

Adventure Travel: Prescription for Health



The next time you head out for a vacation or just have some free time, consider an active trip in the great outdoors. Whether you head out for a walk in your local park or journey to the Everest Base Camp in Nepal, you'll come back feeling better - mentally, physically and emotionally.

Since 1987 I've been leading small group adventures for those who are 50 years of age and better to more than 30 destinations around the world. We've traveled close to home in Colorado and to the far corners of the planet, including Central and South America, Canada, Europe, Asia and New Zealand. Regardless of the destination, time spent with friends and family exploring the wild outdoors provides an uplifting, soul calming connection with self, others and the land that few other experiences can match.

People come back to our trips time and time again. Why? What is it about active travel in the outdoors that is so enticing to us? Beauty, exploration, meaningful connection to self and others, risk, challenge and accomplishment: these are some of the ingredients that make adventure travel one of the fastest growing segments in the world of travel.



We grew up, so to speak, in the great outdoors. Our nights were spent around the warmth and security of a campfire with family and friends. By day we were out exploring the land, rivers and forests around us. We were actively involved in every aspect of our lives. Our senses had to be fully awake and we had to be fully aware of our surroundings and intimately connected to those around

us. In fact, life required it.

There was risk and challenge, yes. Granted, sometimes the risk and challenge were too much, but it was what kept us connected to ourselves, to others and to the world around us.

In today's society the pendulum of risk and challenge has swung in the opposite direction. Now most of us live in climate controlled indoor environments where someone else takes care of most of the daily requirements of life. Food is easily obtained at the grocery, cars move us from place to place and we can do our work without deeply connecting with those around us.

We've forgotten who we are to some degree. We've forgotten our strengths. Forgotten that we are far more capable and strong than we ever believed. Because of this we often limit what we do in our lives, including the kind of vacations and activities we pursue in our later years.

The reality is that we can do almost anything we set our minds to. We can have almost any adventure we're willing to prepare for. The challenge is usually more mental than physical.

I've seen evidence of this time and again, particularly on one of my favorite trails in Arches National Park in Utah, the Delicate Arch trail. It's a short trail, 1.5 miles one-way, with a moderate uphill grade. At one point we round a large sandstone fin and are rewarded with a magnificent view of Delicate Arch. However, between the arch and our viewpoint, the trail traverses a short section of fairly steep downward sloping sandstone. While not a vertical cliff, one still has to stop and think before moving forward.



At this point in the trail, a few of the group members will say that looking at the Arch from a distance is good enough, that they don't need to actually reach the arch. My philosophy is to gently

encourage each group member to push past his or her perceptions of the difficulty and walk to the arch. Often I'll walk with them, either walking down slope, to help provide confidence that they'll be safe in the process. While the distance is small, the shift in mental perception can be great. However, once the decision is made to go forward, and once the arch is reached, life changes, almost instantly. A mental shift occurs. Words like "I can't believe I did that" and "I wish my kids could see me now" bubble forth. It's like a whole new world has opened up for these individuals. These same individuals who a moment before were hesitant to walk a short distance to Delicate Arch would now willingly try almost anything.

A great many activities can constitute an adventure, regardless of how fit or old a person may be. Rafting down a river, whether actively paddling or not, still provides the thrill of the rapids, allows one to feel the coolness of the river and the heat of the sun, hear the roar of the rapids, interact with other passengers, get wet and be exposed to the sublime beauty of a river canyon. Even such a seemingly passive experience opens an individual to the richness of the outdoor environment. Memories are formed, and life is richer for the experience.



So the next time you're planning a vacation or just have a short period of time available, open yourself to new experiences. Let yourself be challenged. Allow a little bit of risk to accompany you on whatever activity you choose. Your life will be richer. Enjoy the experience with a small group of friends or family and your enjoyment will be that much greater.

In 1985-1986 I served as one of 25 staff for the President's Commission on Americans Outdoors (PCAO) in Washington, D.C. Our charge was to look ahead for the next 25 years at the state of outdoor recreation and natural resources in the United States and recommend policy to the President and Congress. Research from the PCAO showed a high positive correlation between participation in group outdoor activities and "adjustment to late adulthood and retirement."

As we retire and begin to feel some of the effects of aging, including loss of family and friends and

even some of our physical strength, it's important to maintain a positive mental outlook on life. One way to do that is to head to the wild outdoors, to walk or travel at an enjoyable pace in areas of great beauty with friends and family. The memories we form from active travel in the outdoors when our soul is opened to new vistas, when our muscles are awakened to new strength and when our hearts are touched by others are the deep, enriching memories that carry us through all times. Take a walk on the wild side and you'll be happier...and healthier. Go out. Seek new adventures...and go out NOW!

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