



# Baby boomers rewrite rules

Wendy and David Clark are among the growing number of older travellers on a shoestring budget, writes Lorna Thornber.

**T**ravelling through Turkey in an old VW in the 1980s, Wendy Clark, her husband David, and their two travel buddies were treated to an impromptu concert by a woman they had no idea at the time would inspire their future travels.

The couple were in the ancient Greek city of Ephesus, the ruins of which lie near the modern village of Selcuk in western Turkey, when a solo traveller they had recently met – a widowed Australian in her 70s – took centre stage at the 25,000-seat amphitheatre, which had once hosted gladiator fights and philosophical debates, and began to sing.

“She had a beautiful singing voice and she stood and gave us a concert,” says Wendy, who now lives in Queenstown. “I’ve never forgotten that. I just always thought what a fantastic attitude that was. She was completely at large, she was doing all these wonderful things, and she wasn’t letting age stop her.”

Wendy and David, then in their early 20s, were on an OE typical of Kiwis at the time: working “black” [illegally] for six months at a time in London to save for jaunts through Europe.

Back then, Turkey was far from the tourist magnet it is today. Oscar-winning film *Midnight Express* – a 1978 prison epic about a young American tourist tortured in an Istanbul prison after being discovered with hash at the airport – had virtually killed the Turkish tourism industry overnight.

The Australian widow aside, Wendy and David, originally from Invercargill, had seen few other tourists in their time there. But adventurous travel on the cheap was their jam.

“I remember a Contiki bus coming into the campground one day,” Wendy says. “We looked down our noses at that. What we were doing was very spontaneous.”

More than three decades on, their travel ethos is largely unchanged. With their children grown, Wendy and David, 56 and 62 respectively, are relishing being able to travel overseas again. And, like a growing number of baby boomers and older travellers, they are

choosing to stay in budget accommodation such as backpackers and homestays, and use cheaper forms of transport.

A 2018 study by Booking.com of 20,000 travellers around the globe, including 500 New Zealanders, found that 20 per cent of baby boomers – often defined as those born between 1946 and 1964 – are planning a trip involving backpacking.

While 35 per cent of baby boomer respondents said they regretted not having travelled more when they were younger, others, such as Wendy and David, think spending less on accommodation will enable them to spend more time overseas and see more. Just as baby boomers made backpacking through Europe a rite of passage, they are now rewriting the rules of mature travel and retirement.

Joshua Nu’u-Steele, Booking.com’s New Zealand area manager, said many baby boomer backpackers are making up for lost time, while realising there’s only so much time left.

“A lot in that age group haven’t had the opportunity to travel yet and want to do it while they still can.”

Like younger travellers, they are seeking unique experiences and, while often more affluent than younger backpackers, are open to “alternative accommodation”, Nu’u-Steele says.

Charli Bateson, product and marketing manager with Jucy Group, which runs hostels in Auckland, Christchurch and Queenstown, as well as hires out vehicles, thinks the relative ease and affordability of international travel these days is prompting more baby boomers to give backpacking a go.

Millennials, she says, are also “re-educating” them about what modern



backpacking entails.

“Most hostels now have en-suite rooms as well as dorms, just not all the five-star facilities. With the more adventurous older travellers especially, they would rather spend their money on travelling and activities than a room they’ll probably only spend a few hours in.”

Wendy and David returned to New Zealand in the mid-1980s, after three years in Europe, to find Queenstown in the midst of a building boom.

“We got swept up in it and never left,” Wendy says. “We built a house and then another house and had a family, so there was no money for travelling. There’s a conception that baby boomers have had it all handed to them but we did work incredibly hard – six to seven days a week. Everything we did, we did ourselves.”

They both still work and, when they do get time to travel, prefer to spend their money on activities and food rather than accommodation.

“I always think it’s a complete waste spending money on accommodation,” Wendy says. “I could sleep under a tree but the husband is not so keen.”

On a five-week trip to Cambodia and Vietnam four years ago, which Wendy describes as “just astounding”, they slept in some very basic accommodation.

“In Cambodia, we stayed on an island in little huts. Most of the other people there were way younger but it didn’t matter. I just love talking to people about their lives.”

In Vietnam, the couple took a train to Sapa, which Wendy says was like something out of the Cold War, sharing a compartment with a young couple on their honeymoon (“poor folks”), before joining a guided trek, staying with members of local hill tribes.

“It was muddy, dirty, wet and hot,” Wendy says. “The oven was a hole in the floor – it was incredibly basic. I can’t imagine a lot of people my age would want to do it, but I loved every minute of it.”

The couple spent their money visiting attractions such as Angkor Wat, museums, and eating everything they had been told not to at street food stalls. Invited out to dinner one night by fellow westerners, they were disappointed to discover the menu had a European flavour.

“We asked if they had tried street food and they said “oh no, you’ll get sick”.

“I kind of felt a bit sad for them,” she says.

They are now planning a four-month trip to Europe, intending to stay at backpacker accommodation and “call on a few favours” with friends who have stayed with them in Queenstown, to keep costs down. They will be travelling with backpacks small enough to take as carry-on luggage on the plane, and cooking at their hostels so they can eat as the locals do. At this stage, they think they will begin in Belgium and France, where they will visit World War I and II battlefields, and then travel to Scotland (Wendy has become more interested in exploring her Scottish heritage as she gets older), England, Ireland, and perhaps Croatia and Poland.

In some ways, backpacking is less risqué than it was in the 80s, Wendy says.

“We use websites to see what’s popular and, with reviews, there’s a lot less chance of ending up somewhere with bed bugs. In New York [in the 80s], we stayed in a youth hostel that turned out to be the most horrifying place – the rooms were smaller than cells and it was full of prostitutes.”

As frequent caravanners, Wendy says she and David have no qualms about backpacking.

“I just enjoy the energy of young people. If we’re in a hostel or backpackers, being among younger people I find it fantastic.”

**B**arbara Iversen, a 79-year-old Aucklander, is another whose fond memories of staying in hostels in her younger years prompted her to reconsider it as a more mature traveller.

A keen rower for about 50 years, Barbara had always wanted to visit Lake Bled in Slovenia which, in rowing circles is just as renowned for its international regattas as its photogenic church on an islet. Barbara was in town for the World Rowing Masters Regatta last December, an event she has previously competed in herself, and decided the local hostel “was the best way to go” because of its reasonable prices and close proximity to the lake.

Arriving to find she was staying on the top floor, Barbara says she “had to bribe a young rower” to carry up her suitcase, but other than that, had a “very comfortable” experience.

“There was a little alcove that looked over the castle. The view was just magical.”

Barbara says there was a variety of people at the hostel, young and old, and that everyone was “very helpful”. While a few rower guests liked to party, she said most were keen to get to bed early after a



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long day on the lake.

“It was easy to make your meals, and the bathroom was good. You just had to be respectful of other people.”

Barbara says she would recommend staying at hostels and using cheaper forms of transport to “more relaxed” older travellers, provided they’re prepared to “expect the unexpected”.

“But if things are not right or you need a favour, don’t hesitate to ask.

“I think they grey tsunami are very fit and active and they’ve worked hard and now they want to play hard,” she says.



**Wendy, centre, says fit, active baby boomers who’ve worked hard all their lives now want to play hard.**



**Barbara Iversen**





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Twenty per cent of baby boomers are planning a trip involving backpacking, a 2018 survey by Booking.com found.