



SANDOR LAU, on the road north with camera rolling to catch one last backpacker or two before returning to Auckland.

On the trail of northward backpackers

Auckland University Film School student Sandor Lau set off to walk from Auckland to the Far North with a professional goal in mind - to collect enough material to produce a television documentary on the subject of backpackers. But a week into the project he was beginning to get nervous - he hadn't found any.

That problem was well behind him by the time he reached Kaitaia. By that stage he had worked out where to look for them, and had enough material to make a series.

The Mousetrap at Paihia, the Tree House at Kohukohu, Mainstreet Backpackers in Kaitaia and other backpacker haunts around the region had put him in the path of all sorts of travellers, whose main major common denominator was that they all believed they were different.

There were similarities to the stories he had been hearing though, many of those who were visiting Northland having "packed in" their jobs at home to hit the road. And while those who sought to lure tourists to New Zealand universally extolled the grandeur of the scenery, the fact was that many of the people he had encountered had little interest in traditional tourist values.

"A lot of them are looking for something inside themselves. They're on a quest," Sandor said.

"Often it's not about New Zealand at all. It's about something they have to resolve at home, and they have to leave home to try to find it."

Sandor, an American Fulbright scholar who arrived in New Zealand three years ago intending to stay for 12 months, had stuck to his resolution to walk every step of the way from Auckland, although the hospitality he had encountered had sometimes made that difficult.

He had been offered countless rides, particularly when traffic was light, part of a pattern of hospitality which had amazed him. And having experienced the unique Northland culture, he was now beginning to wonder how much longer he could continue living in Auckland.

His immediate priority was to finish collecting material of his documentary, however, and he still had to get to Cape Reinga, although he had already seen, and filmed it, from the air, footage which he suspected might well provide the opening scenes of the final product.