992 in order to protect natural resources. The villagers had lost interest in the land and became enchanted by the things the tourists had. Their repeated "requests" annoyed tourists. Some locals were more skilled and playful in their requests, others up-front and demanding. "They have money and many things," said the woman asking for the t-shirt. "it's no problem for tourists."

It is easy for the locals to perceive tourists as incredibly wealthy. The entire tourist experience revolves around money and purchases. The community itself is being purchased. Tourists are superconsumers who bring their foreign languages and communications, strange and inappropriate clothing, and cameras into the community. In the context of a brief visit, sometimes an overnight, few real friendships are formed between tourists and locals. Tourists are eager for adventure, or at least the perfect photo opportunity. If the tourist becomes upset in the midst, of the excitement, the local usually pays the price. But these strange people sometimes give away token gifts to locals, even money. This results in begging, which becomes increasingly widespread as locals begin to see themselves as "poor" and tourists as "rich." The psychological pressure of viewing oneself as poor or backward can manifest itself in crimes not previously common in a community.

Indigenous people in the Andes demand compensation for having their photographs taken, saying it's intrusive. A woman in Otavalo, Ecuador, explained to me, "We see ourselves and our children on postcards and in books. We do not benefit from having our photos taken. A foreigner does. We demand part of the profits." In some indigenous communities, photography is believed to cause physical and spiritual harm to the person who is photographed. In India, young children have had limbs torn from their bodies to make them more pathetic and hence "better" beggars. Adults who commit this violence often have several children who work for them. Other forms of begging, sometimes found amusing by tourists, offend many locals. An indigenous leader from Panama told me, "It breaks my heart to see the young boys swimming after the coins the tourists throw in the water. We spent years acquiring our rights to these lands. Now with tourism, the people here do not care about the land anymore. They just want tourist dollars."

While tourists believe they can contribute to destination communities, locals don't always agree. Money spent by budget travelers—especially backpackers—may go into the local economy. They tend to stay in cheaper hotels and eat in cheaper restaurants owned by locals and so get closer to the local culture. These young vacationers like to distinguish themselves as "travelers" not "tourists." They live by budget travel guides and often flock to the same inexpensive areas of villages and cities. But in "frontiers" like Kathmandu, Goa, and Bangkok, where a backpacking subculture has existed since it became part of the routes in the 1960s, such travelers have a reputation for stinginess and rude, hard bargaining. In Indonesia, I met a British bicyclist who was cycling around the world. He was proud that he had spent virtually no money on his trip. He lived with families that took him in every night from the road and ate what was offered to him by people he met along his way. He had not worked in any of the places he had visited. He was extremely happy that he had just bargained a local merchant down from the equivalent of ten cents to a penny for four pieces of bread. I thought it was rather odd that he was taking advantage of everyone he met and wouldn't even pay a fair price to a poor baker.