

Australian Grey Nomads and American Snowbirds: Similarities and differences

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Abstract

While a considerable body of research has identified and described the North American "snowbird" phenomena, relatively little is known about the Australian "grey nomads". Snowbirds, like Grey Nomads, travel relatively long distances in self drive vehicles to winter in warmer climates. Mings (1997) suggests that Grey Nomads, like the snowbirds, could benefit from the establishment of appropriate resort facilities. However this paper provides evidence from a qualitative survey of grey nomads which suggests that older self drive Australians form at least two distinct market segments. Some, like the snowbird, are seasonal migrants. However the true Grey Nomad is motivated by a different set of intentions, and is vehemently opposed to staying in an organised resort of any sort.

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Introduction

The Grey Nomad phenomenon is a growing one in Australia. Grey Nomads are defined within this paper as people aged over 50 years, who adopt an extended period of travel (at least 3 months) independently within their own country. They travel by caravan, motor-home, campervan or converted bus for at least three months, but often up to several years, moving around Australia. They are not part of any commercial tourist event. While it is difficult to establish accurate numbers, the Bureau of Tourism Research estimates that in a single year Australian retirees undertake approximately 200,000 caravan trips of more than six weeks duration (Carter, 2002). These numbers are likely to increase with the ageing population of Australia.

Research into the Grey Nomad phenomenon will also inform our understanding of two major social trends, the ageing population and the trend to early retirement. The population of Australia is ageing, both in numbers and in proportion, due to lower birth rates and increased longevity. In 1972 those aged over 65 made up 9% of the population but it is predicted that by 2021 they will make up 18% (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2000). Similarly the trend to

early retirement means that people are out of the workforce for longer periods in their later years. The Families in Later Life survey provides a useful overview of this trend (Wolcott, 1998). For men aged 55-59, labour force participation is only 72% and it is 43% for women. For the 60-64 age group, it has dropped to 45% and 19% for men and women respectively.

Recent research has begun to address the recreational needs of this growing cohort of healthy, relatively wealthy and active retirees. Not all retirees wish to travel, but many do. Indeed senior tourism is likely to become one of the fastest growing segments of that industry. However the motivations and needs of older travellers are likely to differ from those of younger travellers. Furthermore, not all older travellers seek the same experience in travel. Several studies, both in Australia and in the U.S. have identified key clusters or segments of older travellers based on motivation. Thus, Shoemaker (2000) identifies three distinct clusters or market segments. The first is the 'escape and learn group' with a focus on new experiences, relaxation and escape from routine. The second is the 'retirees group', being older and preferring to return to the same destination rather than explore new ones. The third is the 'active storytellers group' with a focus on socialising, seeking new experiences, physical activities and intellectual enrichment. In Australia, a qualitative analysis identified five different motivation patterns among older travellers, being 'reunion' (pilgrimage to the past), 'recuperation' (rest, peace and quiet), 'circulation' (indulgence, comfort, pampering), 'reduction' (see it before I die), and 'exploration' (active involvement) (Environmetrics, 1991). Cleaver, Muller, Ruys and Wei (1999) identified seven clusters of motivation among older Australians, with the four largest

clusters being 'nostalgics' who travel to renew memories, 'friendlies' who seek to socialise and like ready made, safe packages, 'learners' who seek new experiences, adventure, new learning, and 'escapists' who seek carefree fun and relaxation. Pearce (1999) examined the self drive market in particular and notes that this form of travel is ideal for older Australians for ease of access, as a purposeful, shared activity providing a reflective experience. But even within the self drive travel market there are identifiably different patterns of motivation and, therefore, of travel, with some (in Queensland) more focussed on touring and extended movement, some focussed on nature-oriented activities (e.g., national parks) while others

Existing studies identify diversity of interests and motivations in the grey nomad market

remain for a longer period around a chosen destination associated with boating and fishing.

The self drive market phenomena has become a huge market, particularly in North America with retirees known as "snowbirds" (McHugh & Mings, 1992; Vincent & De Los Santos, 1990). These "snowbirds" are seasonal migrants moving from the snow belt in northern U.S. and Canada to spend the winter in the southern states, particularly Arizona, Texas and Florida. While estimates of numbers vary, it is probably in the millions. For example, during the winter of 1993-1994 an estimated 220,000 retirees moved to Phoenix, Arizona, of which one third resided in Recreational Vehicle resorts (Mings & McHugh, 1995). Similarly the Rio Grande valley in Texas had some 66,000 Recreational Vehicle sites by 1990 (Vincent & De Los Santos,

1990). Clearly this forms a major segment of the post retiree recreational market. Snowbirds remain in the designated resort for up to four months. According to Mings and McHugh (1995) there are three qualities that distinguish the lifestyle of these snowbirds.

The first and undoubtedly most distinctive is the very large amount of time and attention given over to recreational pursuits (p.59).

An enormous range of activities are available at these resorts organised both by resort staff and by the snowbirds themselves. They include activities such as dances, bible study groups, craft classes, musical groups, sports and sport tournaments, talent nights and so on. Thus the second quality that distinguishes this group is the very high level of social interaction. They are highly gregarious, group oriented people. One study identified that snowbirds in several Phoenix resorts claimed an average of 71 friends among their fellow snowbirds (McHugh & Mings, 1991). The third quality which distinguishes these snowbirds is the high level of geographic mobility. This includes the significant annual trek from north to south and back. In addition, most snowbirds have an additional vehicle for local sightseeing trips and excursions (Mings & McHugh, 1995).

The question then arises as to whether the Australian Grey Nomads can be identified as a similar recreational market segment to the North American snowbirds. Mings (1997) in a study of older self drive travellers in Cairns, North Queensland, assumes that they are. He identified that the Cairns "snowbirds" are likely to travel far more than their North American counterparts (323km per week versus 217km per week) and to develop far fewer friendships among fellow travellers (17 versus 71) with

76% of respondents in Cairns claiming no social contact with fellow residents in the park. Mings berates the lack of recreational facilities in Queensland:

Limited recreational opportunities in their van parks force Queensland snowbirds to seek recreation elsewhere. Another effect of having relatively few in-park recreation opportunities, is that close personal ties among snowbirds are not as easily initiated or nurtured (Mings, 1997, p.176).

The literature raises a number of interesting questions. What are the motivational patterns of the Australian Grey Nomads? To what extent can the snowbird

Structured and provided social activities feature strongly in the U.S. snowbird market experience

phenomena be imposed on the Australian self-drive market of retirees? Are we talking about the same phenomena or a different market segment? This paper reports the results of a qualitative study of Australian grey nomad travel motivation.

Method

The study involved an ethnographic survey of Grey Nomad activities by the first author who travelled some 16,000km around Australia in a motor-home over a period of 2.5 months. This trip involved stopping at a variety of camping sites including "free camping" rest areas, as well as National Parks and commercial caravan parks. At several known and well-frequented stopping points there were stays of several days per place. These included targeted stopping points located in Western Australia, the Northern Territory, and

Queensland. During this travel the researcher interacted with other Grey Nomads in the normal course of daily activities and experienced both the pleasures and difficulties faced by most travellers. Detailed field notes were kept during this journey.

In addition, as the opportunity arose, other travellers who stopped at the same places were asked to complete a brief questionnaire to identify basic demographic information concerning the travellers and their employment/financial status. In the course of completing the questionnaire other information that was volunteered by the respondent was also recorded on the written form. The questionnaires were anonymous. One questionnaire was used for each vehicle travelling whether that comprised a couple, a single traveller or a group. A total of 216 questionnaires were completed, and the results entered on an Excel data base.

In-depth interviewing of key informants identified through the screening process also occurred as the opportunity arose. The interview followed a semi-structured format and obtained detailed information concerning reasons for travelling, health status, employment history and future plans, as well as information concerning travellers' networks, access to information and material resources and relationships to host communities. Altogether, 26 groups were interviewed (comprising couples or a single informant, or a group). All interviews were tape recorded with the respondents' permission and transcribed for qualitative analysis.

Results

Demographics

Responses were received from 215 men and 203 women. Nearly all those interviewed or who filled in a questionnaire were travelling in couples. Seven percent, almost

all male, were travelling alone. Roughly one third (34%) came from a major urban centre while a third (33%) came from a regional centre and a third (33%) came from a rural area. The majority (74%) were travelling with a caravan, 7% in a motor-home, and others were travelling by campervan, reconditioned bus, car with trailer, and other arrangements. Two thirds (66%) had four wheel drive vehicles. In 44% of cases the vehicle was less than 5 years old.

The average age of questionnaire respondents was 64.5 (sd 6.3) for males and 61.3 (sd 6.1) for females. Of males, 21% were aged 70 or more, as were 9% of females. Almost all respondents were Anglo-Australian (83%) or UK born Australian (12%), with 3% from Northern Europe. All had lived for most of their working lives in Australia. There were virtually no Australian Grey Nomads of any other (non Anglo) ethnic background.

Why become nomads

There was no single outstanding reason for becoming a Grey Nomad expressed by those interviewed. However there was a consistent pattern of motivation that includes several common factors. Many of those interviewed indicated that they had always wanted to travel around Australia this way but were unable to when young because of the pressure of children, mortgage or career. Now those impediments were gone and the opportunity was there to revisit an old dream.

That is the dream isn't it? ... I've always had the roaming instinct in me anyway as a kid (Male, 59)

We always wanted to do it, and we were too young ... kids...so if we don't do it now we'll never do it (Female, 61)

Respondents found it hard to articulate the special pleasures

that they found in travelling this way, the things that turned it into a way of life. When probed, most respondents identified a whole range of pleasures:

Adventure: The adventure of discovering places never seen before, of exploring new and different aspects of Australia. There was a sense that the more they travelled the more aware they became of the richness of the country, and the diversity of landforms.

Crossing Australia (through the middle) was an experience...the actual size, the....desolation. There is no one there. We would just pull off in the evening ...and find a place where we could camp off the dirt road. You are still in the middle of nowhere. There is still no one there. Camels are alongside us, these sort of things...make a little fire and you see...just look up and you wouldn't believe the night sky. Out there it is just unbelievable... (Male, 68)

Freedom...seeing the greatest country in the world...There's still a lot of frontiers left. You can go out in the desert, be miles from anywhere and you can go places with a 4wd that not too many other people have been... Yes, adventure, and the people you meet in places like this. It's fantastic... (Male, 62)

Beauty: The pleasure of beautiful scenery, particularly that discovered away from the main tourist centres. Many respondents talked with wonder of the beauty of little things, of the apparently barren desert, of the sunsets, of the rich birdlife, of the stars at night.

I always felt like a love affair with my own country...I never cease to be amazed at the beautiful places... This is just magic. You feel like you have died and gone to heaven just sitting here and looking out at this...just magic. (Female, 64)

That is one of the things that we loved out at the cattle station, because we had spare time during the day...morning tea, we would take the chairs and sit out and look out the back and there would be thousands of budgerigars, or cockatoos. We had the telescope set up and we would look...birds of prey, take photos...It was just magic... (Female, 56)

Just seeing Australia, like just seeing the sun go down on those rocks...Look at that colour. Isn't it beautiful (Couple, both 63)

Learning: Learning about the history of various towns, as well as the geophysical forms, and the wildlife that they came across.

I paint as I travel, learning about the culture, the history, the geography, the animals the birds, I've taken hundreds and hundreds of photos of different birds of which I do paintings...some are in galleries....(Male, 69)

We started fossicking. We'd never seen how to do it with the gemstones ...before. The next thing you know I've got stones (from) all over the places (Male, 65)

Another thing to learn...every town starts with gold. It is the history of so many towns... It's your own history. If you live in suburbia, whether Sydney or Melbourne, you haven't got a clue what the Gulf of Carpentaria even might look like, or the type of people that might live there. (Male, 68)

We never knew some of those things existed there. We went out around the national park at Winton (Queensland). Unbelievable to find water holes where they are. You wouldn't think. Just desert, nothing there and then all of a sudden you come across a water hole...beautiful places. (Male, 65)

Freedom: The freedom to do what they want, go where they wish, the freedom just to be.

We don't travel more than 200km a day, because we've got the time now. You've got time to smell the flowers as they say. (Female, 52)

We just like the freedom of being out here (Female, 60)

Of the 109 comments on the questionnaires about why people had chosen to become Grey Nomads, 32 were about freedom. While some talked about the freedom to go at your own pace, to be independent and to make your own choices others contrasted their current freedom with the life they had left. They said that "life's too organised" "too bureaucratic" and they "do not want to be marshalled." Comments about the importance of freedom were made in other contexts too, for example, in their plans for the future or the importance of learning. "It's more interesting this way because you want to learn. You're not being forced."

As is illustrated by the quotes above, there is a sense of wonder and discovery for most of the Grey Nomads. There is wonder at the vastness and diversity and beauty of the country, but also a wonder that there is actually so much to see and learn in places that seemed so empty. The longer they travel, the slower they move, the more they notice and appreciate. There is a paradox in this pattern. At one level it is about moving more slowly, relaxing, taking it easy. But at a deeper level it is about an intensification of the senses and an expansion of awareness of the country as a whole. It is not about a restriction of the life-space but rather about an expansion of it. It is about personal development in a new form. One woman travelling alone in a combi van perhaps put the matter most succinctly:

I'm learning. I'm learning a lot

by myself. Last trip was an outside trip but I find this time it's an inside trip and while they always have a bit of both, this one I learnt more about me than I did on the last one...I've always pushed my limits so that's another one....(Female, 69)

Social networks

The closest people in the grey nomads' social networks were their travelling companions. The vast majority travelled with their spouse (93%). In one case there was an extra person in the vehicle. Thirteen men and one woman were travelling alone. Although we know of grey nomads travelling with friends in the same vehicle, this appears to be very rare. However there were a number of groups where two or more vehicles travelled together. These could be extended family or friends they had acquired along the way. These grouping could be for just a few days or for long periods such as the single man who had teamed up with a couple for the past two years.

However, the one thing that almost all Grey Nomads point to as the most positive part of the experience is meeting other people. Some of these new acquaintances became life long friends.

Coronation beach we started off with just a couple of drinks with six of us, it ended up with 34....because every couple was telling a joke and it just got funnier and funnier and it was brilliant (Couple, 59, 60)

Once you camp somewhere and you get to know your neighbour and you really talk to them. We've kept in contact with a few of them...from all walks of life. (Female, 52)

We have quite a strong network of friends and we are moving around, and every few days we either have an email or a phone call from them, and they say we

are heading to such and such and when do you think you will be there and they tell us what has happened. (Male, 69)

Travellers help each other out constantly. This camaraderie changes many situations from one of fear and risk, to one of adventure. While travelling along the highway, it is compulsory to wave to all oncoming caravans/motor-homes. If anyone stops at the side of the road it is inevitable that others will stop to see if they need help:

There's always people going past. You can give them a message. Actually I helped a man the other day. I just turned the caravan around, put the jumper leads across and we started him up. (Male, 63)

That day I blew the tyre going up to Gregory River. I had to go off into the dirt and ... took me two and a half hours to change the tyre. But there was two blokes pulled up in caravans on the other side of the road. And they said "are you right?" And I said "yeah I'll be right, I just take my time" and they would not leave until we were ready.....(Male, 61)

It is largely through these traveller networks that word of mouth information is passed on. For example, this is the best source of information concerning the best places to stay, and in particular the location of good free camping places, often not advertised in any way whatsoever. From the questionnaire response it appears that 45% of people learned about their current camp from other travellers, 49% learned from brochures or private maps, while only 11% learned of it through an information centre (allowing for multiple information sources). Certainly our own information while travelling, and certainly the most enjoyable stays were learned from other travellers. On several occasions, word of the research project had passed

ahead to areas later visited several hundred kilometres away.

Bush camping, caravan parks or motels

This is a hot issue for many Grey Nomads. The vast majority prefer to do at least some bush camping. The least preferred option is to stay in a motel or organised resort. When asked 'if you could afford it, would you prefer to stay at an organised resort?' 210 respondents (97%) said no, usually with several expletives thrown in:

The people we have met are enjoying doing exactly what they are doing. They don't want to be regimented. They don't want to be organised. They want to be able to come and go... (Female, 63)

Nooo! Definitely not! No way. You're so free. It's just a relaxing life style. You go where you want to go... (Male, 65)

We went the other day over to [organised resort] and I thought it was the most obscene place I had ever seen...all artificial. It's high push, high sell... There is no way we could see and do what we do if we were going on organised holidays, staying at resorts. (Couple, 61, 58)

Of those interviewed, eight groups were at bush camps when interviewed, including three at a National Park. A further three were staying at designated areas that were not caravan parks. Free camping areas generally have no facilities except perhaps a bush toilet. For example, in one popular stopping spot by the Mary River in the Kimberley, there are usually 20 or 30 vehicles each night. Gregory Downs in North West Queensland is another example. In this situation, everyone depends on each other for information and social engagement:

We don't do the caravan parks

if we can avoid them...we like the free open approach. We find we meet different types of people- more free spirits I think and the companionship you find in these places and particularly the interesting information that you find about what people have previously seen and what you're about to see for yourself. (Male 70)

The majority of respondents like a mixture of bush camping and caravan parks:

Yes, off the beaten track...we prefer to stay in the bush (we are country people at heart). And there is an economic advantage as well. We don't actively seek out others, but if we can and it's getting three or four o'clock in the afternoon, we start looking for somewhere we can hide...but it is very nice to have the modcons now and then. (Couple, both 64)

However some couples preferred to stay at caravan parks, both for the convenience and for security:

No, rarely [go bush camping]. It's only a security thing. Some of the places around Australia unfortunately are not very safe.... You can't unhook and leave your van if you are in the bush. (Couple, 69, 66)

Some people find caravan parks very welcoming, while others regard them as rapacious opportunists. The more positive attitudes recognise the importance of Grey Nomads for caravan parks viability:

I was speaking to people who own caravan parks. They depend upon them in the off season to exist, because the Grey Nomads are probably 90% of their income. With the result, you are pretty welcome wherever you go. (Male, 69)

On the other hand one respondent reported a conflict with a caravan park owner who accused bush campers of being

“free loaders”. This Grey Nomad did not let the moment pass. He pointed out that they paid for their rigs, fuel and food and that those on pensions would be on those pensions at home. Then he went on the offensive:

Alright, you tell us what town you are from. And we will contact the businesses in your town and tell them that we won't be coming to your town because of you and your attitude. (Couple, 52,51)

This kind of debate appears to have been raging right around Australia, with many stories of free camping places closing (in Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland) only later to be reopened as the Grey Nomads flexed their collective muscle.

Places like Queensland which have closed 33% of the free sites... We know at least one little town, G-where within 6 weeks of them closing the town almost went broke. And they were the first one to be re-opened because it affected them that much. (Male, 57)

When we were there [WA in 1998] they stopped all free camping within 50K of a caravan park. We even got an eviction notice.. (Female, 60)

Discussion

The Grey Nomads interviewed in this study appear to be quite different from the North American snowbirds despite superficial similarities. In particular, those interviewed seldom stayed for more than a week in the same place, and tended to avoid tourist resort areas on the coast. They were motivated by a complex set of motivations which included a desire for freedom and adventure, a reaching out for new experiences and learning, including meeting new people. In this, they partially reflect market segments identified elsewhere, such as

Shoemaker's (2000) 'escape and learn group' or Cleaver *et al.*'s (1999) 'learners cluster'.

However, unlike other market segmentations identified, these Grey Nomads were also motivated to actively avoid being “organised”. This may reflect an Australian/North American cultural difference. Certainly there is an Australian resistance to being organised and managed. For many Grey Nomads, part of the motivation to retire, and especially to retire early, was the desire to escape unpalatable bureaucratic regimes in their work life. The sense of freedom and adventure dominated the motivation of the great majority of Grey Nomads interviewed. This stands in stark contrast with the organised regime of North American resorts as described by Mings and McHugh (1995) and which most interviewees reacted to with horror.

There also appear to be different forms of sociability between American and Australian travellers. Australian Grey Nomads did in fact form very complex and long lasting networks of friends during the travelling experience but they did not necessarily get to know many others within a single van park or resort. In fact most significant friendships appeared to form among those met on the road, away from van parks, and those travelling some of the same routes.

It would appear from this analysis of the Australian Grey Nomad that they represent a very different phenomena from the North American “snowbird”, despite the superficial similarities of age and mode of travel. The activities of the Australian grey nomads do not conform at all to the lifestyle description of the snowbirds (Mings & McHugh, 1995). However some of the apparent differences may be explained in terms of market segment theory. The present study did identify but did not

interview many retirees who preferred a seasonal migration pattern to a more nomadic pattern. There is some indirect evidence that a seasonal migration pattern does exist for many older Australians, mostly involving annual winter travel from the south to the north, along well established coastal routes (Pearce, 1999). In contrast the Grey Nomads tend to avoid coastal areas as being “too commercial” and to prefer instead long stays in more isolated outback locations, though with some visits to coastal areas that are less populated.

While it was beyond the scope of this study, the results are none the less suggestive of an attempt by Grey Nomads to escape the homogenised and industry controlled “McDonaldization” of retirement options (Ritzer, 2004). It would appear that grey nomads, unlike the North American snowbirds, are motivated at least in part by a desire to escape the bureaucratic control of their previous employment as well as their consumption driven, commercialised and homogenised former lifestyle. This is not to say that Grey Nomads have ceased to be consumers. Indeed they are creating new markets, not least for recreational vehicles and appropriate places to stay. Our preliminary results suggest that the Grey Nomads have a significant impact on many outback local economies. However the terms are different. Grey Nomads are resisting their commodification as aged travellers. Above all else they want the freedom to do their own thing. Perhaps this reflects on the traditional Australian icon of the self reliant bushman.

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