

Rise of the flashpacker

By Philip Hammond

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THEY holiday with their laptops and prefer to stay within mobile phone range.

Their accommodation must be in the prime real estate zone, with ample battery recharging points, electronic key access and under-bed safes.

They'll fly to Hervey Bay or Byron Bay from Sydney for a few days' break rather than endure uncomfortable overnights on long-distance buses.

They're flashpackers . . . the latest manifestation of the budget-conscious world traveller.

Are they wimps, or what?

Flashpackers would be horrified at the prospect of unrolling a sleeping bag on a string net stretcher bed, or consider sampling mysterious morsels from dubious street stalls.

Any self-respecting wanderer with a Tom Waits yen for "riding the rails" in a boxcar, holding out the thumb on a motorway intersection or dossing down out of the rain is on a different planet to this comfort-orientated crowd. Flashpackers go where many thousands of people have gone before. Theirs is the very well-beaten east coast route from Byron Bay pizza joint to Airlie Beach beer garden, to Cape Trib cafe.

Their idea of adventure is to sunbathe on a maxi yacht in the Whitsundays or photograph a dingo from a Fraser Island tour bus . . . just as long as they can scrub up for lots of drinks at day's end.

The Queensland tourism industry loves them and is climbing over itself to pamper them even more.

"They are difficult to sift out," says Tourism Queensland's Peter O'Reilly. The National Visitation Survey identifies only people who have spent a night in hostel accommodation at some stage during their trip.

"That definition covers people who are not necessarily backpackers and also possibly misses people who are flashpackers," he said. Flashpackers are older than the archetypal backpacker, and more likely to be cashed-up professionals, taking time off to travel between contracts.

O'Reilly said recent industry talk refers to "adventure travellers from a wider demographic" rather than backpackers, and flashpackers are in that group.

"They are looking for good accommodation but they're not spending a lot on accommodation. They spend a lot on adventurous activities, such as trips out to the Reef, or 4WD tours.

"They don't really want to sleep in dormitories. They don't want to hear others snoring or rolling in drunk at 3am."

Greg Tom, a director of the Palace Backpackers accommodation group, has heard the term "flashpacker" a lot, "but my view is rather more simple, I don't think budget travellers have changed a heck of a lot in the past 10 years".

Competition to accommodate travellers is fierce, he says, and rooms in an old house no longer suffice. Flashpackers find the best hostels on the internet as well as by word-of-mouth from other travellers.

Some people will still arrive unannounced at the Palace – a one-time Salvation Army hostel in the city centre, but a much greater percentage have pre-planned and pre-booked their tours and accommodation.

And as more accommodation comes on the market, flashpackers opt for the newer, better-situated facilities.

"We have spent a fair bit of money but it's yielding good results," Tom said. "These people travel with more IT capability. A lot are carrying around computers to manage their digital photos and look online."

Flashpackers post videos of their Fraser Island experiences on YouTube and they are prepared to spend \$90 per night for a secure double room, with clean linen, recharge points, comfortable bed, electronic key access and under-bed safes, he said.

Steve O'Callaghan, front-office manager at Gilligans hostel in Cairns, said flashpackers tended to be in the 30 to 35-year age group. "They have good professional jobs and have been working since university. They're taking a year off to see the world and they have a good job to go back to afterwards. A lot are English. They'll do three months in Asia, three to four months in Australia, then move on to the Pacific and the US," he said.

"Travellers are becoming a lot more sophisticated. Flashpackers have a lot more money at their disposal than the younger student travellers."

Tom said with working-holiday visas allowing them to work for up to six months with one employer, flashpackers were often opting for more short holidays while remaining in one base.

"Low-cost airlines have changed the dynamic," Tom said. "Why travel 19 hours on a bus when you work in Sydney and it's easy to fly for three or four hours to the Whitsundays? They are astute consumers and they're out to have fun."