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Introduction to the Special Issue on Independent Travel

The seven papers included in this special issue of the *e-Review of Tourism Research* are based on papers presented at the ATLAS Independent Travel Research Group conference that met in Beirut, Lebanon in January of this year. The conference was the fifth expert meeting of Research Group (formerly the Backpacker Research Group). The overall aim of this conference was to examine and review research into the relationships between independent travel and hospitality.

The conference location aligned with this theme, as Lebanon is widely known for its hospitality and is a popular independent travel destination. We would like to thank our colleagues at the Lebanese International University (LIU) for being exceptional hosts. The conference had a diverse group of participants from Lebanon, UAE, New Zealand, China, UK, Germany, and Iran. Hence, the papers in this special issue illustrate the wide range of topics that were explored and provide a glimpse at some important emerging topics within the study of independent travel and hospitality.

Two of the papers focused on the relationship between travel regulations and independent travel. Accaoui's paper provides an overview into the role that Lebanese laws and regulations have had in defining and organizing the institutions and professions related to the tourism industry. He argues that there is a need for an updated and modernized regulatory framework for tourism in Lebanon, as many current regulations are more than 40 years old. Louisville's paper focuses on the external visa regulations and the role that they have for

travel to developing destinations. She suggests that while visa policies are important government tools for influencing international tourism, for the most part in developing destinations they are inadequate and inefficient, and thus an obstacle to tourism growth. In her paper, she uses the illustrative case study of Suriname. She concludes that developing destinations might prove more receptive to implementing more facilitating visa policy reform decisions than other, more developed and well known destinations because many developing destinations have few institutionalized policies for destination management and the overall regulation of tourism.

Two of the articles focus on the impacts of the internet on independent travel. Ibrahim's article explores the increasing trend of the use of online booking systems in Lebanon. He suggests that rather than perceiving the online booking systems as simply a threat, travel agents should seize the opportunity to invest in online booking technology as a means of overcoming the threat of direct reservations on their businesses. Berger and Paris, meanwhile, explore the influence of Facebook on Backpacker's social experiences in hostels. Their findings suggest that Facebook has shaped the social, behavioral, and communicative norms within the hostel environment.

O'Reagan's study also explores the practices of independent travelers through an analysis of the 'tactical practices' of independent travelers, including backpackers and hitchhikers, which allow them to navigate and negotiate space differently from convention, expectation or habit. By employing these creative tactics, independent travelers can take possession of the travelerscapes, and produce temporary and experiential forms of social interaction and connectivity.

Abdallah and Hannam's paper provides a critical perspective of hospitality and the Lebanese diaspora. They discuss the conditional and absolute notions of hospitality in relation to western and non-western cultural norms, and they explore the ways in which early

traditional Lebanese migrants and modern recent Lebanese migrants interact in terms of hospitality.

In the final paper, Al-Hamarnah provides an overview of his keynote lecture at the conference during which he discussed the rise of intraregional mobility in the Arab World and the development of new tourism trends in the post-‘Arab Spring’ uprisings.

This special issue includes a range of emerging topics on Independent travel and it is our hope that they can spawn new lines of academic inquiry. We’d like to thank each of the authors, reviewers, and participants in the ATLAS Independent Research Group conference for their contributions to this special issue. We’d also like to thank the *e-Review of Tourism Research* for providing a forum for the ideas to be planted.