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Adventure travel: Young travelers seek more authentic experiences

by The Grand Rapids Press and The Associated Press
Monday March 31, 2008, 9:57 AM



Courtesy Photo

Hope College junior David Fraker, front right, travels with classmates down a river in a dugout canoe in the Amazon as part of an education-adventure-service trip.

GRAND RAPIDS -- Forget the tan, the Mickey Mouse photos and the cliché souvenirs. Adventure travel is hot, especially among young travelers.

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. They want to help build homes or work in orphanages in a foreign country -- adventures that can make a vacation more meaningful.

"People are increasingly seeking the authentic, unique experiences that stretch the imagination and create potent memories that last a lifetime," said Chris Doyle, vice president of the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA). According to the organization, adventure travel is the fastest growing segment of the leisure travel industry.

"More traditional vacations try to fulfill the need for a break by providing less substance," said Hope College junior David Fraker, who has taken mission and adventure trips as well as the typical resort vacation. "What (many people now) are looking for in a getaway ... (is) a different kind of experience. Maybe such a trip still engages your mind, but it does so in a different way. Or maybe it doesn't require as much thinking but it still engages spiritually or physically. The best experiences challenge in every way.

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"For me, to give up substance doesn't make for more relaxation, just boredom," said the Forest Hills Northern High School graduate. "A vacation should provide a change of pace, but not necessarily a lack of effort."

Voice of experience

Fraker visited Mexico twice on two very different trips.

"Once was for a mission trip, the other a resort vacation. The mission trip was cheap and included 52 hours of van ride transportation, staying in a low-class hotel with ants in the room and long days of hard construction work," he said. "The resort trip cost three times as much, flew me in fast, had me staying in an expensive hotel and provided free time and excursions galore.

"Which was more enjoyable? The mission trip, far and away. The resort was fun, but that was about it. After a few days, it was over and I was flying back to the states, not really looking forward to working again and a whole lot poorer. The mission trip I will never forget. It was just as full of amazing sights and new experiences. They weren't all pretty, but that made it so much more real.

"At the end of the trip, I had made a difference in peoples' lives and in so doing, I received some of my best memories and inspiration. I felt alive, and I'd forged some real friendships, the kind that only form working side-by-side with people on something you both care about. It was the kind of experience only a vacation can provide, but one that an indulgent vacation never could."

A local perspective

Jeannie Wolbert, travel agent with AAA Michigan, said there's definitely a growing market locally for adventure trips, especially with older teenagers. She recommends Contiki Tours, which specializes in travel for those 18-35 and includes tours in Central America, Europe and Australia.

"They're organized backpacking-type tours that are priced inexpensively, but parents can feel safe sending their kids on," Wolbert said, noting she has seen parents book them as high school graduation gifts or before a young adult starts a new job.

"Kids like them because there's still that sense of adventure, and they're traveling with people their own age."

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, said David Larkin, managing director of [AdventureUs.com](#), a social networking and directory for adventure travelers.

Not all trips are about service, but they should all challenge and provide growth, said Hope's Fraker, who recently returned from a mid-March backpacking trip in the Smoky Mountains. The first day included a brutal 3,000 foot climb, uphill for hours with a 65-pound pack.

"Most people wouldn't consider that fun, and by the end it wasn't, but it's an unparalleled feeling when you're done," he said. "Even in the midst, the experience was exhilarating. Why do people play competitive sports even though the training can be brutally painful? Because the feeling of accomplishment and success more than makes up for it.

"Coming back from a lazy break, I just feel annoyed at having to gear up for work again. But after pushing myself and expanding the limits of my ability, the day-to-day doesn't seem so overwhelming, and it doesn't seem so trivial. I'm ready to come back swinging.



Photo by David Fraker

Studying the flora and fauna, such as this tropical frog, was a part of the education-adventure-service trip for Hope College students to the Amazon rainforest and Galapagos Islands.

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Photo Courtesy Global Volunteers

Blake Brady, 16, volunteers with a girl during her vacation in the Cook Islands.

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"A good vacation doesn't just temporarily replace your daily life with a new one, it enhances it with new experiences," Fraker said. "I feel most alive and renewed ... when I'm getting my hands dirty doing something that matters -- something that makes me stronger or the world a better place. At the end of the day, there's no better feeling."

-- *Travel Editor Andrea Tamboer and The Associated Press contributed to this report. Contact Tamboer at atamboer@grpress.com.*

MEANINGFUL MEANDERINGS

Here are some of the latest trends in adventure travel:

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 said, but the fastest growing demographic in the past 18 months has been people age 20 and younger, more than likely resulting from 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 for 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 U.S., 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 trips

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 combat trainer aircraft.

Family adventure

Some families are forgoing theme parks and all-inclusive resorts for "more genuine nature-based, cultural and education and learning excursions," said Chris Doyle, vice president of the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA).

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." The Web site, GordonsGuide.com, which deals with adventure and active travel, said the top vacation requests are all family friendly -- dude and guest ranches, houseboat rentals, whitewater rafting and pack-horse trips and trail rides.

Soft adventure trips

More 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. 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 and Alaska, said Carolyn Spencer Brown, editor-in-chief of CruiseCritic.com, three places that are hard to see without sailing there. The cruises, while less glitzy than those of big ship cruise lines, include lectures and presentations.

"On an expedition cruise, everything revolves around what you see off the ship," Brown said.

Roots vacations

With an increasing number of people swabbing their cheek to find their roots through DNA, 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.

African travel

While the Kenya Tourist Board said 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, said Wil Smith, director of Deeper Africa, a tour operator with trips to Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

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.


Girlfriend getaways

More women are leaving the men at home. More than 50 percent of adventure travelers are women and are between ages 41 and 60, according to an ATTA survey.

-- *The Associated Press*

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