

The Nature of Independent Travel

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Independent travel is an important and growing sector of worldwide tourism. This study examines the extent of travel planning by independent travelers, the extent to which travel plans are actioned, and the temporal sequence in which vacation elements are chosen. In-depth case studies were completed on 20 international travel parties who were first-time visitors to New Zealand. Travel parties were interviewed at both the beginning and the end of their vacations. Using an inductive-deductive process of research, a series of propositions was developed and tested using pattern-matching procedures. The study demonstrates that the motivations for independent travel are reflected in the decision processes adopted by independent travelers. Three characteristics are identified that distinguish the nature of independent travel: the traveler experiences an evolving itinerary, the traveler is willing to take risks in selecting vacation elements, and the traveler possesses a desire to experience the unplanned.

Keywords: *independent travel; travel planning; decision making; information search*

A continuing trend in international tourism is the growth in independent travel and the relative decline in package travel (Chesshyre 2002; Pryor 2001; Scutte 1997).

To the travel industry, a *package traveler* is a vacation traveler who has booked his or her air travel and accommodation—and perhaps other elements of the vacation—through a travel retailer. This traveler has purchased a product bundle, or package. To the travel industry, *independent travelers* are all tourists who are not package travelers; they are all the vacation travelers who have not booked an air travel and accommodation package with a travel retailer. By this definition, those vacation travelers who have booked only air travel with the travel retailer would be considered independent travelers; those vacation travelers who have booked their travel or accommodation through the Internet would also be considered independent travelers.

According to the “travel styles” definitions used by Tourism New Zealand (2002), the package traveler sector consists of tour group travelers and all other travelers who have booked their accommodation and internal transportation arrangements for the destination prior to departure. Tourism New Zealand views independent travelers as those with no travel bookings other than an international air ticket, as well as those with additional bookings that were not purchased as part of a travel retailer package. Backpackers are one sector of this independent travel market. Morrison, Hsieh, and O’Leary (1993) define independent travelers as those “who make their own transportation and accommodation arrangements, choosing not to buy prearranged packages or tours.”

However, a definition of independent travel should be based on a tourist’s behavior rather than the choice of distribution channel through which his or her vacation was purchased. What is important in a definition of independent travel is whether the elements of the vacation have been prebooked (from any source) prior to departure. The term *independent traveler* should apply to those travelers who have flexibility in their itinerary and some degree of freedom in where they choose to travel within a destination region. Package travelers are likely to have limited choice in the towns and cities they will visit within a destination region once their vacation is booked, whereas independent travelers are likely to have considerable choice in the towns and cities they will visit in the destination region, even after the vacation has been booked.

Independent travel may have accounted for some 78% of British overseas travelers in 1989, some 72% of French travelers, and some 58% of German travelers (Morrison, Hsieh, and O’Leary 1993). Among international tourists to New Zealand during 2001-2002, 92% of British, 90% of Australian, and 75% of American visitors were independent travelers (Tourism New Zealand 2002).

The World Tourism Organisation (1993, p. 21) has suggested that “the homogeneous group package tour developed so extensively during the 1960’s, 1970’s and into the 1980’s . . . has become outmoded. It is not in line with the trend toward individual expression.” Quest (1990, p. 137) claims, “The decline of the package tour may be due to the fact that it has become unfashionable,” and “as more people travel overseas . . . they become more sophisticated in their demands, more importantly, they have the confidence to travel independently.” Poon (1993) suggests that changing demographics and lifestyles have resulted in greater demand for choice and flexibility in vacations. Poon describes a growing group of *new tourists*, “consumers who are flexible, independent, and experienced travellers, whose values and lifestyle are different from those of the mass tourists” (p. 114).

The choice between the independent travel mode and the package travel mode is influenced by sociodemographic characteristics (such as age and gender of the traveler), travel characteristics (such as length of stay, size of travel party, and previous travel experience), country of origin, and travel destination (Hsieh et al. 1993; Hsieh, O’Leary, and Morrison

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1994; Morrison, Hsieh, and O'Leary 1993; Sheldon and Mak 1987).

Despite the prevalence and importance of independent travel, surprisingly few of the leading texts, encyclopedias, or handbooks of tourism take space to explore this phenomenon.

It aids us little to simply assume that the essence of independent travel is "independence" or that independent travelers sometimes adopt "flexible itineraries." Independent travelers are likely to vary in the amount of preplanning of their vacation. There is likely to be a continuum in the degree of preplanning. At one extreme of this continuum may be travelers who have researched and preplanned (though not prebooked) a great deal of their vacation; at the other extreme may be travelers who have neither researched nor preplanned any of their vacation itinerary.

Research is required that investigates and describes the fundamental nature of the independent vacation in terms of planning, decision making, and behavior. Both commercial operators and public organizations within the tourism industry need to understand the type and extent of vacation planning undertaken by the independent traveler and the extent to which such travel plans are implemented (Coventry 1996). No item of research has sought to describe the nature of the independent vacation as a worthy subject of research in itself.

This article describes research that seeks to demonstrate the information search, planning, and decision making of travelers on an independent vacation. It then seeks to draw conclusions regarding the defining characteristics of independent travel. The research uses a case study methodology to investigate these issues and a pattern-matching technique to test a series of propositions relating to the nature of the independent vacation.

The background to the study draws on three fairly distinct areas of tourism research. First, a review of existing literature identifies a number of theorists who have described the motivational bases for independent travel. Second, existing research on tourist information search is summarized since this has often used independent travelers as its subjects. Third, several recent studies are summarized that recognize the multifaceted nature of travel planning and decision making. From this literature review, a number of research questions arise regarding independent travelers' information search, travel planning, and decision making.

The Motivational Bases of Independent Travel

A considerable amount has been written in the tourism literature emphasizing the different motivational bases between the package traveler and the independent traveler.

In his exposition on the tourism phenomenon, Krippendorf (1987) suggests that travel offers the individual a *sense of freedom* and self-determination not available in everyday life. It might be that independent travel offers greater opportunities for this very sense of freedom sought by many tourists.

In addition, many people may be born with a sense of curiosity and a need to explore the world around them (Mayo and Jarvis 1981). Anderson (1970) describes the "Ulysses factor," which is a basic motivation of some tourists to explore, a curiosity for new places and people. Anderson appears to describe the characteristics of an independent traveler, saying, "He is not looking for anything in particular

and is not greatly concerned with what he discovers. It is in this sense that he is a true explorer" (p. 179).

Gray (1970) recognized a clear distinction between two types of tourism. He identified *wanderlust* as a basic trait of some individuals that causes them to leave familiar things behind and seek out exciting new places and new cultures. This is contrasted with *sunlust*, which is a desire for a single-destination, stay-put vacation involving rest and the best of amenities.

Similar dichotomies have been identified many times in the literature with slightly different terminologies and exposition of motives. For example, a tourist's choice between package travel and independent travel might be a result of the balancing of two opposing motivational forces. According to Mayo and Jarvis (1981), in any traveler's behavior, we observe a balance between the traveler's *need for complexity* and *need for consistency* (i.e., a balance between a desire for novelty and a desire for routine). The individual chooses a vacation that represents the best balance of complexity and consistency that is consistent with his or her needs.

In his parsimonious view of tourism behavior, Plog (1973, 1991) identifies two personality types among tourists. The *psychocentric* traveler is safety seeking and prefers the familiar, and the *allocentric* traveler is adventure seeking and prefers the exotic. This distinction applies not only to a traveler's choice of destination but also to his or her choice of travel mode (Plog 1991). Plog's typology has received mixed empirical support (see Smith 1990; Madrigal 1995; Griffith and Albanese 1996).

The work of Lee and Crompton (1992) suggests that a tourist's choice of destinations may be influenced by a genetic predisposition toward seeking more or less novel experiences, a factor these writers term *novelty seeking*. Novelty-seeking tourists are likely to prefer the unusual, the adventuresome, a change of pace, and excitement. Novelty-avoiding tourists are likely to prefer a familiar, planned vacation experience.

Cohen (1972) described a typology of four alternative tourist roles, according to the traveler's desire for novelty or familiarity. The *organised mass tourist* purchases a package tour, as he or she seeks to minimize exposure to the unfamiliar. The *individual mass tourist* takes short sightseeing trips to provide a blend of familiarity and novelty. The *explorer* travels on a self-guided tour and tries to get off the beaten path while maintaining comfortable accommodation and reliable transportation. The *drifter* forgoes tourist establishments and seeks to envelop himself or herself in the host's culture. Keng and Cheng (1999) found support for Cohen's typology in their study of Singaporean tourists.

Finally, Poon (1993) draws a distinction between the *old tourist* and the *new tourist*. Old tourists search for the sun, are cautious, and follow the masses; it does not matter where they travel because the vacation is treated as an escape from the stress of urban life. According to Poon, new tourists are more spontaneous, with a lower level of vacation planning and a desire to do what comes on the spur of the moment. New tourists want to be different from the crowd and experience something different; they are adventurous.

A number of sectors of the independent travel market have been studied, including the adventure travel sector (Sung, Morrison, and O'Leary 2000), the bicycle travel sector (Ritchie 1998), and, in particular, the backpacker sector (Ateljevic and Doorne 2001). Riley (1988) describes the

backpacker as a long-term budget traveler. He or she is a youth traveler driven by hedonistic and self-development motives who is often at an important junction in life such as the junction between the end of study and the commencement of a career. Loker-Murphy and Pearce (1995) define backpackers as travelers on an extended independent vacation, staying in budget accommodation, with an emphasis on informal and participatory vacation activities that expose them to the culture of the destination country. Many of these tourists are students or young professionals. They represent Cohen's (1972) explorers and drifters.

But we must be careful not to view all independent travelers as backpackers; backpackers are merely *a subset* of all independent travelers. In a study of independent travelers to New Zealand, Parr (1989) reports that such travelers are not solely budget travelers; rather, they include travelers adopting a very wide range of accommodation types and transportation modes. What these varied travelers hold in common is not a particular level of expenditure on vacations but a *lack of prebooking of vacation elements*. Parr found in her study that a full 62% of independent travelers arrived in New Zealand without any prior booking of vacation elements. Interestingly, 90% of the independent travelers studied by Parr traveled alone or as couples.

Tourist Information Search

While this research provides a good foundation for understanding the needs and wants of the independent traveler in relation to others, it does not help unravel the nature of information search, planning, and decision making undertaken by this type of tourist. This is likely to involve many more decision points and to be a complex and fragmented matter compared to those vacations taken by a package traveler.

Studies of tourists' information search and travel planning have often been studies of the independent traveler. Such studies are of two types: those that examine the sources of information used by tourists and those that examine the amount of search undertaken (Fodness and Murray 1997, 1998, 1999). From even the earliest studies, it appears that *personal* sources of information, particularly friends and relatives, constitute the major source of information in most tourist decision making (Gitelson and Crompton 1983; Nolan 1976). However, the choice of information source may vary by stage of the vacation and by type of traveler.

Travelers en route to their destinations are known to make use of travel information centers and other people to learn about attractions and activities; such information can influence an independent traveler's length of stay and choice of attractions and activities in the destination area (Fesenmaier, Vogt, and Stewart 1993). Travelers *at their destination* seek information from personal sources, such as employees of accommodation facilities and fellow travelers, and are also influenced by commercial signage (McDonough and Acker 1986).

Travelers taking routine trips to familiar destinations use past experience and advice from family and friends in their travel planning. In contrast, travelers traveling longer distances, taking longer vacations, or visiting new and unfamiliar destinations are more likely to use *destination-specific literature* and to seek a greater volume of information (Etzel and Wahlers 1985; Gitelson and Crompton 1983). Those

travelers who want security and comfort are likely to use travel agents and tour operators; those seeking to explore new destinations tend to use printed material such as *guidebooks and brochures* (Snepenger 1987).

Fodness and Murray (1997, 1998, 1999) were able to demonstrate segmentation of the traveler population based on the amount of information search undertaken for the vacation. Amount of information search undertaken was related to the length of the vacation, as well as number of destinations and attractions visited. In their study of travel information search and planning, Schul and Crompton (1983) identified *active search* and *passive search* groups. Active searchers displayed variety in their choice of attractions and activities and preferred vacations that were an escape from the ordinary.

Travel Planning and Decision Making

By definition, independent travelers have not pre-purchased the elements of their vacation. But have they pre-planned those vacation elements? Morrison, Hsieh, and O'Leary (1993) suggest that independent travelers may have prearranged itineraries or flexible itineraries. What proportion of the independent vacation elements is planned prior to arrival at the destination versus the proportion of vacation elements chosen while on vacation? How flexible are the itineraries of independent travelers? Does the commercial tourism operator at the destination have the opportunity to influence these travel plans and travel behaviors?

The following studies provide some insight into travel planning and decision making for multidestination vacations. The elements of the vacation of central interest are the choice of subdestinations, travel routes, attractions, and activities.

From her study of independent travelers, Parr (1989, p. 108) concluded that "some knew exactly what they wanted to do. . . . [Others] had little idea of what they wanted to see and do." In their study of visitors to Alachua County, Florida, Crofts and Reid (1993) found that most visitors had decided on recreational activities prior to arrival. But those travelers who made their activity decisions *after* arrival were typically long-haul and international visitors. In a study of travel planning by visitors to New Zealand, Tsang (1993) found that more than 40% of travelers had *no* preplanning of vacation activities, and only a minority of visitors had preplanned their length of stay in each subdestination.

Recognizing that much of the research on tourist decision making has assumed a single-destination choice, Leu, Crompton, and Fesenmaier (1993) presented a typology of multidestination vacations. Stewart and Vogt (1997) called on researchers to investigate the decision processes by which an itinerary of multiple destinations is chosen. Tideswell and Faulkner (1999) employed regression analysis of Queensland Visitor Survey data to reveal a number of factors correlated with multidestination tourism: long-haul travel, access to a motor vehicle, having multiple purposes for the trip, and consulting many information sources prior to the trip. Taplin and McGinley (2000) demonstrated that multiperiod linear programming could be used to model the sequence of day-to-day route choices made by car tourists in multidestination tourism.

Clearly, tourist vacation decision making involves a complex series of decisions in which choices of the different elements in the vacation evolve in a temporal sequence

(Dellaert, Ettema, and Lindh 1998). What is required is research that reveals the most common temporal sequences used by travelers. Very little research has been published on the temporal sequence of tourist decision making while on vacation.

Jeng (1997) asked respondents to imagine a 2- to 4-day domestic vacation trip and consider which vacation elements they might plan before departure. Jeng identified a set of *core* decisions made before departure, including date of trip, primary destination, location of overnight stay, and travel route. He identified a set of *secondary* decisions, made before departure but considered to be flexible, including choice of attractions and activities and secondary destinations. Third, he identified a set of en route decisions, including where to dine, shop, and stop and rest.

Woodside and his colleagues have provided two useful frameworks for understanding the multifaceted nature of multideestination vacations. Woodside and MacDonald (1993) presented a general systems framework for understanding a tourist's choice of vacation elements—including choice of destination, choice of accommodation, transport mode, travel route, subdestinations, attractions, and activities. According to Woodside and MacDonald, these travel decisions can be interdependent.

Woodside and King (2001) refer to the concept of a purchase consumption system (PCS), a sequence of purchases the consumer undertakes in which the purchase of one item may lead to the purchase of others. In the context of a vacation, this concept provides a framework for understanding the interrelated nature of vacation decisions: destination choices, activity choices, choice of attractions, accommodation choices, transportation mode and travel route to the destination, retail shopping purchases, dining choices, and transportation mode and travel route around the destination. Woodside and King demonstrated in their study of vacationers in the Big Island of Hawaii that several decisions within a customer's leisure-travel PCS are dependent on prior purchases of products. Some product purchases were not planned before the start of the trip. During each of the three stages of the vacation—before trip, during trip, and after trip—there was information search and decision making.

Woodside and King (2001) go on to describe the temporal sequence of decision making for their tourists. In level 1 decisions, destination choice and choice of attractions and activities were made. In level 2 decisions, accommodation and mode/route to the destination were decided. In level 3 decisions, retail purchases, dining choices, and routes taken between subdestinations were chosen. Woodside and King advocate continued research to develop an understanding of the sequence of decision-making processes used by vacationers.

The current research examined in detail the vacations of 20 independent travel parties who were visiting an international destination for the first time. The research sought to establish the following:

1. extent of pretrip information search;
2. extent of pretrip travel planning;
3. timing of information search—pretrip versus on vacation;
4. sources of information used both pretrip and on vacation;
5. percentage of pretrip travel plans that are actioned;
6. factors influencing the amount of information search, amount of planning, and percentage of plans actioned;

7. temporal sequence in the choice of vacation elements—namely, choice of subdestinations, route, attractions, and activities.

METHOD

Qualitative research methods have become increasingly common in tourism research (Riley and Love 2000; Walle 1997). Qualitative methods produce in-depth information on a small number of individuals and look beyond simple snapshots of events, people, or behaviors (Bonoma 1985; Patton 1991).

Typically, research on tourist information search and decision making has adopted a one-shot survey methodology. Questionnaires are distributed or interviews conducted at a single point in the vacation—either pretrip or posttrip or at some ad hoc point during the vacation. Such approaches to understanding tourist information search and decision making will of necessity suffer from the limitations of consumer recall. This is especially a problem when the research is seeking to understand the timing and sequence of decision events; the tourist who has been surveyed at a single point in the vacation might not reliably recall the chronology and details of the decision process.

What is required to understand the decision-making processes of independent travelers is a research methodology that collects data at more than one point in the vacation. Case study is a suitable methodology.

According to Yin (1994), case study is the preferred research methodology when “how” or “why” questions are being posed. Case study is especially useful for investigating the sequence or process of a phenomenon (Eisenhardt 1989). Case study does not yield trustworthy estimates of population characteristics. Rather, depth of understanding is based on a detailed knowledge of the particular and its nuances in context (Stake 1994).

While case study research can typically claim high levels of external validity, stringent procedures should be followed to ensure the reliability and internal validity of the data gathered. Such procedures may include testing rival explanations, seeking negative cases, triangulating methods and sources, and subjecting the data and findings to peer review (Lincoln and Guba 1986; Patton 1991).

Furthermore, case study has traditionally been viewed as an inductive, theory-building endeavor. But it can be argued that a combination of induction and deduction is desirable in case study; it is desirable that theories are not only built but also tested (Hyde 2000).

Pattern matching is an approach to theory testing in case study research (Campbell 1975; Wilson and Wilson 1988). In pattern matching, the model to be tested is expressed as a set of independent outcomes that are predicted to occur. Likewise, a countermodel is put forward that prescribes a pattern of competing outcomes. The case data gathered are compared to the predictions of the model and predictions of the countermodel. Support is demonstrated for the model if case data match the predicted pattern of outcomes of the model more closely than they match the predicted pattern of outcomes for the countermodel. If the results fail to show the entire pattern as predicted, the initial propositions need to be

modified. In summary, pattern matching is a theory-testing procedure that actively employs rival explanations and exposes case evidence and conclusions to independent peer review.

In the current study, data gathering occurred in three phases. First, a series of propositions regarding independent travelers' information search, planning, and decision making was developed inductively from exploratory research, interviews, and published literature. Second, these propositions were tested and revised in a pilot set of interviews. Third, a final set of 19 propositions was tested in a series of in-depth interviews with 20 independent travel parties, using pattern-matching methodology.

These propositions (presented in full in the Results section) considered the content and extent of pretrip vacation planning, the most influential information sources in the preparation of pretrip vacation plans, when detailed information search occurred (pretrip vs. on vacation), when choice of attractions and activities occurred, the basis for choice of attractions and activities, the percentage of pretrip plans that were actioned, the temporal sequence in which vacation elements (subdestinations, route, attractions, and activities) were decided upon, the motivational and emotional aspects of the independent vacation experience, and whether the independent traveler enjoyed a vacation in which vacation elements were largely unplanned.

The discussion that follows describes this third and final phase of the research program, the theory-testing phase.

An initial interview was conducted with 32 travel parties within 24 hours of their arrival in New Zealand, an international destination they had not visited before. The interviews sought to probe and record content of cognitive sets *at these points in time*, rather than retrospectively.

New Zealand is a destination consisting of two main islands, the North Island and the South Island, and some smaller offshore islands. The North Island and the South Island are each approximately the size of Florida. Multi-destination trips are the primary form of vacation for visitors (Oppermann 1994). It is common for tourists to travel a circuit route around each of the main islands. The primary attractions are geographically dispersed, and travelers must choose a route connecting their selection of subdestinations. New Zealand has one of the highest length of stay and intranational dispersion of tourists of any international destination (Oppermann 1992).

The population from which the study sample was drawn was defined as follows: (1) independent travel parties, (2) who were first-time visitors to New Zealand, (3) traveling alone or as a couple, and (4) *not* visiting friends and relatives. The selection of travel parties was designed to maximize diversity within the sample. A stratified purposeful sampling method was used (Patton 1991). Three strata were judged critical to diversity in the study population, namely, nationality of the traveler, travel party size, and mode of transportation. All initial interviews were conducted in the city of Auckland, the major gateway for inbound international tourism to New Zealand. The sample was sought by intercepting tourists at two locations: the busiest tourist information center in the country and the busiest motor home rental depot in the country. The initial interviews were conducted during the peak summer visiting period of December and January. An interview protocol was followed (Yin 1994). The protocol required the interviewer to probe the following:

- planned vacation elements (i.e., where travelers planned to go on their vacations and what they planned to see and do),
- planned travel route,
- number of hours spent reading written sources of information to plan the vacation,
- number of personal sources of information consulted in planning the vacation, and
- which sources of information had most influenced their vacation plans.

Of the interviews, 28 were conducted in English, and 4 were conducted in Japanese. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed in full. A process of data triangulation (Patton 1991) was employed involving the interview transcript, quantitative measures (length of vacation planning time, length of vacation, number of vacation elements planned), and responses to two checklist items. The checklist items asked respondents if they would have liked more detailed information about New Zealand before they arrived and asked if they wanted all the details of their vacation itinerary planned. Interview transcripts were examined for each travel party to identify the list of planned vacation elements (subdestinations, attractions, and activities).

Arrangements were made for each travel party to recontact the researcher by telephone for a second interview, to be conducted at the end of their New Zealand vacation. Of the 32 travel parties participating in the first interview, 20 parties reported back for a second interview.

In the second interview, an interview protocol was followed that probed the following:

- subdestinations visited (i.e., locations involving at least one overnight stay);
- travel route followed;
- attractions and activities experienced;
- for each unplanned vacation element, why the traveler had chosen this element;
- amount and type of information search conducted while on vacation; and
- for planned vacation elements that were not actioned, how the traveler felt about failing to see or do that.

Respondents invariably spoke with enthusiasm and at length about the details of their vacation experiences. A number of travel parties referred to their trip diaries when speaking to the interviewer.

Again, a process of triangulation was applied with multiple data sources as follows: the interview transcript, responses to a checklist, and a map of the travel route taken. The checklist queried the following:

- sources of information used on the vacation,
- length of time that vacation elements were planned in advance,
- length of time that information on subdestinations was sought in advance,
- whether the traveler considered undertaking any spontaneous vacation elements, and
- whether the traveler considered that part of the adventure of the vacation was taking chances with his or her choice of attractions and activities.

Each of four judges examined the 19 propositions against summaries and excerpts of transcript from each of the 20 cases. Each judge examined whether a proposition or its counterproposition was better supported by data. In total, 4 × 20 judgments were put to bear on *each proposition*. Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks tests were employed to test the level of agreement among judges.

RESULTS

The 20 travel parties came from a diverse range of countries, occupations, and age groups. Travelers came from continental Europe ($n = 7$), North America ($n = 3$), Australia ($n = 2$), Scandinavia ($n = 2$), Great Britain ($n = 2$), East Asia ($n = 2$), and the Middle East ($n = 2$). This matches well the diversity of international visitors to New Zealand. They traveled by a diverse range of transportation modes—rental car, motor home, purchase of a car, bus, train, flight, and hitchhiking. Accommodation types used included four-star hotels, motels, youth hostels, and tents. The length of travelers' vacations varied between 10 and 88 days.

Extent of Pretrip Information Search

The travelers studied displayed considerable variation in the amount of pretrip information search; amount of reading completed to research the vacation itinerary varied from 0 to 40 hours for any one individual or travel party.

Extent of Pretrip Travel Planning

On average, travel parties had fewer than seven specifically planned vacation elements. This number is not dissimilar to the size of cognitive sets found in other purchase decisions, including choice of vacation destination (Woodside and Sherrell 1977). Almost half of these specifically planned elements were subdestinations. Many fewer attractions or activities had been specifically planned. A minority of travel parties had a preplanned travel route.

Travelers' vacations consisted of a mean of 32.8 elements. In other words, some 80% of vacation elements had been neither specifically nor generally planned. This finding provides some indication of just how flexible independent vacation itineraries might be.

The Timing of Information Search

Studies by Crotts and Reid (1993) and Jeng (1997) suggested that domestic consumers vacationing in familiar destinations undertake most of their information search and travel planning prior to departure. The current study of international travelers to an unfamiliar destination has presented a very different result. For the travelers studied, a majority of information search and planning occurred *after arrival* at the destination. Travelers made detailed plans for choice of attractions and activities for the immediate 24-hour period only. Only as travelers approached a subdestination did they seek detailed information on that subdestination and its attractions and activities.

The Sources of Information Used Both Pretrip and En Route

For these travelers, the most influential information sources in the preparation of vacation plans were travel guides and brochures. Of the travel parties, 80% had read a travel guide prior to arrival at the destination. While on vacation, these travelers were eager for information about local subdestinations, attractions, and activities from any source.

The Percentage of Pretrip Travel Plans That Are Actioned

No previous longitudinal studies were located describing the percentage of a traveler's plans that are put into action. The information presented here appears unique in this regard. Of the vacation elements these travelers had specifically planned, almost all—a mean of 72.9%—were actioned. This indicates that knowledge of a traveler's specific vacation plans may provide an accurate prediction of actual vacation behaviors.

The Factors That Influence Amount of Information Search, Amount of Planning, and Percentage of Travel Plans Actioned

Of the constructs studied, *amount of information search* was identified as being most central to predicting other aspects of travel behavior. Amount of information search was the strongest predictor of the amount of travel planning and percentage of travel plans that are actioned. A low-search group of travelers was identified, who were more likely to be backpackers (Fisher's exact test, $p = .077$) in their 20s ($\chi^2 = 6.173$, $df = 2$, $p = .046$), from English-speaking countries (Fisher's exact test, $p = .088$), and traveling alone (Fisher's exact test, $p = .030$). These travelers had few specific plans. What plans they had tended to feature a selection of *activities*, and yet these activities were readily substitutable. High-search travelers tended to be couples, from non-English-speaking countries, in their 30s, and not backpacking. They had many specific plans—especially a selection of "must-see" subdestinations—and were highly likely to action these plans. Notwithstanding this, even individuals who did the most planning experienced a vacation in which the majority of elements were indeed *unplanned*.

The Temporal Sequence in Which Vacation Subdecisions Are Made

In this study of independent travelers to New Zealand, the decision sequence observed for choice of vacation elements was as follows: subdestinations → travel route → attractions and activities.

Several findings point to subdestinations as being the central element in planning the vacation itinerary. Most specifically planned elements were subdestinations. High levels of information search were associated with precise planning of subdestinations but bore no relationship to degree of planning of attractions or activities. Most planned subdestinations were actioned. Several findings point to the conclusion that alternative activities are substitutable. Individuals who had the highest number of planned activities were *least* likely to action these plans.

Test of Propositions

Propositions were tested using a pattern-matching procedure. The following propositions were supported:

Proposition 1: An integral element in independent travel is the enjoyment the traveler experiences from not planning the details of the vacation ($z = -3.864, p = .000$).

Proposition 2: Vacation planning consists of a set of planned vacation elements. For some travelers, this set will consist of 8 to 16 elements; for other travelers, this set will consist of fewer than 4 elements ($z = -3.823, p = .000$).

Proposition 3: The most influential information sources in the preparation of planned vacation elements are printed sources (i.e., travel guides and brochures) ($z = -2.595, p = .010$).

Proposition 8: The decision sequence displayed by these travelers is subdestinations \rightarrow travel route \rightarrow attractions and activities ($z = -3.920, p = .000$).

Proposition 9: Travelers make detailed plans for choice of attractions and activities for the immediate 24-hour period only ($z = -2.314, p = .021$).

Proposition 10: Only as travelers approach a subdestination do they seek detailed information on that subdestination and its attractions and activities ($z = -3.320, p = .001$).

Proposition 11: In addition to planned vacation elements, travelers will consider other attractions and activities ($z = -3.920, p = .000$).

Proposition 13: Choice of attractions and activities is based on balancing the pleasures expected from experiencing the attraction or activity versus the constraints of time and expense ($z = -3.920, p = .000$).

Proposition 14: Almost all planned attractions and activities will be actioned ($z = -2.636, p = .008$).

Proposition 18: Travelers will take advantage of serendipitous opportunities to experience some attractions and activities they had neither planned nor actively researched ($z = -3.920, p = .000$).

Proposition 19: The independent vacation is like experiencing the "fun of the fairground," a freewheeling experience of going from place to place, relatively unaware of what each subdestination offers, extracting as much as possible from each place (given the constraints of time and expense) and taking advantage of serendipitous opportunities ($z = -3.920, p = .000$).

Evidence in support of these propositions can be seen in the case data. Excerpts from two sample cases follow.

Case 1: Mike and Carol

Arrival interview. Mike and Carol were American citizens who lived and worked in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. He was a 50-year-old mining engineer, and she was in her 40s. They booked their flight to New Zealand 8 weeks prior to arrival. They had booked a motor home for their vacation and would be joined for a short time by their son and his girlfriend. Between them, they had undertaken 20 hours of research for the vacation, including reading picture books and a guidebook and watching a travel video. Carol had done much more research than Mike, speaking with New Zealanders in Riyadh

and compiling a list of things to see and do in the North Island. (She had not prepared a list for the South Island.) Carol was interested in pottery and crafts. Table 1 lists the planned and unplanned elements of their vacation. They had 11 planned vacation elements, including just one subdestination.

I purposely don't read up on where I'm going. I just follow my nose. And that way I'm not disappointed, because I've read about something that didn't make it. (Mike)

And I, on the other hand, like to spend time with the books, researching, making a list of things. (Carol)

Departure interview. Their vacation was 22 days long. They stayed in motels. They actioned 82% of their planned vacation elements. Their vacation consisted of 38 elements in total, of which 87% was unplanned. They considered that they had planned the details of their vacation just 48 hours in advance. They considered their most useful information sources to be their guidebook, visitor information centers, and brochures. They considered that they took advantage of some spontaneous opportunities to do unplanned things and that part of the adventure of the vacation was taking chances.

We had made absolutely no plans for the South Island. . . . But the constraint was that we had to have the kids to Christchurch only 3 days later on the 28th. So we had to make a short circle for the kids. (Mike)

The lady that ran the motel as we were checking out in the morning—"How have you enjoyed your trip so far?" etc. etc., as they all ask . . . "Where are you heading today?" "Well I think we have to start heading north." And I said to her we really wanted to see Milford Sound but it's going to have to be another trip. And she said, "Why don't you just fly in?" And I said, "Well, it's pretty expensive was why." And she said, "But you really ought to do it." And I said, "It's only money." So we did, we flew in. She got us within 20 minutes. (Mike)

She was on the phone. This was a snap decision. And in 20 minutes we were at the airport, getting on a plane flying. (Carol)

We were certainly aware of the most popular places through the planning and that kind of thing. But it's interesting the little out-of-the-way places you find doing it Mike's way. You just go and if something looks interesting, then you search that out. (Carol)

Case 2: Francois and Edith

Arrival interview. Francois and Edith were from Switzerland. They were career people in their 30s. They appeared to be relatively wealthy, upper-middle-class people who were well traveled. New Zealand was their only destination on this vacation, and they had booked their flight to New Zealand 52 weeks prior to arrival. Francois had undertaken more than 40 hours of research for the vacation, including studying two travel guidebooks, but was reluctant to commit himself to an itinerary. He had planned a route for the couple to tour both

TABLE 1

**PLANNED AND UNPLANNED VACATION ELEMENTS—
 CASE 1: MIKE AND CAROL**

Specifically Planned Elements	Generally Planned Elements	
Whitewater rafting	Head north •	
Blackwater rafting •	Caves •	
Caving •	Geothermal area •	
Abseiling	Trekking •	
Mt. Cook •	Crafts and pottery •	
Glaciers •		
Six items/67% actioned (•)	Five items/100% actioned (•)	
Actual Vacation Elements		
Sheepworld	Turangi	Milford Sound
Takapuna	Mountain trek •	Boat trip
Russell	Palmerston North	Haast
Swim with dolphins	Nelson	Fox glacier
Taupo Bay	Greymouth	Franz Josef
Kauri trees	Pancake rocks	Reefton
Warkworth	Christchurch	Paraparaumu
Otorohanga	Arts center	Mt. Egmont
Waitomo Caves	Botanical gardens	Taumararui
Caving •	Twizel	Taupo
Blackwater rafting •	Mt. Cook •	Paeroa
Rotorua	Pottery •	Waiheke Island
Waimangu	Queenstown	
38 items/13% planned (•)		

TABLE 2

**PLANNED AND UNPLANNED VACATION ELEMENTS—
 CASE 2: FRANCOIS AND EDITH**

Specifically Planned Elements	Generally Planned Elements	
Coromandel •	South Island •	
Rotorua •	Nature •	
Volcanic activity •		
Three items/100% actioned (•)	Two items/100% actioned (•)	
Actual Vacation Elements		
Coromandel •	Paekakariki	Nelson
Tapu		Wellington
Cathedral		
Whitianga	Cable car	Collingwood
Tauranga •	Blenheim	Motueka
Rotorua	Waipara	Wanganui
Walk	Christchurch	Waitara
Kauri forest	Crayfish	Orewa
Thermal area •	Cathedral	Whangarei
Maori village	Waitati	Mangonui
Old bath house	Dunedin	Opononi
Paradise Valley	Gore	Dargaville
Gisborne	Kingston	Kauri museum
Wairoa	Queenstown	Maritime museum
Napier	Ross	Aquarium
Dannevirke	Westport	
Forty-four items/7% planned (•)		

the North and South Islands, but where they were to stop or what they were to do would be left flexible. They had just three specifically planned items, including two subdestinations. Table 2 lists the planned and unplanned elements of their vacation. They had booked a motor home for their vacation. Francois said he would not have liked any more information on New Zealand and definitely did not want the details of his vacation planned.

Question: Have you learned a lot about New Zealand from the guidebooks?

Francois: I don't know, it's very theoretical. One says so, one says so. So I think you have to, to see each day how it's going on.

Departure interview. Francois and Edith stayed in New Zealand for 24 days. In addition to traveling by motor home, they took a train journey. They stayed in camping grounds and motels. All three of their specifically planned vacation items were acted on. Their vacation consisted of 44 elements, of which 93% was unplanned. Even the travel route that they had planned prior to arrival was not strictly adhered to; they were willing to make changes to this route. Their primary source of information while on vacation was their travel guidebook, but they were also influenced by signage and by the motor home company's discount book. They considered that they made detailed vacation plans only for the immediate 24-hour period, chose where to go and what to do based on the enjoyment expected, and took advantage of some spontaneous opportunities to do unexpected things.

All life is planned. We work the whole day. It's planned. You have to. So the holidays we have just the direction, we read there's good way to drive to see something and is good. . . . We traveled 2 to 4 hours per day, so we stop here or there. When we say, "Today is enough," OK, then we look for a place. (Francois)

CONCLUSIONS

A number of theorists have recognized the motivational bases for independent travel. Krippendorf (1987) suggested that travel offers the individual a sense of freedom and self-determination. Anderson (1970) described the "Ulysses factor" as the motive for some tourists to explore the world around them. Gray (1970) recognized wanderlust as a trait of some individuals, which causes them to seek out exciting new places and new cultures. Plog (1973, 1991) identified the allocentric traveler as someone who is adventure seeking and preferring the exotic. Lee and Crompton (1992) suggested that novelty-seeking tourists prefer the unusual and the adventuresome. This study has demonstrated that these motivations for independent travel are directly reflected in the decision processes of independent travelers.

Compared to most other examples of consumer decision making, vacation decision making is a particularly complex and multifaceted matter, involving a series of decisions on multiple elements of the vacation itinerary. This study has

identified and described the decision processes particular to independent travel.

For the travelers studied, an integral element in independent travel was the enjoyment experienced from *not* planning the details of their vacation. Some vacation elements were planned before arrival, but many other vacation elements were only learned about after arrival. The travelers also took advantage of serendipitous opportunities to experience some vacation elements they had neither planned nor actively researched. This is analogous to the three categories of retail purchase that consumers make—planned, unplanned, and impulse purchases (Solomon 2002).

The most influential information sources in the preparation of travel plans were travel guides and brochures. The number of hours of information search conducted correlated significantly with the number of specifically planned vacation elements, degree of planning of a travel route, and the percentage of specifically planned vacation elements that were actioned. Almost all plans to visit specific subdestinations were actioned.

High-search travelers were more likely to be couples, more likely to be in their 30s, more likely to be from non-English-speaking countries, but less likely to be backpackers.

For the travelers studied, alternative activities were relatively substitutable, yet alternative subdestinations were much less substitutable. The choice of subdestinations appears central to the travel decision process.

The temporal sequence of decision making displayed by the independent travelers in this study was as follows: subdestinations → travel route → attractions and activities.

Only as travelers approached a subdestination did they seek detailed information on that subdestination and its attractions and activities. The travelers studied appeared hungry for information from many different sources while on vacation.

For these travelers, the independent vacation was like experiencing the “fun of the fairground,” a freewheeling experience of going from place to place, relatively unaware of what each subdestination offered, extracting as much as possible from each place (given the constraints of time and expense) and taking advantage of serendipitous opportunities.

It appears that three characteristics distinguish the nature of independent travel:

1. travelers experience an evolving itinerary, rather than a planned itinerary;
2. travelers are willing to take risks in their selection of vacation elements; and
3. travelers possess a desire to experience the unplanned.

These characteristics of independent travel are likely to be displayed when

1. the vacation is a multideestination vacation,
2. forward bookings of accommodation and transportation have not been made,
3. the traveler lacks familiarity with the destination, and
4. levels of risk are perceived to be low or irrelevant.

This research has investigated travelers to an international destination, but this does not necessarily imply that independent travel is restricted to international tourism. Multideestination tourism can occur at a number of levels of abstraction: (1) a tour through several countries, (2) a tour through a single international destination, or (3) domestic

tourism. It appears that such multideestination tourism is likely to become independent travel when the above listed conditions exist. A critical element appears to be a *lack of familiarity* with the destination. Otherwise, in the instance of the traveler who is familiar with the destination, the percentage of planned elements is likely to rise (Oppermann 1997). Provided the vacation is of sufficient duration, there may come a point in the chronology of the vacation when even individuals who do the most planning begin to experience unplanned, freewheeling independent travel.

Managerial Implications

Recent years have seen rapid growth in the number of entrepreneurial businesses established to cater to the needs of the rapidly growing independent traveler sector. A number of these businesses have been established in locations far from traditional tourist travel routes. Many small settlements now have entrepreneurs with businesses catering to the needs of the independent traveler. Experience has taught a number of lessons regarding the likely success of such entrepreneurial ventures.

For destination regions that attract substantial numbers of independent travelers, the understanding of independent traveler decision processes is crucial. The results of this research have provided insight into the extent of travel planning by independent travelers, the extent to which such plans are actioned, and the temporal sequence in which vacation elements are chosen. The research has suggested that many independent travelers do not make their choice of attractions and activities until they arrive in a region or on the day that they are driving to that region. This suggests that effective local distribution of the tourism product is very important to smaller, start-up enterprises. In addition to having the product on sale from their business premises, such businesses should consider if other parties would be willing to act as booking agents for them, including information centers, local moteliors and hoteliers in their region, and operators of businesses similar to their own.

If the business is located some distance from the traditional tourist travel routes, the business operator must question how the tourist could reach it more easily. Transport links, road signage, and cooperative promotional activities with other operators in the region should be considered.

The business targeting independent travelers needs to consider at what point the travelers actively research their vacation. Some travelers are “planners.” Long before they have left their home, they have actively researched what is on offer in the destination. They may have looked at travel guidebooks, brochures produced by travel wholesalers, and publications from destination marketing organizations. They may have visited Web sites, including general travel Web sites for a destination, or searched the Web for specific attractions and activities, transport, and accommodation options. Entrepreneurial tourism businesses are thus likely to benefit from promotional activities such as the hosting of writers of travel guides, sales calls to travel wholesalers, and paid advertising space in destination guides and airline in-flight magazines.

But the current research has also emphasized the importance of promotional activities at a very local level. Operators of attractions and activities, at least in New Zealand, would be advised to concentrate a good proportion of the

marketing budget on localized activities such as brochures and guides for a city or region and distribution of their promotional material widely within their own region.

Implications for Future Research

The conclusions regarding independent travel developed here would benefit from wider testing with vacations in different destinations, both international and domestic. Of particular note is the need to test the conclusions of this study regarding the temporal sequence of decision making among vacation elements. This is especially so, as Woodside and King (2001) found a different sequence of decision making for their visitors to the Big Island of Hawaii. The current study has identified that, for a group of travelers to New Zealand, subdestinations are central to their decision making and that attractions and activities do not play a central role in shaping the vacation itinerary. Yet the sequence of travel decision making may be different in other destinations where "icon" attractions—such as Niagara Falls or the Kilauea volcano—are likely to play a more central role.

As use of the Internet becomes more prevalent, it may be valuable to repeat the research conducted here and examine if use of the Internet leads to an increase in the proportion of vacation elements planned by the independent traveler prior to arrival at the destination.

Future research could be undertaken into the effects of perceived risk in determining the amount of prevacation information search and planning undertaken by the independent traveler. Research could be undertaken into the extent of risk taking in the decisions made by tourists. Research could also be undertaken to see if the novelty-seeking scale developed by Lee and Crompton (1992) might assist in identifying individual consumers with a greater or lesser desire for independent travel.

While many instances of consumer behavior can be described adequately using linear models of decision making, independent vacation decision making cannot be. Research activity should continue into describing these decision processes.

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