

# No flash in the pan

Sue White discovers big things are happening in the backpacker accommodation market.



Base desires: Attracting an ageing market of flashpackers as baby boomers realise that comforts can be found.

FOR those who spent months (or years) of their youth sleeping in cramped dormitories in less-than-appealing accommodations, the concept of affluent backpacking may seem the ultimate oxymoron.

But with the rise of the "flashpacker", backpackers with cash are proving to be an attractive niche within the budget segment – and by all accounts they're here to stay.

Rather than bedding down in a 10-bed dorm with strangers, flashpackers look for hostels that have private rooms and en suites, plus technical facilities such as WiFi so they can Skype friends from the laptop in their backpacks.

Hostels across the world are catching on and now provide this slightly older (think 30s, not 20s) tech-savvy audience with more upmarket facilities than their predecessors on the hippie trails of the past could have dreamed of.

"Flashpackers have more money to spend, but want privacy at the same time," says Tom Clark, general manager sales and marketing at the 13-strong Base hostel chain and Backpackers World Travel.

For Clark, dramatic improvements in the quality of backpacker accommodation in the past five to 10 years have helped change the market. "It's a higher-quality experience, with the social benefits of a hostel," he says.

Lonely Planet writer George Dunford, author of *The Big Trip*, agrees the flashpacking phenomenon is changing budget travel.

"Now all travellers have laptops and want to recharge their phone, and you find more and more singles, doubles and boutique rooms, not just dorms," he says. "Hostels are also getting quite clever about rolling deals in on tours and packages. They're looking at their business model and finding different ways to tweak it."

In Australia and New Zealand, the concept is so well entrenched that Base plans aggressive international expansion – and a competitor, Nomads, has rebranded most of its properties as "flashpackers" rather than "backpackers" as the market works to capture the hearts and wallets of the new segment.

"Whenever we show someone an en suite room at one of our premium properties they are surprised to see that we offer a premium product at this price," Clark says.

He also believes difficult economic times mean the trend is likely to reach even older travellers: "Baby boomers are surprised by the fact that we have these types of rooms, and they like it. Boomers still want to travel, so I think as a result of what's happening we'll see more of this audience coming to stay in these types of accommodation."