

# Travel Is Aging Gracefully

Among the most noticeable features of global travel today are both the age and the sheer numbers of older men and women—most particularly women—taking active, adventurous vacations with a strong learning and service focus. While sun and sand vacations will be with us always, many more people today are measuring their travel satisfaction by newly acquired skills, significant brain stimulation, and, yes, even proudly worn calluses, blisters, and bruises.



People over 50 make up the vast majority of travellers worldwide, and these numbers promise to expand even more rapidly as the so-called baby boomers move with vigor and high expectations into their second half century—there are no thoughts of retiring to a rocking chair on the front porch among this group! Largely due to travellers between the ages of 50 to 80 years old, nature-based (ecological) vacations, educational, cultural/historical, and volunteer vacations are flourishing, while establishing a very different tourism agenda for the 21st century.

Contrary to popular belief, it is not the baby boomers who started this shift from mainstream/conventional travel to “alternative travel” some 25 or 30 years ago, but rather the generation before the boomers. However, the boomers have adopted all types of alternative travel as their own, and they are already making changes that travel professionals from tour operators and tourism organizations to travel agencies and planners would do well to understand if they are to survive and thrive.

The stereotype of older vacationers wanting to rest and relax in multi-national hotel enclaves or aboard large cruise ships is well and truly out the window for at least 50% of senior travellers. They won't bother to leave home unless they have a meaningful, responsible, stimulating holiday to lure

them. They are indeed the adventurers of our time with women (on average) making up 65% of alternative travelers on nature-based and educational vacations and 70% on cultural and volunteer vacations.

Try your hand at creating French cuisine while staying in an elegantly restored chateau in France, or brush up your Spanish language skills at a popular language school in Guatemala. How about a guided horseback holiday into the Maori heartland of New Zealand or an immersion in undisturbed nature and Aboriginal culture at a remote safari camp in Australia's Northern Territory? Dig dinosaur remains in Alberta, teach English for a couple of weeks in China or volunteer with cheetah conservation in Namibia. Many people are combining these exhilarating but often challenging experiences with an add-on independent holiday—once in a country, you might as well enjoy it from all angles!



Nature on its own turf is a high priority with senior travelers, often enjoyed on foot, bicycle, horseback, or via canoes, river rafts or sea kayaks. Walking part of northern Spain's pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela is a never-to-be forgotten experience where you will see older pilgrims meeting the challenge more than any other age group. Equally, you will find plenty of seniors on a kayak camping vacation among the grey whales of Mexico's Sea of Cortez. Small-scale expeditionary cruising opens up a world of otherwise inaccessible destinations ranging from the Arctic to the Amazon to Antarctica, enriched with expert evening slide lectures and daily shore excursions. This type of cruising is flourishing only because of the active, curious senior.



Thanks to the Internet around which seniors are highly motivated travel researchers, they are prepared to do a lot of personal research before making up their minds what travel themes to embrace and destinations to explore. Since retired seniors frequently take more than one focused vacation a year—for example, an educational program in Rome in the Spring and a bird watching tour to Costa Rica in the Fall—there is plenty of potential for travel professionals to work with alternative travelers and build an ongoing client relationship. Just don't try talking them into a large-ship cruise or a casino holiday, or they will be gone forever!

## **Who Are Senior Tourists?**

'Senior tourists' are people of later age (after 55) who travel for leisure and whose earning and family obligations decrease and finally disappear. A -first- distinction can be made in young-old (aged 55-64), old (aged 65-74) and very old (aged 75 and over). Calendar age differs from biological age.

### **Older Persons Are Attractive as Consumers Because**

They have the financial means. They have time. They have a better education than in the past. They belong to a generation which has traveled. They are relatively healthy and know that activities like tourism and recreation contribute to a healthy life style.

### **By Alison Gardner**

An ongoing source of new and established operators and richly-illustrated feature articles covering all types of senior-friendly alternative travel is Travel with a Challenge web magazine. Editor, **Alison Gardner**, is a global expert on alternative travel for seniors.

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