

# ADVENTURE TOURISM MARKET REPORT

**A STUDY BY:** The George Washington University  
School of Business, The Adventure Travel Trade  
Association, and Xola Consulting



THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF  
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ADVENTURE TRAVEL  
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XOLA

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# Adventure Travel Market

## Introduction

The George Washington University (GW), the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA), and Xola Consulting (Xola) undertook the following study of the Adventure Travel Market in 2009. The goal of the study was to gain a better understanding of the size and characteristics of this important market segment. This profile of the adventure traveler market will be useful to:

- Government policy makers
- Destination marketing organizations or destination management organizations, state or national tourism offices
- Adventure tour operators
- Gear and equipment companies

Marketing, positioning and branding at the organizational or destination level may be adapted to attract this lucrative segment. Understanding traveler preferences and trends, such as those outlined in this report can impact the design and development of attractive tourism products and services for this market.

## Overview

Adventure travelers often seek unique or new travel destinations and activities. It is often believed that a percentage of this sector is willing to accept limited tourism infrastructure with the promise of an exceptional, authentic experience. Given their penchant for exploring new destinations and seeking new experiences, they are frequently coveted by emerging destinations at the early stages of tourism development and also in more mature destinations that have protected and/or developed appropriate product.

Although adventure tourism is recognized as an important, growing tourism segment, primary research to quantify the size and scope of this market in the U.S. or internationally (Schneider 2006) has been lacking. For this reason, George Washington University, along with its partners, the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) and Xola Consulting, sought to better understand the adventure traveler. This study's focus area was limited to three major markets: Europe, Latin America and North America, which comprise 70% of overall international departures, according to the UNWTO<sup>1</sup>.

The study focused on previous (actual) and anticipated (intended) travel behavior, as well as psychographic and demographic information. This report provides a detailed examination of adventure travelers in these three areas, including: number of travelers, spending, and a snapshot of predicted future trends.

The information in this report may provide guidance for destination management organizations and firms involved in marketing as well as product development. It may be especially useful to destination management organizations or state/regional tourism offices seeking to build or enhance their adventure offerings or adventure tourism operators seeking to understand their target market.

### **The Adventure Travel Market Report includes:**

#### Market Sizing Information

- The size of market and characteristics of adventure travelers in Latin America, North America and Europe, including psychographic and demographic profiles;
- Analysis of behavioral patterns including their online behavior with a focus on social networking sites;
- A detailed list of activities/trip types included within the study's definition of adventure travel; and
- A snapshot of purchasing patterns for gear, computer and car brands and widely read publications to facilitate a better understanding of their lifestyle.





## Methodology

This study of the adventure travel market was conducted in late 2009. Adventure travel is an inherently subjective activity: what is adventure to one person, may not be to another<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, a broad definition of adventure tourism was adopted: any domestic or international trip that includes at least two of the following three aspects: physical activity, interaction with nature and cultural learning or exchange.\* Respondents were provided with a list of possible activities. They were asked to choose what activities they had participated in. These activities were categorized into either hard or soft adventure activities or “other” tourism activities. This use of this classification system is based on previously established research in this field<sup>3</sup>. This categorization has its foundation in academic literature and has been confirmed by previous surveys of consumers.

### Activities included:

	Hard	Soft	Other <sup>4</sup>
Archeological expeditions		X	
Attending local festivals/fairs			X
Backpacking		X	
Birdwatching		X	
Camping		X	
Canoeing		X	
Caving	X		
Climbing (mountain/rock/ice)	X		
Cruise			X
Cultural activities			X
Cycling		X	
Eco-tourism		X	
Educational programs		X	
Environmentally sustainable activities		X	
Fishing/fly-fishing		X	
Getting to know the locals			X
Hiking		X	
Horseback riding		X	
Hunting		X	
Kayaking/sea/whitewater		X	
Learning a new language			X
Orienteering		X	
Rafting		X	
Research expeditions		X	
Safaris		X	
Sailing		X	
Scuba Diving		X	
Snorkeling		X	
Skiing/snowboarding		X	
Surfing		X	
Trekking	X		
Walking tours			X
Visiting friends/family			X
Visiting historical sites			X
Volunteer Tourism		X	

Utilizing an on-line survey instrument, zoomerang.com, the survey was sent to a representative sample of residents. The survey was completed by 855 respondents in six countries, in the following three regions: Europe, North America and Latin America, representing about 73% of global expenditures or 68.7% of international departures (UNWTO, 2009). The survey was distributed to the six countries in the languages outlined to the right.

Country	Language
Argentina	Spanish
Brazil	Portuguese
U.S.A.	English
U.K.	English
Spain	Spanish
Germany	German

\*Adventure Travel Trade Association, (2006) adapted from research conducted by Schneider, P. & Vogt, C.(2005). “Adventure Travel Survey: Consumer Report.” Prepared for the Adventure Travel Trade Association: 1-37.

- The survey sample is statistically representative of the population under study<sup>5</sup>. North American results are less dispersed around the estimates in the population than Latin America or European results due to the fact that the North American region hosts only 3 countries.

Respondents' choice of activity were separated as "hard" or "soft" adventure building on previous research conducted<sup>6</sup>.

### Select Key Findings:

- Of those countries surveyed, 26% of respondents indicated that they participated in adventure travel activities;
- 16% of all international departures from these three regions were for adventure travel;
- The choice of activities influence whether consumers term their trip 'adventure.'

### Adventure Travel Destinations

- On average, the regional adventure market represents 55% of adventure travel in the three regions surveyed;
- The top adventure destinations for developed countries correlate with those highly ranked on the Adventure Travel Development Index. (Learn more at [www.adventureindex.travel](http://www.adventureindex.travel))

### Adventure Travel Expenditures

- Adventure travel is resilient and is trending upwards even in difficult economic times;
- Adventure is expanding into a broader range of activities;
- The "soft" adventurer spends the most per trip, (excluding airfare);
- The value of the global adventure market is \$89billion;
- All adventure travelers spend significant amounts of money on equipment & apparel pre-trip.

### Behaviors, Psychographics and Demographics

- Adventure travelers are equally likely to be single or married, and male or female. The majority are between 35-37 years old. Industry followers familiar with research from the Adventure Travel Trade Association may expect a higher percentage of baby boomer travelers. However, this study reflects not only consumers of tours but adventure travelers in general; it includes people who organize their own trips and therefore more likely to be younger with more time to plan.
- After "local newspapers," the most widely read publication by adventure travelers in North America was People Magazine, followed by National Geographic.
- Compared to "other travelers," adventure travelers place importance on exploring new places and meeting and engaging with local cultures while on vacation; this confirms earlier research by ATTA which found that travelers were craving more cultural interaction on trips (ATTA, 2006).\*
- Compared to other forms of pre-trip research, the majority of adventure travelers (35%) conduct research online, but they also consult friends and family.

\*Schneider, P., Latkova, P., & Vogt, C. "Consumers' Need for Uniqueness: Seeking the Trait Through Adventure Travel." *Travel and Tourism Research Association*, 2008.

### Top Product Companies Recognized by Adventure Travelers

1. Timberland
2. Quicksilver
3. Gore-Tex
4. The NorthFace
5. Columbia Sportswear
6. Montagne
7. Eddie Bauer
8. Swiss Army Luggage
9. Salomon
10. LL Bean





## Profile of Respondents

Who are adventure travelers? They are fairly evenly split male to female, even within in category of “hard” adventure sports. Soft adventurers skew slightly more female, but not as much as other types of travelers who are predominantly female (62.3%). The average age of an adventure traveler is 35 (again, this may seem low from the perspective of adventure travel tour operators, however, this number reflects the overall adventure traveler, not just consumers of tours), slightly younger than the “other” traveler who is on average 42.

Adventure travelers are more likely to be single or married; less than 10% are divorced or separated. They are also more highly educated than other types of travelers, with 70% of hard adventures having post-secondary education and 63% of soft adventurers having post-secondary education. 47% of other travelers have a two year degree or higher. Considering these demographic trends, it is unsurprising that adventure travelers also have higher levels of household income.

Interestingly, while many hard adventure travelers clearly view international travel as important (75% have valid passports), among soft adventure travelers, only 56.5% have valid passports. From this we can theorize that among soft adventurers, many are engaging in activities domestically. The table below shows the percentage of adventure travelers who hold valid passports.

	Hard Adventure Travelers	Soft Adventure Travelers	Other Travelers
I have a valid passport.	75%	56.5%	63.7%
I do not have a valid passport.	25%	41.5%	36.3%

These responses indicate that much adventure travel is taking place regionally, and adventure operators in destinations may consider allocating additional marketing budget to reach their local populations as well as international markets.

What do adventure travelers want when they plan a vacation? Hard adventure, soft adventure and other travelers place a high importance on similar things when planning their vacations: time to be with friends, time to be with family, relaxation, exciting new activities and learning about different cultures. However, adventure travelers place a higher importance on exploring new places, time to be in nature, meeting and engaging with local cultures and pushing their physical limits.

Not surprisingly, most adventure travelers are now turning to the Internet to research their trips. When researching a destination, most travelers will go directly to Google with generic search terms such as the destination name. Over 30% visited the destination’s official website; this may be because it appeared high in the search results. Around 20% used social media to learn about the destination either by reading a blog post or viewing a friend’s photos on a social network. The survey results reveal that Facebook dominates the social networking space, and targeted ads would best be placed here.

Secondary to the Internet, travelers routinely consult friends and family for opinions and suggestions on destinations.

## Top Magazines Being Read by Adventure Travelers (US only):

1. Local daily newspaper
2. People
3. National Geographic
4. Newsweek
5. Time
6. Reader’s Digest
7. Cosmopolitan
8. CondeNast Traveler
9. Glamour
10. GQ



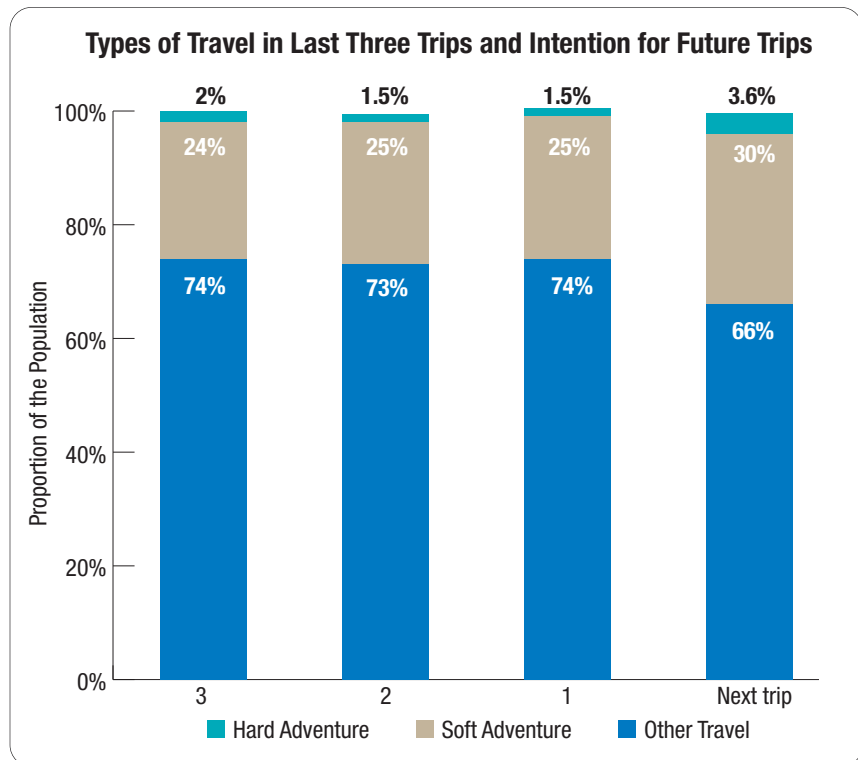
**11.2% of Adventure Travelers own an iPhone**

## Size of Adventure Market

### Volume of Adventure Trips

In the past, the definition of what constitutes an adventure trip or adventure travel has been ill-defined; with influential and respectable entities disagreeing on what to include or exclude in the definition. This study's definition is based on past literature that classified specific activities into two segments: hard adventure and soft adventure. In certain instances, they have been combined in "all adventure."

The central question is — how many people are taking adventure trips? Applying a strict definition based on activities done while on vacation, allows an answer to this question to emerge.



### Hard Adventure

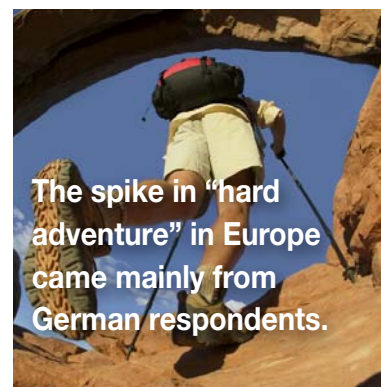
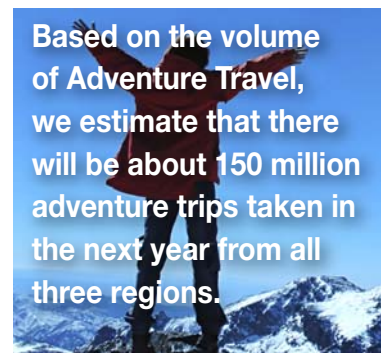
Hard adventure includes trekking, climbing (mountain, rock and ice) and caving<sup>8</sup>. These activities are high risk and require a high level of specialized skill. Unsurprisingly, these represented small percentages of the population but still uncovered a sizable market.

The trend over the past three years indicates that the number of hard adventure trips has held steady, at around 2% of the population. However, respondents in Latin America and Europe indicated that they intended to take a hard adventure trip for their next vacation. In North America, the trend was opposite, and the percent of people expressing the intention to take a hard adventure vacation dipped slightly.

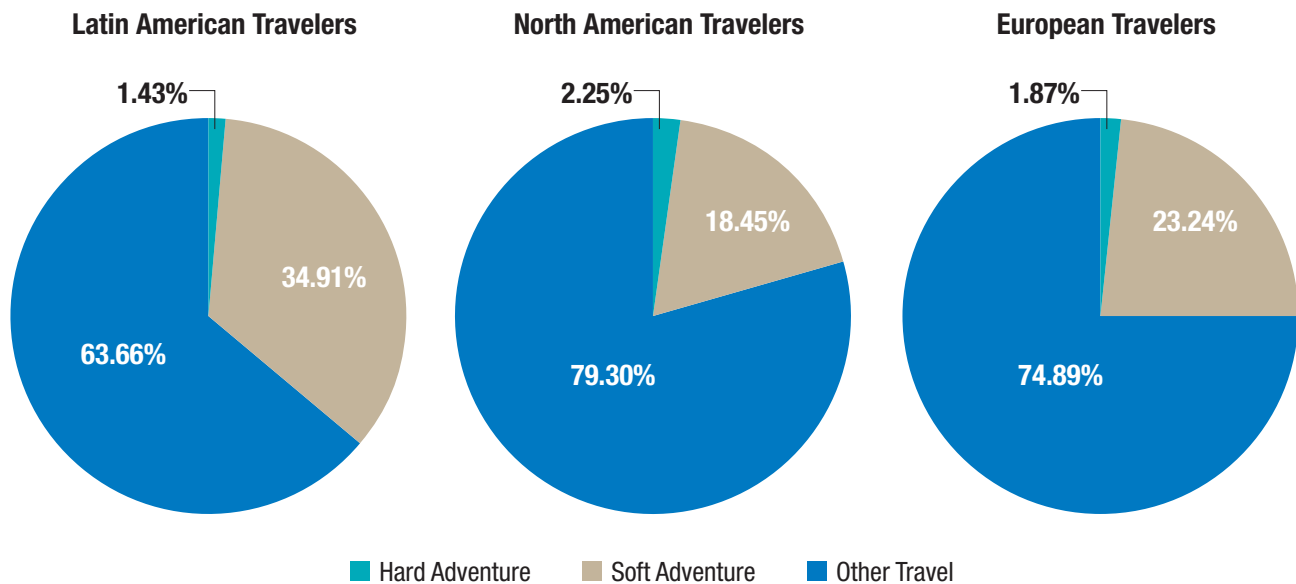
### Soft Adventure

The number of soft adventure departures represents a substantial percentage of trips worldwide. Interestingly, compared to North Americans and Europeans, Latin Americans are taking the most adventure trips at 35% of total outbound travelers. On average, 25% of international trips taken from all three regions are soft adventure trips. Soft adventurers are an important market for destinations, gear companies and tour operators. They are more likely to try different activities and destinations than hard adventurers. They are also more likely to respond to targeted marketing.

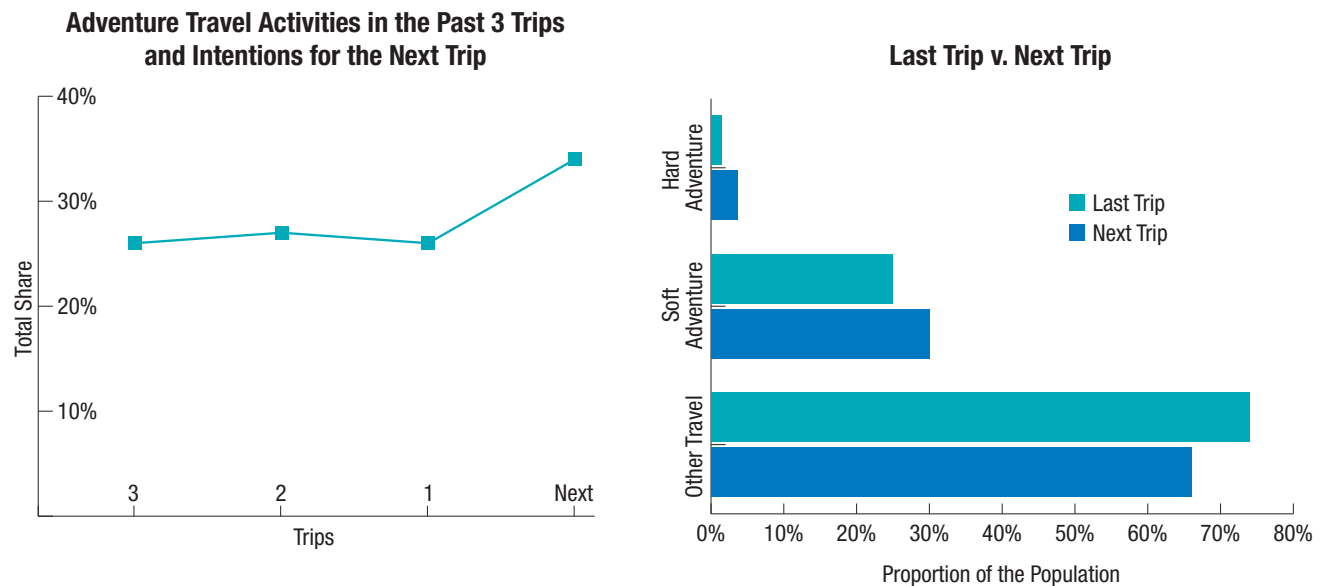
In all three regions — Latin America, North America and Europe — soft adventure increased steadily over the traveler's past three trips and continued to do so with future travel intentions. Around 43% of Europeans indicated that for their next vacation they would take a soft adventure trips.



Although Other Travel still dominates the tourism landscape, Soft Adventure claims 34% of travelers among Latin Americans, 18% of travelers among North Americans, and 23% of travelers among Europeans.



Overall, adventure travel is on the rise:



This may be due to numerous factors including new types of technology which allow potential visitors to access an unprecedented amount of information before they travel, so travelers may feel more secure in visiting far-off and exotic destinations, or travelers are growing older and becoming more mature, craving more authentic experiences. A range of other factors could be affecting this shift, from the availability of more diverse itineraries from mainstream operators to increased attention to healthy lifestyles to the desire for multi-generational travel.

### Adventure Activities (Risk/Satisfaction)

Adventure, by definition, involves an element of risk. Past literature on adventure travel has suggested that location can be an indicator of adventure based on the perceived or real riskiness involved in that place. However, this survey finds that the perceived level of risk associated with the activity performed while on vacation is much more significant to travelers. Adventure travelers rated the level of risk associated with their activities higher than other types of tourists, but did not extend this assessment of risk to their destinations. Perhaps adventure travelers are aware of the safety of their activities but less sensitive to destination safety; this is an area for further research.



## Expenditure and Length of Stay of Adventure Travelers

Adventure travelers indicated that their average trip was between 7 and 8 days. They indicated that their next trip would be longer and also involve more challenging activities and far-flung destinations. On the other hand, while other travelers (whose average stay was the same, at 7.5 days) indicated that their next trip would also be longer, over 12% respondents shifted from the “other” category to adventure category based on their selection of activity<sup>9</sup>. For example, Respondent A may have indicated that on his last trip to the Dominican Republic he lay on the beach for 7 days, but on his next trip he hopes to go biking in Portugal. The last column of this table below indicates the percentage of change. For example, 82% more people indicated their next trip would involve an activity characterized as hard adventure. Conversely, 10% fewer people indicated they would take a type of trip categorized as “other travel.”

**Average Length of Trip (All 3 Regions)**

	Last trip	Next trip	% of change
Hard Adventurers	7 days	8 days	Increase of 82%
Soft Adventurers	8 days	9.5 days	Increase of 22%
Mass Travelers	7.5 days	9.5 days	Decrease of 10%

## How Much Are They Spending?

On average, hard adventure travelers spend less per trip than soft adventure travelers. Anecdotal, it is known that hard adventurers are also less likely to use a tour operator for their trip, so this could explain part of the difference in spending. The table below illustrates expenditure.

**Average Spending per Trip Excluding Airfare**

	Hard Adventure	Soft Adventure	Other Travelers
European Travelers	\$500	\$525	\$483
North American Travelers	\$500	\$914	\$605
Latin American Travelers	\$375	\$861	\$835
All 3 Regions	\$462	\$822	\$591

Hard adventurers do however spend more on gear than people engaging in other types of travel.

**Gear Budget as % of Trip Expenditure (All three regions combined)**

	Cost of the Trip	% of Trip Expenditure
Hard Adventurers	\$462	87.0%
Soft Adventurers	\$822	42.5%
Other Travelers	\$591	43.2%
Total	\$646	44.7%

## Top 3 Brands of Computers Owned by Adventure Travelers:

1. Acer
2. Toshiba
3. IBM

\*Acer are usually netbooks which are easy to travel with



Photo by Jessica Reilly

### Implications for Marketers (DMOs, tour operators, gear companies, policy makers)

Our findings indicate that adventure travel is diffusing in the market. More people, who in the past chose to engage in other types of travel, are indicating that on their next trip they will be more adventurous in their activity and destination choice. Product developers and marketers should capitalize on these dreamers and create soft options to ease them into the world of adventure travel. This will mean catering to their trip length and expectations at the destination. Marketers should also appeal more to mainstream travelers, and advertise or generate editorial coverage in publications such as People Magazine.

Adventure travelers are early adopters: they are more likely to go to a new destination or try new products before most people. But they still take their cues from sources such as magazines, tour operators or even social media blogs and networks. However, messages need to be specific and speak to what this market is truly seeking: meaningful connections with the place and authenticity. These messages can be placed where travelers least expect them — at their yoga studios and their organic supermarkets. One example comes from Thai tourism, which has disseminated tourism brochures throughout many Thai restaurants in the U.S.

Destinations and operators may consider putting more effort into press FAM trips. Reading a story in a magazine or newspaper produces higher engagement than traditional advertising print media. Online ads can be targeted more effectively, however some research (eMarketer.com) suggests that online users are beginning to ignore them, so choose the forum carefully.

#### How Do Adventure Travelers Prepare for Their Trips? (% represent the probabilities of picking each choice<sup>10</sup>)

Research online	23.2%
Consult friends and family	17.8%
Book airfare/hotels online	11.4%
Consult magazines/newspapers	8.7%
Visit a travel agent	8.1%
Purchase a guidebook	7.5%
Book through a travel agent	5.8%
Watch a travel program about the destination	5.6%
Will not prepare before leaving the destination	5.2%
Visit a destinations marketing or tourism promotion organization	4.1%
Book through a tour operator	2.7%

#### Most used Social Networking Sites by Adventure Travelers

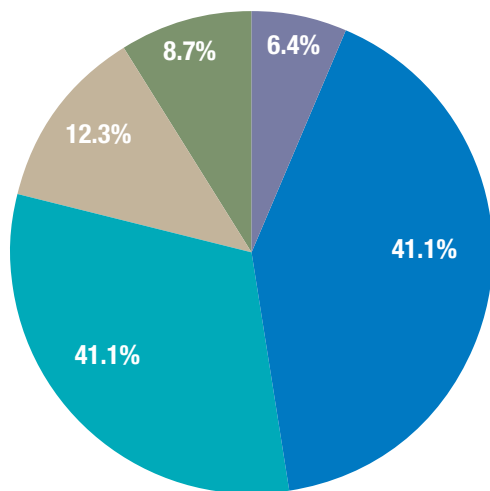
Facebook	34.3%
MySpace	11.9%
Twitter	8.6%
Hi5	7.1%
Orkut	5.9%
Flickr	3.3%



As for seasoned adventure travelers, they are passionate about and dedicated to this mode of travel. They are always searching for new destinations and value online reviews or comments (even by strangers) and the opinions of friends and family. They often use official websites. Destinations and operators should invest in understanding keywords and optimizing their sites for searches in the key engines. Ensuring that a website is findable in all languages that travelers may be searching in is an important consideration.

23.2% of Adventure Travelers indicated they researched their trip online prior to departure. This pie chart below provides a breakdown of how they did that.

### How did you research your trip online?



- I typed the destination or activity into "Google" or another search engine
- I visited the destination's official website
- I read a blog account of someone who visited the destination
- I viewed a friend's photos from the destination on a social networking site
- I visited a meta-search site like Kayak.com or Orbitz.com to search for flights and hotel deals



Photo by Jessica Reilly



## Segmentation

There are many ways to segment the adventure travel market. Recognizing increasing specialization in the tourism industry along with the shared values of adventure travelers, many industry players have moved to a psychographic segmentation approach.

This means organizing adventure travelers by their specialized interests such as kayakers or birdwatchers. From there, specific marketing tactics can be developed with the addition of demographic segmentation. From a demographic perspective, there are two main categories of adventure travelers:

1. The younger generations, GenY (people aged between 18 and 30) and GenX (people aged between 31 and 44). These people have often traveled throughout their youth, studied abroad during college and are adept at navigating the Internet to find good deals and new destinations. This segment can further be broken down into two groups that are of interest to the adventure tourism industry:

- High disposable income, time poor

This group is already in the workforce and has a limited amount of vacation time each year. They will seek to fill as much as possible into their vacation time, often splurging on what they view as once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, such as hiking Mt. Kilimanjaro. This group is more likely to book through a tour operator. They are mostly likely reached through social media — destinations and companies should monitor the online conversations taking place around their brands to capitalize on this trend.

- Smaller budget, extensive time

This group engages with the communities and places they go. Many young people take the opportunity to travel for an extensive period of time after two or three years in the workforce. With low budgets and big dreams, they travel deeply in the communities they visit. Seeking authentic experiences, they are more likely to go trekking or take long train journeys, such as the cross-Siberian railway. Budget and value will be the key selling points for this group, although sustainability/responsibility plays a surprisingly high role in decision making.

2. The “baby boomer” (people aged between 45 and 64) adventure traveler is frequently awakening (or re-awakening) to the adventure travel experience later in life. Many find themselves with extra time and money as their children have moved from the house or they enter retirement with good health and a curiosity to do things they couldn’t during their working years. They have large budgets and value adventures combined with a cultural experience. They also book through tour operators and may take two to three international trips a year. Increasingly, they are bringing grandchildren along. This group is inspired by their reading material, television series (Survivor, Amazing Race) and especially stories from friends and families. Offering something unique and difficult to attain will be key with this group. “Experience” and “authenticity” are key words/concepts that resonate with this group.



## Conclusion

The findings of this study support the notion that adventure travelers represent a significant, growing market. This research indicates that the value of the global adventure market is \$89 billion. Adventure tourism does not appear to be a trend specific to any one geographic area, as the results indicate similar findings in North America, Europe and Latin America, where increasingly, travelers continue to explore deeper into communities and seek to connect with nature. Even in the midst of growth, we found some adventure travelers do not hold valid passports and are not necessarily traveling farther from home to get an adventure experience.

Various trends around adventure tourism are positive: more people intend to take adventure trips and these people intend to spend more than they have on their previous vacation. Adventure travelers are specialty travelers and thus spend more than the average traveler on a trip. Destinations and marketers should position their marketing and branding to attract this growing and lucrative segment. Product development and branding should speak to their desire to have natural, cultural and active experiences, and to engage more deeply with local communities.

We encourage marketers to also focus on the “Other Travel” market, which is moving towards more adventurous travel. They may return to the same countries that they have previously visited on a less adventurous vacation, but this time try more adventurous activities (safaris, visiting cultural sites). This market offers tour operators the opportunity to re-position themselves to the market. Engage in niche marketing or develop cross-marketing between tour operators, specifically targeting past clients. This also speaks to the opportunity for adventure operators to partner with mass tourism outlets such as resorts, hotels, cruise lines to offer smaller day trips to entice travelers with something interesting and outside the bubble. Key characteristics for this group will be shorter trips, perception of safety, and unusual opportunities.

Interestingly, over the course of their past three trips, respondents have participated in the same type of activities on their vacations. They indicate that they intend and desire to become more adventurous, but it remains to be seen if they will in fact select a more adventurous option when it comes time to planning their next vacation. This presents an opportunity to marketers to capitalize on these travel aspirations.

This study illustrates that the adventure market is sizable, at 26% of the traveling population. In addition to revealing the actual size of this market, this study calls into question the often, generally accepted industry profile of the adventure traveler. A common assertion from within the adventure industry is that the typical adventure traveler today is likely to be over 50, with a secure income and desire to explore and experience new places. Based on this research and others, however, we find the average adventure traveler age might be closer to 40, and although these people engage in adventure activities, they might not be paying tour operators and guides for their experiences, and hence not recognized, or served as an important market segment by the industry.

Adventure travel operators and destinations may use this information to consider domestic and regional market potential. During the current economic situation, the cost of an international flight may make travel cost prohibitive to some people, thus domestic or regional, closer to home adventure travel may provide an attractive alternative for many and also provide as an introduction to an experience they may want to try abroad in the future.

Destinations may wish to also consider how the adventure traveler is defined. People who engage in a broad variety of activities consider themselves to be adventure travelers even if they are not participating in adventure activities each day of their trip. For many countries, the size of this market is probably more significant than currently estimated.

Overall, this piece of research provides further insight into the size and shape of the adventure travel industry. The findings support the notion that the adventure travel market constitutes an important, contributive, growing niche within the economic powerhouse that is travel and tourism.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> UNWTO. "UNWTO Barometer Vol. 7 No. 1 January 2009." Quarterly Report, UNWTO, Madrid, 2009, 3.
- <sup>2</sup> Priest, S. *Adventure Programming*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing, 1999.
- <sup>3</sup> Sung, H.H. (2000). *An Analysis of the Adventure Travel Market: From Conceptual Development to Market Segmentation*. (Doctoral dissertation) Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN. Schneider, P., Vogt, C., Smith, S. "Segmenting the Adventure Travel Market by Activities: An extension of Sung, Morrison and O'Leary." *Travel and Tourism Research Association*, 2006.
- <sup>4</sup> "Other" tourism, refers to all other types of tourism that are not included in the definition of either soft or hard adventure.
- <sup>5</sup> With a sampling error of 3.3%.
- <sup>6</sup> Schneider, P. (2010). *Exploring the Motivation and Personality Traits of Adventure Travelers: A Hierarchical Model Approach*. (Doctoral dissertation) Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI.
- <sup>7</sup> The Adventure Travel Development Index is an index that ranks countries world based on their adventure tourism competitiveness. [www.adventureindex.travel](http://www.adventureindex.travel)
- <sup>8</sup> Schneider, P. (2010). *Exploring the Motivation and Personality Traits of Adventure Travelers: A Hierarchical Model Approach*. (Doctoral dissertation) Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI.
- <sup>9</sup> There is a possibility of slight data inflation due to respondent bias caused by the introduction of the survey which included "We will use the results of this survey to inform a study on Adventure Travel."
- <sup>10</sup> Respondents could select more than one option, however the responses were normalized to get 100%. Therefore, each percentage should be interpreted as the probability of picking one choice





