

Experience matters

TREND | More and more, travelers want to be fully involved when it comes vacation time

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BY MEGAN K. SCOTT

NEW YORK -- Forget the tan, the Mickey Mouse photos and the cliché souvenirs. These days, 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 whitewater rafting. But because of that, 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 and most fall between ages 41 and 60, according to a 2006 survey by the ATTA.

"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 still rule, she says, but the fastest growing demographic in the last 18 months has been people under age 20, more than likely baby boomers who bring their children with them.

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 are two weeks, and no special training is required. (Exceptions may be trips that require scuba-diving certification or a high fitness level.)

Other examples include conservation-minded tours to watch giant sea turtles lay their eggs in coastal areas of the southeastern United States, Mexico and Costa Rica.

CHARITY TRAVEL: Think an extreme version of a walkathon. Venture Expeditions, a Christian-based organization, sponsors trips to raise awareness and funds for various organizations, such as biking through Thailand to raise money for an orphanage. Travelers pay for the trip and then make a minimum donation to the charity.

ACTION-PACKED VACATIONS: Some people call action-packed vacations "The Bucket List" for the movie starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman, two terminally ill patients who want to complete a list of things to do before they kick the bucket. 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 forgoing theme parks and all-inclusive resorts for "more genuine nature-based, cultural, and education and learning excursions," Doyle says. He attributes this in part to baby boomers who have the means 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, whitewater rafting and horse pack trips and trail rides.

SOFT ADVENTURE: 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 also 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. (Surfing is one of the top activities that women want to do, says Dez Bartelt, co-founder of Best of Both Women's Adventures.)

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, three places that are hard to see without sailing there, says Carolyn Spencer Brown, editor in chief of CruiseCritic.com. The cruises, while less glitzy than big ship cruise lines, include lectures and presentations about the place. "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 swabbing their cheek to find their roots, some are taking it a step further and traveling to the places where their ancestors lived. Discover Natural Ancestry (Amazingdna.com) not only provides DNA analysis and genealogy services, 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 ADVENTURE: While the Kenya Tourist Board says the sporadic and isolated violence has calmed and tourists were never in danger (the situation was internal and 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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