

What the boomers want on vacation

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Big font. Easy-to-print pages. Luxury hotels that can be sorted by amenities like cooking lessons and connecting suites. If you find yourself enjoying the carefully planned features on Preferredfamily.com, you have the baby boomer generation to thank.

From new hotel websites to shorter cruises and smaller tours, the travel industry is redoubling its efforts this year to win the hearts and wallets of people between the ages of 49 and 67.

It's a generation that, given its size (about 26 percent of the population) and its collective wealth (it controls the lion's share of the country's disposable income), has been shaping the nation's travel choices for decades. Your lost summer backpacking through Europe? Thank the boomers who in the 1960s and '70s made shoestring student trips to Europe de rigueur. Your naughty romp at Club Med? It was the boomers who propelled the singles resort scene to its apotheosis in the 1970s. Your posh room at the Copacabana Palace in the 1990s? Fueled by boomers' appetite for luxury hotels.

Yet when the economy tanked in 2008, boomers began snapping their wallets shut and stowing their luggage in their closets instead of airplane bins, helping to send the travel industry into a tailspin. Now, five years later, with the economy showing signs of recovery and the first wave of boomers retiring, many travel companies have declared a New Year's resolution: Seduce the boomer. (Again.) Whether it's a yen for Wi-Fi in the Serengeti or a disdain for bus tours, boomers' latest needs, whims and aspirations are determining 2013's large and small vacation trends. Some are new. Others have been around but will become more prevalent. Having studied the predilections of people born between 1946 and 1964 as if they were a tribe recently discovered by anthropologists, travel companies are rolling out services designed to woo and recapture a generation of travelers.

Boomer or not, here's what all of us will be seeing more of in the months to come, and why.

SHORTER ITINERARIES

Bon voyage lengthy cruises and tours. Boomers are the most likely of all age groups to say that they have lost money on investments and that their household finances have worsened since the recession, according to Pew Research. Among boomers ages 50 to 61, 6 in 10 said they might have to postpone retirement. That has tour companies — which for decades have offered lengthy trips for retirees with time on their hands — making sweeping changes.

“Speaking from a boomer who feels like I'm going to be working until I'm 70,” said JoAnn Bell, vice president of programming for Road Scholar, a nonprofit organization that leads educational tours around the world, “we're very conscious of the fact that so many more people are still working.”

To cater to boomers postponing retirement, Road Scholar has shortened the length of some tours. While the organization has international trips that can be 21 days or longer, “we have more and more programs that are seven to 10 days,” Bell said. For instance, a traditional program is Road Scholar's “Survey of France: Paris, Provence, the Wine Regions and more” — an 18-night tour. A new program for boomers? The seven-night “Allure of France: Paris and Normandy.”

With working boomers in mind, Road Scholar has also changed the days of the week that its tours begin and end. Its domestic programs used to begin on Sunday and conclude on Friday; now it's scheduling programs that begin Thursday or Friday and end on Monday. For international trips, the company originally planned its 10-day programs with midweek flights because they are less expensive than weekend flights — but the schedule was not ideal for most working people. Now trips depart Friday or

Thursday night and return on Sunday.

Cruise lines are also adjusting their schedules. Crystal Cruises, known for its cruises of 10 days or longer, has increased the number of shorter itineraries it is offering in 2013, making almost half of its cruises 10 days or less. Last year, only three of Crystal's European cruises were shorter than 10 days. In 2013, 22 of its cruises in Europe are 10 days or less. Its Crystal Getaways, 5- to 11-day itineraries that it set up last year have been so successful among time-strapped working boomers that this year the company is introducing 26 new segments for Europe.

EXOTIC LOCATIONS, MODERN AMENITIES

Boomers continue to be intrepid explorers, even as many express a desire for creature comforts.

Last month, I invited boomers to share their travel habits and plans on The New York Times Travel blog and Facebook page. A man from Seattle noted that he and his wife will go on a safari in Botswana this year and, in 2014, visit Hong Kong, Vietnam and Thailand. "Working on our bucket list," he said. A couple in their 60s from Delaware said, "since we are not sure when our legs will give out, we enjoy active trips with companies such as Backroads." Another couple, from New York, plan to climb Mount Kilimanjaro with their son for the first time this summer.

The research company Euromonitor International predicts that boomers will "lead the way" to places that were not always possible to visit, including Myanmar and Cuba. And American Express Travel Insiders said boomers are heading off to destinations like Machu Picchu and Patagonia before they reach an age when they can't handle the physical demands that may come with visiting such places.

Yet researchers also note that boomers do not want to rough it once they arrive. In a study of the impact of the economy on vacation travel among boomers, the market research company Mintel posited that boomers are "ideal candidates" for upscale camping, fondly referred to as glamping.

Glamping, for the uninitiated, is camping minus the sleeping bag and dome tent. Participants need not have the faintest idea of how to rig a tarp or build a fire. Rather, glampers enjoy gourmet food, private bathrooms, even "spa tents" in which the only knots discussed are those that can be worked out during a massage.

Michelle Woodley, senior vice president of distribution and revenue management for the Preferred Hotel Group, which created Preferredfamily.com with boomers in mind, said that one of its popular destinations is Sanbona Wildlife Reserve in South Africa, where guests sleep "in a nice, cozy bed" in "luxury tents" with minibars, electronic safes, showers, heating and air-conditioning, decks and plunge pools. There's also Wi-Fi — for when you tire of observing the white lions and riverine rabbits.

While many vacationers strive to get away from email and smartphones, tour operators say boomers are telling them they no longer want to be out of touch with their offices and families.

"The core of our business used to be the get-away-from-it-all and have no contact," said Pamela Lassers, a spokeswoman for Abercrombie & Kent, which caters to more affluent travelers.

And now?

"Safari lodges in Africa now are installing Internet connections," she said. "They're in the middle of the Serengeti," she said of boomers, "and they want to update their Facebook page."

MULTIGENERATIONAL TRAVEL

Marketing studies have long purported that boomers, the "me generation," have a fascination with

themselves. And the travel industry is finding that this fascination extends to their families, fueling a surge in multigenerational travel. As boomers join the ranks of grandparents, many are financing vacations for their children and grandchildren. Preferred Family was designed to make booking those multigenerational trips to places like Morocco and India easier: Users can search for hotels with amenities like connecting rooms, kitchenettes and storytelling for children.

Meanwhile at Road Scholar, families are chartering entire 16-person boats in the Galapagos that the company uses for its natural- and cultural-history group tours.

Of course, boomers are not strictly grandparents. Plenty are starting second or third families.

“They are grandparents even as they are parents,” said Art Webb, president and chief executive of the travel marketing agency BCF in Virginia Beach, Va., which uses the tag line, “boom your brand.” “The stereotypical progression of life stages goes out the window.”

Take, for example, what happened at Road Scholar, which offers specialized tours for grandparents and their grandchildren to places like Ireland and Grand Canyon National Park. In recent years, boomers have been calling to say, “I’m grandparent age, but my child is 16. Can I go on that program?”

But that would change the dynamic of the tour, said Bell. And so those parents were told they could not participate. Yet Road Scholar received so many of those calls that it ultimately created an “exception” tour for grandparent-age parents and their young children.

Still, even that was not enough. The number of people who wanted to participate in the “exception” tour kept growing.

“Now,” said Bell, “we have a whole series that was based on our exceptions.”

EMPHASIS ON LOCAL COLOR

“It used to be that when Americans were traveling abroad they were looking for something that they were familiar with,” Lassers of Abercrombie & Kent said.

To paraphrase the saying, familiarity can breed contempt. Today, Lassers said, boomers prefer an “authentic hotel that reflects the local character of the destination.”

Woodley of the Preferred Hotel Group agreed, explaining that many boomers have traveled extensively for work and slept in chain hotels that make one city feel indistinguishable from the next. “Now they’re looking for more unique experiences,” she said.

That not only applies to where they sleep but also to what they do. Industry professionals say boomers do not want to be isolated from the local culture. They want to practice digital photography in a Costa Rican rain forest or to volunteer at a Haitian orphanage. Abercrombie & Kent’s new Connections tour, “East Africa: Tanzania and Kenya,” for instance, includes a visit to a local school, a meeting with a Maasai village elder and a dance performed by members of a local tribe.

CUSTOMIZED TRAVEL OPTIONS

If travel companies had to write a boomer operating manual, they would include this warning: Do not herd them. As one boomer succinctly put it on The Times’s travel blog: “No interest in being with ‘a group.’”

Travel companies, in turn, are making their tours more intimate, which boomers say they prefer because there are fewer stragglers to slow them down and it’s easier to develop a relationship with the guide or lecturer.

“Most of our boomers are not really buying motor coach programs,” Bell of Road Scholar said.

This desire for enrichment that's personalized led Road Scholar last year to introduce "flex programs": international tours that provide travelers with free time to pursue their own interests. The company said the programs were so successful that this year it's rolling them out domestically as well.

In Aspen, a ski program called Bumps for Boomers is thriving because it's teaching skiers of a certain age how to escape crowded, groomed trails and ski moguls and off-piste terrain without exhaustion or knee pain. The program's founder, Joe Nevin, does this by emphasizing balance and control instead of speed, fast reflexes and brute strength.

One take-away from his surveys of boomer travelers: They don't want to wear hats that say "Bumps for Boomers." The company's tag line — "ski for life"— on the other hand, goes over like a beautiful coat of snow. Nevin said that's because "ski for life" sounds fun and broadcasts longevity, "as opposed to stereotyping me as an older boomer circling the drain."

Plenty of travel professionals are invoking the word "boomer," though. Last year, Denver's convention and visitors bureau issued a news release entitled "Boomers do more in Denver," while the Bermuda department of tourism heralded a spring-break-for-grown-ups promotion with the words, "Calling all boomers!"

Whatever you call them, veteran marketers say the key to a successful seduction is never to stereotype boomer travelers, particularly when it comes to aging. After all, Webb said, "They may be rockers in a cover band that are just starting a new family and have new earrings dangling off their lobes."

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