**Gray days**

Today’s mature market is looking for more than a coach holiday, says Jennifer Thomas

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**DEFINING WHAT MAKES** a mature traveler is more gray than black, and more adults enter this changing age category. While working out exactly who belongs to this category can be difficult, predicting where they travel is even more challenging. If you think you know what a typical senior vacation comprises, think again.

A few defining characteristics do exist, however, when an attempt is made to paint a picture of this traveling sector. The mature traveler is typically defined as 55 or older, although ASTA’s Mature Adult Travel Specialist course states a mature adult is aged 50-plus. Compared to other age groups they take longer trips, spend more per trip, gamble more, take more day trips, represent a majority of luxury travelers, like to cruise and are the most affluent age group.

As with other generations, dining, shopping, sightseeing and entertainment are preferred activities among mature travelers. One travel preference distinction, according to the 2006 Travel Industry Association (TIA) Across the Generations report, is that the senior demographic is more likely to include group tour (5% compared to 2% of baby boomers and 3% of Generation X/Y trips). Other activities that resonate with the older market include golf, historic sites, festivals/concerts/plays/dances. Highlights including local food and music interest today’s mature travelers and they want more variety in their vacations, says Cheryl Hudak, CTC, ASTA president and CEO.

The 50-plus population is an attractive market for the US travel industry as mature travelers undertake nearly one third of all trips taken. This exploratory segment will travel at least three times annually, more than any other age group, according to AARP’s *Modern Maturity* magazine.

Seniors like to travel and do it often, reports SuddenlySenior.com. “They represent 80% of all luxury travel purchased in the US, making up 65% of all cruise passengers, and typically spend 74% more on vacations than the 18- to 49-year-old population segment,” the company states.

**Active pursuits**

The mature market has also become increasingly interested in adventure tourism. Older people can be found “riding elephants in India, horseback riding in Costa Rica and bungee-jumping in New Zealand,” according to a recent Randall Travel marketing report.

Mature travelers often want action and encounters requiring mental effort and physical preparedness, knowing they can go back home for a rest when the adventure is over,” explains Alison Gardner, author of *Travel Unlimited: Uncommon Adventures for the Mature Traveler*.

The most obvious change in travel choices by senior citizens appears to be their pursuit of an active lifestyle, which affects their selected vacations to maintain this way of life, explains SeniorJournal.com’s publisher Tucker Sutherland.

Hiking and fishing are two activities being pursued more frequently by senior travelers, Sutherland adds. “This is very different from the choices of my parents, who wanted a quiet place where they could just relax,” he recalls.

ASTA’s Mature Adult Travel Specialist course outlines the group’s increasing activity level and cautions travel agents about stereotyping today’s mature traveler.

“As a travel agent, the one mistake you can make is assuming this market are not active travelers,” advises Margie Jordan, ASAP Specialist and CEO.

“Don’t be afraid to suggest some active adventures like snorkeling, deep sea fishing or even parasailing,” says Jennifer Thomas, CTC, ASTA president and CEO.

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**Dispersed families**

No longer is a visit to the grandparents just a quick call after church on Sunday. Today’s mature traveler is experiencing a family displacement, across the US or even across continents, more than any other generation.

Seniors control most of the discretionary income in western society and spending on travel is a high priority,” Alison Gardner, author of *Modern Maturity*.

Six million report vacationing with their grandchildren monthly.

“The senior traveler is increasingly taking more family vacations that include their grandchildren,” Hudak says. “These travelers are looking for something different in a vacation, but the vacation also has to be kid-friendly at the same time.”

Grandparents traveling with grandchildren is now known as ‘grandtravel’. A recent Today Show segment reports that a University of Florida study found the phenomenon of grandtravel has increased 60% since 1996 and now accounts for at least one fifth of all trips taken with children. Meanwhile, a 2006 Virawich, Pepperdine, Brown & Russell/Yankelovich study found that 30% of grandparents had traveled with their grandchildren in the last 12 months.

“The last couple of cruises that I have booked a cruise and requested two suites,” says Hudak. “These travelers are looking for something different in a vacation, but the vacation also has to be kid-friendly at the same time.”

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Florida and Las Vegas are the two most popular destinations for Southwest Airlines’ senior flyer, according to the airline’s spokesman Chris Mainz.

Late boomers (ages 52 to 61) represent 6% of the airline’s vacation passengers, according to a 2002 Travel Industry Association (TIA) survey.

Holland America debuts a 64-day Polynesian Explorer cruise visiting ports in Russia, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Australia, New Caledonia, Fiji, Samoa, Kiribati and Hawaii.

As Dubai continues its awe-inspiring climb as one of the world’s hottest travel destinations, Crystal Cruises is introducing a 14-day Itinerary from the Middle East destination to Rome.

Known for its adult educational journeys, Elderhostel pairs up grandparents with grandchildren on unique domestic and international itineraries, including an interactive Cowboy and Indian experience in Cody, Wyoming, and a program visiting the Sedona’s red rocks and the Grand Canyon.

Generations Touring is another company that specializes in grandtravel. Bonding experiences between generations including meeting sportswriters on the baseball tour; enjoying private concerts on the music tour; meeting the cast of *Grey’s Anatomy* on a ski trip to Tahoe National Forest.

Designing grandtravel vacations is more than just putting together activities that will appeal to both age ranges. According to Grandtravel, a luxury travel service catering to inter-generational relationships, its program was created by teachers, psychologists and luxury counselors. Grandtravel’s website
We know when grandparents and grandchildren travel together, they are drawn closer and relate to each other in remarkable new ways. Grandtravel expands the world of grandparent/grandchild relationships.

Trips that transform

One vacation tagline being driven by the mature traveler is ‘not leaving home without it’ — without your mind, that is. This influential group is packing both their body and mind when exploring destinations.

According to the Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA), with the graying of the baby boomer generation, more travelers are seeking intellectual fulfillment and cruise lines are responding with enlightening on-board enrichment programs.

“Guests who choose to learn on a cruise are seeking an entertaining educational experience,” says Terry Dale, CLIA president and CEO. “Guests aboard CLIA member line ships give consistently high scores to the cruise lines’ innovative enrichment programs.”

One such example can be seen on the voyages of Cunard’s Queen Mary 2. Bill Thomas, president, Tropical Latitudes Travel, says that onboard this year’s July 4 voyage, the guest lecturer packed the theater with her discussion of sex after 50. “Dr Ruth, at the age of 79, not only still has her game on in terms of her expertise, but her participation in cruise activities demonstrates that age is only a number,” Thomas says.

The QM2 offered more than intellectually stimulating lectures. During the short voyage, there were two equally interesting lectures on the history of the Bahamas and on buccaneers and pirates. “This programing demonstrates Cunard’s grasp of the topics that interest guests across generations,” Thomas adds.

Other travel organizations are beginning to recognize this market’s quest for learning. Most recently, Elderhostel developed a new kind of learning-travel adventure to serve the new generation of independent, active and culturally inquisitive travelers.

“Road Scholars will be able to go behind the scenes at museums and special collections, archeological sites, private estate gardens and other places that individual travelers wouldn’t know about,” says James Moses, president and CEO, Elderhostel.

As outlined in the Road Scholar program description, travelers can visit Cambodia to meet Buddhist monks in their ancient monastery and ask questions about monastic life and history. Additionally, a program in Alaska travels into the wildlife habitat at Denali National Park, where large tour buses are not permitted.

A sampling of Elderhostel’s most popular international travel destinations includes Spain, New Zealand, Germany, Morocco and Costa Rica and more. From New York to California, there is something for everyone to quench the American thirst for history.

These destinations are as varied as the mature travelers’ preferences and the variety of itineraries being created for this market only goes to show travelers are increasingly looking for unique experiences to remember and savor.