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Deck chair and book? No way

More travelers seek excitement during vacations

Sunday, February 17, 2008 3:40 AM

BY MEGAN K. SCOTT
ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK -- Forget the tan, the Mickey Mouse photos and the cliché souvenirs.

Travelers want to experience something more than the gated resort and the cruise-ship buffet. They want to go on a walking tour, climb a mountain and kayak down a river -- adventures that can make a vacation more meaningful.

"In travel, people are increasingly seeking the authentic, unique experiences that stretch the imagination and create potent memories that last a lifetime," says Chris Doyle, vice president of the Adventure Travel Trade Association.

According to the organization, adventure travel is the fastest-growing segment of the leisure-travel industry.

Of course, adventure is in the eye of the traveler and ranges from a walking tour to white-water rafting. But it remains relatively unaffected by the weak dollar and economic downturn, says David Larkin, managing director of AdventureUs.com, a social networking and directory for adventure travelers.

Here, according to the experts, are some of the latest trends in adventure travel.

- *Girlfriend getaways:* More women are leaving the men at home. More than 50 percent of adventure travelers are women; most fall between ages 41 and 60, according to a 2006 survey by the Adventure Travel Trade Association.

"We used to think of active holidays for 20-somethings," says Evelyn Hannon, creator of journeywoman.com, an online-travel resource for women. "Now it's not unheard of for 50- and 60-year-olds to be going kayaking, mountain climbing, surfing."

- *Volunteer vacations:* Combining volunteerism with vacation continues to be a growing trend; Global Volunteers saw a 30 percent increase in participation last year, according to co-founder Michele Gran. Baby boomers rule, she says, but the fastest-growing demographic has been people younger than 20.

- *Expeditionary travel:* More people are helping researchers through the Earthwatch Institute, an international volunteer organization supporting science. Expeditions include surveying coral reefs on a remote Bahamian island or feeding and caring for cheetahs in Namibia.

Most of the trips last two weeks and require no special training. (Exceptions might be trips that require scuba-diving certification or a high fitness level).

- *Charity travel:* Venture Expeditions, a Christian organization, sponsors trips to raise awareness and money for various organizations, such as biking through Thailand to raise money for an orphanage. Travelers pay for the trip and then make a donation to the charity.

- *Action-packed vacations:* Ultimate 5 Lifetime Adventures packs five of what it calls the world's greatest adventures into one week: a military-developed ropes challenge course, skydiving, Indy car racing, rappelling and piloting a primary combat trainer aircraft.

- *Family adventure vacations:* Some families (including multigenerational) are forging theme parks and all-inclusive resorts for "more genuine nature-based, cultural, and education and learning



KAREL PRINSLOO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Journeys to Africa, including Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, are regaining popularity.



Travel agencies offer adventure travel, which might include white-water canoeing.

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excursions," Doyle says. He attributes this in part to baby boomers who mean to travel "coupled with a strong interest in bonding more deeply with families."

GordonsGuide.com, a Web site on adventure and active travel, says the top vacation requests are all family friendly -- dude and guest ranches, houseboat rentals, white-water rafting and horse pack trips and trail rides.

Soft-adventure vacations: An increasing number of people are choosing a vacation that centers around a theme, such as a culinary tour in Asia or wine vacation in Israel.

Yoga has seeped into the mix. Best of Both Women's Adventures has yoga on all of its trips and a specific yoga and surf vacation in Puerto Rico. Other combinations include yoga and snowboarding or yoga and wine-tasting.

Expedition cruising: Look for more people to take expedition cruises to Antarctica, the Galapagos Islands and Alaska, says Carolyn Spencer Brown, editor in chief of Cruise Critic.com, three places that are hard to see without sailing there. The cruises, while less glitzy than big-ship cruise lines, include lectures and presentations.

"On an expedition cruise, everything revolves really around what you see off the ship," Brown says. "On the big-ship cruises, everything revolves around what happens on board and the ports are sort of an addendum."

Roots vacations: With an increasing number of people interested in finding their roots, some are traveling to the places where their ancestors lived. Discover Natural Ancestry (amazingdna.com) provides DNA analysis and genealogy services, and it puts people in touch with tour operators who plan the trip for them.

"If they are breathing, then they have a genetic story hidden within them, and we help them to discover and explore the unknown secrets about their heritage," says Yvonne Walker, marketing director for Discover Natural Ancestry.

African travel: While the Kenya Tourist Board says the sporadic and isolated violence has calmed and tourists were never in danger (violence occurred in places where tourists generally don't go), there has been a downturn in tourism in Kenya and some spillover to other countries in East Africa, says Wil Smith, director of Deeper Africa, a tour operator with trips to Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

"I believe the bounce back in the neighboring countries is going to be swift," he says. "I think it's probably going to take, best scenario, six months for Kenya to recover."

When the region recovers, look for more people to go gorilla tracking in Uganda and Rwanda; visit Ethiopia, an emerging destination; and climb Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania before the snow on its peak, which has been gradually receding, disappears.

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