ElderTreks Gets It Right from the Start!

In the 21st century, seniors (50 to 80 years of age) control more than half the discretionary income in the western world. Discretionary income is the amount people have left over after paying their necessary expenses, such as food, rent or mortgage payments, utilities, transportation and insurance. In poll after poll over several decades, what do seniors put at the top of their discretionary spending wish lists? Travel. But not just any travel...

The stereotype of older vacationers wanting to rest and relax in multi–national hotel enclaves, or to frequent casinos and golf courses as their primary vacation interest, or lounge aboard large cruise ships, all is out the window for at least 50% of senior travelers. With a goal to challenge themselves both physically and mentally, that 50% won't leave home unless they have a meaningful, stimulating holiday to lure them. They are indeed the adventurers of our time with women (on average) making up 65% of active travelers on nature–based and educational vacations and 70% on cultural and volunteer vacations.

Something else to remember when catering to this exciting clientele is that they are the best–educated generation in history ... lifelong learners, attracted to stimulating travel laced with education about their far–flung destinations and often–challenging activities. Post–secondary qualifications are nearly double that of equivalent mainstream vacationers.

One of the earliest specialists entering the 50+ travel market was Canadian tour operator **ElderTreks** (eldertreks.com), now more than a quarter century into serving as a successful model of active adventure travel for seniors. Today, the company offers small–group adventures (maximum 16 per group) in over 100 countries and has clients who have taken upwards of 30 trips. The repeat client rate is an impressive 75%.

Originally founded as an all–ages adventure company called Passages Exotic Expeditions, ElderTreks President Gary Murtagh says, "We noticed early on the high percentage of mature travelers taking our trips and the general absence of travel companies serving their specific needs. We listened to our traveler feedback and modified our approach to best suit the adventurous, culturally–curious senior traveler. That segment was so popular it quickly became the company's sole focus. ElderTreks was born!"

Reflecting on the past 26 years, Gary has seen many changes in the travel industry, with the biggest being the attitude of those now travelling. "When we first started out, 50 was considered 'old' for adventure travel. Today the majority of people joining our trips are in their 60s, 70s and even 80s. And they are willing to go just about anywhere that we offer trips."

"Our clients are vibrant and have a bigger thirst for adventure than any 25 year old. They have no hesitation in riding a camel across a desert, hiking through a jungle to a remote village or clambering in a Zodiac twice a day to search for Arctic or Antarctic wildlife. When we announce a new itinerary as a first–time exploratory trip, it predictably sells out quickly," adds Gary. "Clients are not deterred by the idea that everything might not go exactly as planned, and they love the idea that they can help shape the final product with their creative suggestions."

Most ElderTreks trips include a strong element of sustainability, wildlife conservation and long term charitable causes such as supporting schools and orphanages. Clients are seriously drawn to these elements. Recent projects include building two homes for abandoned women and children in Madagascar and building an orphanage in Uganda to mark their 25th anniversary. In addition to what the company contributes, many ElderTreks travelers decide to support a project at a personal level.

Longstanding tour leaders who recognize and support every client's desire to achieve difficult goals are another key element of the company's success. On the four trips I have personally taken with this company, I have frequently heard repeat clients compare favorite guides and admit their inclination to pick the tour leader first and then select an itinerary that person is leading. Recognizing that many tour leaders have a following, ElderTreks has a "Follow Your Leader" section on its website, providing a personal profile for each guide and hotlinking all tours for which that person is responsible.

"In the early years, I was the tour leader for most of our trips," recalls Gary, "so I know what it takes and the unexpected challenges to be faced, especially when your tour strays far from the beaten path as most of ours do. Someone who is good at tour leading can make it seem easy but in reality it is a rare

skill. A great tour leader needs to be a true leader who is organized, knowledgeable, a fine communicator, adaptable, dependable, caring, empathetic, a diplomat, has a terrific sense of humor ... and that's no joke!"

Frequently in the field himself testing out new itineraries, Gary Murtagh celebrated his 50th birthday two years ago, making him officially eligible – for the first time! – to take his own trips. In the just–released 2014 catalogue, there are new trips in Oman, Israel & Jordan, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe, and Hiking in the Carpathian Mountains (Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine). Already popular path–breakers in the catalogue are Iran, the Stans of Central Asia, Trekking in Patagonia ... something for every level of active senior who agrees with Albert Einstein's declaration: "Life is like a bicycle, to keep your balance you must keep moving."

By Alison Gardner

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