



# GRINGO TRAILS

A film by Pegi Vail  
An Icarus Films Release

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## SYNOPSIS

Anthropologist Pegi Vail's feature-length documentary raises urgent questions about one of the most powerful globalizing forces of our time: tourism. The film follows stories along the well-worn western travelers' route—the 'gringo trail'—through South America, Africa Asia, revealing the complex relationships host countries hungry for financial security and the tourists who provide it in their quest for "authentic" experiences.

## ABOUT THE FILM

Are tourists destroying the planet-or saving it? How do travelers change the remote places they visit, and how are they changed? From the Bolivian jungle to the party beaches of Thailand, and from the deserts of Timbuktu, Mali to the breathtaking beauty of Bhutan, GRINGO TRAILS traces stories over 30 years to show the unanticipated impact of tourism on cultures, economies, and the environment.

Directed by prominent anthropologist Pegi Vail, the Director of the Center for Media, Culture and History at New York University and a Fulbright Scholar, GRINGO TRAILS raises urgent questions about one of the most powerful globalizing forces of our time: tourism. Following stories along the well-worn western travelers' route-the 'gringo trail', through South America and beyond to Africa and Asia-the film reveals the complex relationships between colliding cultures: host countries hungry for financial security and the tourists who provide it in their quest for authentic experiences.

As dramatically as travelers are altered by new landscapes, values and belief systems, they also alter the people and places they visit. A man getting lost in the Amazon jungle in 1981 has had an unexpected effect on future generations. The original inhabitant of an island on the Salt Flats of Bolivia faces the dilemma of trying to preserve its ecosystem while still allowing outsiders to experience its unique magic. A traveler's search for an "unspoiled" island paradise in Thailand has unintended but devastating consequences and poses ethical quandaries for locals in a position to profit from tourism. A woman's romantic fantasies about "the unknown" meet reality in Timbuktu. Locals worldwide express the desire for visitors to better understand how to respectfully walk on their sacred lands, including an indigenous community that has become a model for sustainable tourism in South America.

GRINGO TRAILS experts include National Geographic Traveler editor Costas Christ; Jungle author Yossi Ghinsberg; travel essayist and novelist Pico Iyer;

Bolivian Chalalán Ecolodge's Freddy Limaco and Guido Mamani; Globe Trekker host Holly Morris; Lonely Planet travel writer Anja Mutic; Vagabonding author Rolf Potts; A Map for Saturday's Brook Silva-Braga; National Museum director Kempo Tashi; travel writer Ernest "Fly Brother" White; and Royal Family of Bhutan member Dasho Sangay Wangchuk.

## ABOUT THE FILMMAKER



**Pegi Vail (Director/Producer)** is an anthropologist and Associate Director of the Center for Media, Culture, and History at New York University. She has taught at NYU and Columbia University on Film, Culture, and Tourism. *Right of Passage*, her book based on her research among backpackers in Bolivia as a Fulbright scholar, is forthcoming from Duke University Press. Vail has served as lecturer for Columbia Alumni Travel Study Tours, National Geographic and Soros Open Society and as a judge for the World Travel and Tourism Council's Tourism for Tomorrow Awards. As a curator, she has collaborated with organizations such as

the Museum of the American Indian, American Museum of Natural History, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and The Moth, the storytelling collective where she was also a founding board member. Vail currently serves on The Moth's General Council and Curatorial Committee. She directed the award-winning short documentary, *The Dodger's Sym-Phony*. *Gringo Trails* is her feature-length film debut.

IN THE PRESS

# The New York Times

TRAVEL | Q&A | By DIANE DANIEL JAN. 22, 2016

## What Pegi Vail Knows About Backpackers



A scene in Pegi Vail's documentary, "Gringo Trails," showing the Salar de Uyuni in Bolivia. Credit Melvin Estrella

Pegi Vail, 53, an anthropologist and the associate director of the Center for Media, Culture and History at New York University, studies backpacker subculture and the impact of travel on communities and on biodiversity. Her documentary, "[Gringo Trails](#)," has been shown at dozens of festivals and in more than 20 countries since 2014, and recently was released on DVD (it is also available on iTunes and Amazon Video). Here are edited excerpts from an interview with her.

### **Q. Why the focus on backpacker culture?**

**A.** I backpacked throughout my 20s. My first trip was to Europe, and I got inspired to do more. I went through China, Southeast Asia, Africa. For a young traveler on a budget, backpacking offered the possibility of more immersion, or so I thought. It did to a certain point, because you go to smaller villages, use local transportation. When I went to graduate school for anthropology, I decided to study my own tribe.

## **Describe a typical backpacker then and now.**

Most are still in their 20s, equally male and female and even if they're on a shoestring, the majority are from middle- to middle-upperclass families. However, the racial and ethnic profiles have changed with the education and income levels in different countries. So now there are many more travelers from Asia, Brazil, Russia and India. And they're using social media as much as, if not more than, Lonely Planet. That element of being connected, among themselves and to people back home, is the biggest change.



**Pegi Vail**

**You begin your film with the story of Yossi Ghinsberg, who in 1981 was lost in the Bolivian jungle for a month. His book about his adventures sparked a boom in backpacker travel to the town of Rurrenabaque. Your film showed how locals created canned adventures for the travelers who poured in.**

That's a very typical example of what can happen. In the case of Rurrenabaque, there aren't any policies that limit the numbers. Communities really need to plan ahead or at least react quickly to save their cultural and environmental resources.

**Your most jarring example of backpacker tourism run amok was Haad Rin, a town on the Thai island of Ko Pha Ngan, which went from a little-known beach to a giant party place, famous for its full-moon parties. What is the situation now?**

I was there in 1987. There were just a few huts to stay in, and in my youthful notions of paradise, that was it. Back then, it was really chill and beautiful. Now it's mostly buildings. I went after another backpacker told me about it, so of course I was part of that process. It keeps growing and now they have half-moon and quarter-moon parties.

**One example you show of tourism done right is the Chalalán Ecolodge in Bolivia, a natural and cultural immersion experience that Mr. Ghinsberg helped create. As one of the first community tourism businesses in the country it's commendable, but a two-night, three-day package there costs \$800 for two people. Do backpackers partake?**

Chalalán is a great example because the people there have really become stewards of their own land and culture. We actually saw a number of backpackers who had decided to splurge at Chalalán; also, you can often get cheaper rates when you sign up in person. It's really about the things people value. Some backpackers don't blink about spending tons on beer.

A version of this article appears in print on January 24, 2016, on page TR3 of the New York edition with the headline: Pegi Vail, Once a Backpacker, Now Studies Them.

[http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/travel/backpacking-hiking-gringo-trails.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/travel/backpacking-hiking-gringo-trails.html?_r=0)

# Outside

## 'Gringo Trails' Illuminates Our Travel Footprint

by Mary Catherine O'Connor, October 23, 2013

The film, directed by anthropologist Pegi Vail, takes a critical look at how and why we inadvertently love places to death.

We'd all like to hew to the practice of leaving only footprints in the places we travel, and we all know that's as untenable as the notion of a true paradise. Now there's a film that shows a slice of the marks – physical, cultural and ecological – we leave behind, and it does so in stark detail.

The film, *Gringo Trails*, is Pegi Vail's first feature-length film but it was decades in the making. An anthropologist and associate director at the Center for Media, Culture, and History at New York University, Vail collected footage during her many trips around the world and sifted through that as well as archival footage from various sources to convey the transformations that tourists have made in Bolivia, Thailand, and Africa. She tells the stories that comprise *Gringo Trails* through the voices of travelers, travel writers (including Pico Iyer) the guides and hosts who aspire to both profit from and protect their enchanting homelands.

Whether you're an armchair traveler or you're working through a bucket list of exotic destinations, it's an important and moving film. It premiered in New York City on October 19, at the American Museum of Natural History's Margaret Mead Film Festival. Its next showing is November 23, during the Canadian Planet in Focus film festival. [Icarus Films](#) is distributing the film in North America.

One of the most striking themes woven through *Gringo Trails* is that the places that have been overrun by tourists, like Thailand's Koh Pha Ngan and its Haad Rin beach, were "discovered" not by multi-national hospitality prospectors but by curious and adventurous backpackers. (The Gringo Trail is a moniker for South American destinations that white travelers have put on the map.) Word gets out, and other travelers arrive. It has always been this way, but in the age of guidebooks and then, of course, the Internet, the speed and scope of discovery is amplified.

I asked Vail, who first visited Haad Rin in 1986 when it was becoming popular among backpackers but before it had really exploded as a party scene, whether there are still places that remain in relative obscurity. "I think there are," she says, adding that the people who are finding those places are not following guide books or online forums. "We're not hearing about those places."

Eventually, of course, we will.

"It's a fine line I'm walking, as a guidebook author," Anja Mutic, who writes for Lonely Planet, says in the film. "It is a huge responsibility, especially in places like Bolivia, where tourism can really make it or break it. How do you encourage sustainable development and make travel accessible?" Part of that responsibility falls on local governments, she says.

Many organizations around the world, including the Center for Responsible Development (CREST) and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council, have spent many years pushing for international tourism standards and best practices designed to prevent the cultural and environmental degradation that often comes in the wake of tourism booms.

"People think of it just as the leisure industry, but tourism is very powerful," says Vail. In 2011, international tourism receipts exceeded \$1 trillion for the first time, according to the World Tourism Organization.

Vail sees parallels between tourism globalization and urban gentrification. She made her home in Brooklyn's Williamsburg neighborhood many years before it evolved into the epicenter of East Coast hipsterdom. "I can't turn it back," she says of her hood. But planning is important, both in cities and in booming tourist destinations, she says. When exotic locations are in the midst of being loved to death, "there is a certain stage, halfway through, when we can make choices before it gets to those later stages."

Despite its sad and cringe-inducing vignettes – like hordes of tourists in thrashing Haad Rin beach or stalking snakes in Bolivia – *Gringo Trails* is ultimately hopeful. It opens with the story of Israeli adventurer Yossi Ghinsberg's month-long marooning and then rescue in the Bolivian jungle, which paradoxically drew thousands of travelers to Rurrenabaque where they sought out similar adventures that ultimately turned into Disneyland-esque boat tours of the Tuichi River. But the film ends on a hopeful tone, showing how that crush of tourism can be converted into a sustainable model, as at the Chalalan Ecolodge in Bolivia's Madidi National Park.



*"Gringo Trails": Tourism Trap*

November 21-28, 2013 | VOL. 33 NO. 12 | By Glenn Sumi

When Yossi Ghinsberg chronicled his harrowing, near-fatal 1981 trip to the Amazon in the book *Jungle*, little did he know he'd inspire generations of global backpackers to try to recreate his experiences, transforming the area into a faux adventure tourist trap.

His story bookends Pegi Vail's absorbing look at how tourism has altered the ecology, geography and culture of some of the world's most beautiful and remote areas. From Thailand to Timbuktu, travel writers and bloggers have discovered places only to see them overrun by pollution and corruption within a few years.

The most depressing example is Thailand's gorgeous, isolated Haad Rin beach, now the site of western-themed parties. There's also something poignant in the story of Bolivia's Incahuasi Island, which Vail revisits a decade after first going there.

Despite the trend toward what one clever subject calls backpackaging, the cleverly edited and beautifully shot film ends on a hopeful note with the emergence of sustainable models in places like Bhutan, where citizens have fought to limit tourism and preserve their culture.



