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Articles

# Marketing the Leisure Experience to Baby Boomers and Older Tourists

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based on their perceived feelings about the tourism experience. In seeking to bring greater attention to this issue, this article seeks to first detail the changing leisure interests of today's older tourists before concluding with a discussion of key marketing considerations for this growing cohort group.

KEYWORDS:

- Baby boomers
- cohorts
- leisure experiences

## INTRODUCTION

It has become generally accepted that most people travel for the leisure experiences that they actively pursue. [Cooper, Fletcher, Gilbert, and Wanhill \(1998\)](#), stated that “most tourism throughout the world is a leisure activity” (p. 11). [Leiper \(1990\)](#), argued that tourism was a valued category of leisure, and that similar benefits such as relaxation can be derived from both the leisure/and or the tourist experience. The types and variety of leisure experiences that are engaged in by people while on holiday have also been of interest to several researchers ([Wei & Millman, 2002](#)). This is because tourists away from home. [L](#) a more liberated behaviour at home. To facilitate social interaction and contribute to satisfaction. Older people in 1946 and 1964 experience’ in their two billion people w of five) of the world ic shift will be seen on effects is that olde holiday spending ample, in 1999 also d over. This



figure is projected to be greater than 2 billion trips annually ([World Tourism Organisation, 2001](#)).

There is little doubt that baby boomers are increasingly placing travel as a higher priority in their retirement years, mainly because they are feeling healthier, wealthier, better educated, more independent, have an abundance of leisure time and a lessening of social and family obligations than younger people ([Martin & Preston, 1994](#)). Because many have larger amounts of time for leisure and are relatively free of family obligations, they generally prefer to take trips for longer periods of time, often travel off season and have a greater concern for personal safety when travelling compared to younger age groups ([Zimmer, Brayley, & Searle, 1995](#)). Because of the greater heterogeneity and diversity of the older population, they often require a greater variety of choices in their travel experiences than previous generations of cohort groups. These can range from soft adventure travel that they want to organize themselves, to booking travel on the Internet, or to group package tours where everything is done for them by the travel agent and they stay in 5-star hotels.

In view of the importance of the aging babyboomers to tourism, this article aims:

1. To gain an understanding of the demographic characteristics of baby boomers and to investigate their changing needs for more challenging tourism and leisure experiences

2. To recognize the changing needs of baby boomers for more challenging tourism and leisure experiences, and to investigate the marketing and demographic variables that influence these needs

3. To suggest ways in which the tourism industry can better meet the needs of baby boomers for more challenging tourism and leisure experiences



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Although the relationship between tourism and the environment has been a topic of research for many years, it was not until the 1970s that it became a major area of research. In fact it was not until the 1980s that the term 'sustainable tourism' was coined.

there was a growing realization that tourism and travel research was encapsulated within most of the current definitions of leisure, and that tourism and travel have similar qualities. These included both being undertaken in people's free time, being regarded as pleasurable, intrinsically motivating and a rewarding experience that has formed the basis of the subjective definition of leisure ([Neulinger, 1974](#)).

The field of leisure studies research has also undergone major changes in recent years. In particular, the term leisure 'experience' is now being more commonly used by leisure researchers and this has replaced the use of terms such as 'activities' or 'patterns' ([Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1987](#); [Tinsley & Tinsley, 1986](#); [Lee, Datillo, & Howard, 1994](#)). More recently, researchers have begun to refer to the leisure experience as multi-dimensional in nature and characterized by the variety of experiences that occur. For example, [Lee et al. \(1994\)](#) referred to the transitory, dynamic and complex nature of leisure experiences. To most people, leisure is seen as a mixture of pleasurable (and sometimes unpleasurable) experiences that are generally characterised by feelings of fun, enjoyment and relaxation.

Contemporary leisure researchers such as Witt, Ellis, Mannell and Kleiber are now applying social psychological theory to the study of leisure. Such terms as perceived freedom, internal locus of control, optimal arousal, intrinsic motivation, and flow have been found to be useful concepts that when operationalized, have helped researchers to better understand leisure. [Witt \(1977\)](#) first coined the term 'leisure' to describe the effortless action that is characteristic of leisure. He referred to it as:

...a state of being in which a person is in contact with his or her self and the world around him or her in the present and future.

As a result, leisure researchers have become more concerned with people's leisure activities and rates or quality of leisure activities throughout all life.



satisfaction, rather than the actual type of leisure or tourist activity that a person participates in ([Smith & Godbey, 1991](#); [Grant, 2007](#)).

We now live in a world where tourism and leisure experiences are now being increasingly catered for by the commercial sector. The modern tourism and leisure industry is now all about providing experiences at a profit for the pleasure of others. [Grant \(2007\)](#) stated that, "We want to escape, socialize, fantasize, be creative, learn new skills, engage in some form of physical activity or interact with the environment" (p. 30). It is now the experience and not the event or activity that has become important for consumers. As [Pine and Gilmore \(1999\)](#) stated, people want to, 'buy an experience' and to spend time enjoying a series of memorable events that engage them in a memorable way. This change in mindset also has meant that tourist agencies have had to rethink about how they view their customers, and how they are going to service their changing needs and desires. That is, there has been a shift from a product centric mindset to a customer centred one in which:

- Customers are no longer targets; they are humans to be served.
- Marketing is no longer a game of persuasion; it is a service.
- Customers are no longer data sets; they are human beings.

- The focus is on the customer's experience, not the product. ([Grant, 2007b](#))

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On a global scale, the impact of aging is becoming increasingly significant. On a global scale, the impact of aging is becoming increasingly significant. that older people are becoming a larger proportion of the population ([Beldner, 1992](#)). M

America, the rate of aging is increasing. In the United States, the rate of aging is increasing. turning 50 at the rate of one day and one night. In the United States, the rate of aging is increasing. g, baby boomers are becoming a larger proportion of the population ([Imartin, 2007a](#)). M

representative of the increasing aging population. In the United States, the rate of aging is increasing. Second, the rate of aging is increasing. In the United States, the rate of aging is increasing. from around 10% in 1980 to 20% in 2000.



Northern Europe, the number of older adults aged 65 years and older is increasing and is expected to grow from 11.1% in the 1960's to around 16.2% in 2010 ([International Labour Organisation, 1997](#)). Europe's share of global tourism dollars has diminished over the years, which some sectors of the tourism industry have attributed to ignorance and a lack of information about the size and growth potential of the senior market. As a result, the promotional strategies that have been used to attract the senior market have lagged well behind the US ([Viant, 1993](#)). Germany and the United Kingdom are the largest senior domestic and international markets, while seniors in Scandinavia and Spain show the greatest propensity to travel.

On a global scale, the world is becoming increasingly aware of the significant impact that older adults will have on the tourism industry in the decades ahead ([Goeldner, 1992](#)). This trend is beginning to become noticed in the statistics that have been collected on travel in the Asia Pacific Region. In 2006, [Ianniello \(2006\)](#) from Roy Morgan Research reported that 40% of Australians and New Zealanders who were taking an overseas holiday in the Pacific Asia Region were baby boomers. In 2005, 664,000 Australian Baby Boomers and 302,000 New Zealand Baby Boomers took a holiday in the Pacific Asia region, spending \$AUD 4.1 billion and \$AUD 1.2 billion respectively (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 Overseas holidays taken in the last 12 months by Australians in the Pacific Asia region



[Green \(2006\)](#), has argued that those born particularly between 1946 and 1955 are poised to shatter traditional assumptions about the sixth and seventh decades of life. For example, he argued they will have little tolerance for stereotypes or ageism. Importantly, as consumers they will have an increased expectation of products and services that instil value beyond mere utility. That is to say they will seek out products and services that speak to deeper values, and they will reward those that crack the marketing code ([Green, 2006](#)). Such a shift in mindset will thus have an immediate and notable impact on the type of holidays undertaken and the destinations that are chosen by older adults. For example, there is a likelihood that in the future, the volume of beach holidays will fall significantly, while at the same time it is likely that educational or cultural experiences will increase as older people show a marked preference to take holidays where they will learn something new, and/or embark on different historical and cultural experiences (World Tourism Organization, 2001).

It has been generally accepted that not all older people want to do the same sorts of things, and they need to be seen as a heterogeneous group of people with different motivations, destination preferences, preferred modes of travel and personal values ([Cleaver, Muller, Ruys, & Wei, 1999](#)). Some prefer to travel with their family in their own cars and caravans. Others are more adventurous travellers who travel with a companion or friends and explore new and different locations, while others prefer to totally escape to a remote location for an extended period.

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commitment has helped them to keep busy, make new friends and enhance their older years.

Specifically in regard to the travel experience, [Wei and Millman \(2002\)](#) were interested in ascertaining whether a tourist's psychological well-being was positively affected by the variety of leisure activities that they engaged in while on a vacation trip. Data was collected from a sample of over 300 senior travellers (of which 60.5% were over 70 years of age) who were travelling on several 7-day North American escorted tour itineraries. The most popular activities that travellers participated in while on tour were found to be city sightseeing (89.3%), visiting historical places (88.1%), restaurant dining (85.7%), and shopping (77.4%). Less popular activities are hunting and fishing (1.2%), water sports and sunbathing (1.2%), and camping and hiking (3.6%).

The researchers found that a positive and significant relationship existed between senior traveller's participation in leisure activities, their overall satisfaction with the travel experience ( $p = .236$ , significance =  $> .031$ ), and their level of psychological well-being ( $p = .358$ , significance =  $> .01$ ). As a result of their findings, [Wei and Milman \(2002\)](#) concluded that marketing campaigns needed to focus more on the types and range of leisure activities that are provided at different tourist destinations. This would help to ensure that the senior tourist's satisfaction and psychological wellbeing would be at a high level throughout their vacation.

Shopping is considered by many senior tourists as a primary reason for travelling, and is often developed as a key feature of the vacation while travelling in North America ([Littrell et al., 2004](#)). Senior tourists are often found to have different shopping preferences to younger tourists, and a bar chart illustrating these differences is shown in Figure 1.

[Littrell et al. \(2004\)](#) found that senior tourists generally preferred to be in a relaxed environment, and were generally felt to be more concerned with their health and safety priorities. They also found that senior tourists were more likely to be interested in shopping as a primary reason for travelling, and as a result, the shopping experience was often a key feature of the vacation.





implemented were to stress the importance of challenging oneself and achieving sensory stimulation, and this concept needed to reflect a self-image of usefulness. The second group were the 'older-at-heart' seniors were more concerned about security and danger, travel arrangements falling through, and/or becoming ill while on vacation. A greater proportion of females were in this group, and they were more likely to prefer travelling with either a group of friends, or with family members.

One of the new emerging markets is adventure tourism that focuses on more challenging, exciting and authentic experiences, and has become a new niche market for baby boomers who may be bored with being a mass tourist and a passive sightseer.

## Adventure Tourism Experiences and Older Adults

A new generation of retirees have emerged that are 'hungry to go off the beaten path' resulting in the adventure travel business now growing to a \$500 million segment and at a rate of 30% per year, and is driven in partly by, "... more and more retirees with time, money, and a yen for the exotic" ([Symonds, 1998](#), p. 102).

Many want to escape the stress and boredom of their everyday routine, to spend their vacation time on pleasure filled trips with a range of exciting and new physically challenging experiences, as well as expressing their need to meet people and build new friendships.

Klamath Falls, Oregon, is a small town with a population of about 10,000. It is a small town with a small group of friends who are interested in adventure travel.

Why are they interested in adventure travel? They choose a particular activity that is largely untapped by the older generation. This is older adults, and they have a concept of adventure travel that is different from the traditional concept of adventure travel.

The literature on adventure travel experiences is limited. (Muller & Cleaver, 2000) at recent retirees



years and older ([Travel Industry Association of America, 1998](#)). Their love for adventure tourism is particularly reflected in the comments by 74 year-old Elaine Carr,

Over the last 10 years, I have slept in a mountain hut while climbing 19,300 ft. Uhuru Peak on Mount Kilimanjaro and pitched a tent in a sandstorm in the Gobi desert. I have been to Mongolia, Madagascar and Peru and I am already planning this year's trips to the Andes and Ethiopia. When I first began travelling after her husband died in 1993, my friends could not understand why I did not choose more relaxing vacations in Hawaii or California. I told them that those were very nice places, but I can visit those places when I get older. ([Bierman, 2005](#), p. 53)

Therefore, one area that is attracting greater attention in the tourism and leisure literature is the need to cater for the very active, able, adventurous traveller. There is a greater demand for the travel experience to become a learning adventure in itself. Lipscombe (1996) stated that travelling is an important aspect of one's life adventure and exemplifies the search for meaning in later life. He suggested that the taste for new adventures might be more intense and addictive as we grow older. Older people are craving new experiences with a substantial adventure component, and are requesting that they be part of the decision-making process, and these, "... involve physical challenge, if not actual danger, travel that involves an inner journey,

intellectual stimulation" (Lipscombe, 1994, in

[Muller and](#) adventure activities usually conduct studies that supply the an recovery the World



enjoyed the trip very much. I thought many times during the trip that travelling with my contemporaries increased my enjoyment. The vistas were the same but the pace was more leisurely. My group of “elderlies” outwalked many younger people, and good spirits and fitness carried us further on the trail than some other groups ventured. ([Harnik, 1998](#), p. 42)

Many tourism providers have scaled back the physical demands of their trips for older people, such as reducing the number of miles travelled per day, lighter backpacks, optional rowing on a white water trip, and providing a choice of vans or tents. Generally, tour companies warn clients that adventure travel can be taxing and even risky at times, and they need to prepare for strenuous hiking and rustic conditions on five-day backpacking trips to Uganda for example. As a rule, many of these trips offer training beforehand especially for hiking and biking, as decent medical care may be many miles away. Some firms require older tourists to fill out a medical questionnaire before the trip, and may even request a physical examination if there are potential health problems ([Silver, 1994](#)). Therefore, travel companies need to be more diligent and mindful about the physical capacity and health of their older clients before sending them off to rugged destinations. They also should need to heed older people's preferences for slower paced tours, choosing their own food menus, and avoiding too many early morning departures ([Massow, 2000](#)).

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such words as enjoyment, fun, excitement, optimal arousal, sensation seeking, flow and intrinsic motivation need to be better emphasised by marketers to describe the leisure experience that is associated with adventure tourism. In other words, the emphasis should be on the actual feelings and emotions that people experience while participating in tourism.

Based on an examination of the current research literature, future marketing campaigns should place greater emphasis on the authentic statements used by older people that enable them to describe their “real” experience – such as a sense of adventure, escapism and the challenge of actual involvement. Terms such as enjoyment, flow, optimum arousal, and meeting new friends should be emphasised so as to encourage feelings associated with a sense of freedom, fun and escape from a mundane and sometimes boring lifestyle at work and perhaps an unhappy family life. In addition, marketing strategies that promote images of older people doing soft and hard adventure activities so that they can feel younger and healthier by literally ‘buying back their youth’ should also be encouraged by the media.

### Segmenting the Market

The tourism industry must not consider older adults to be one single distinct group, but rather as a heterogeneous group of people that include many distinct market

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assess their subjective age as different from their chronological age. That is, seniors typically feel a decade younger (average of 10.2 years) than what their actual age is, and as a result often prefer to spend their holiday activities with younger people ([Cleaver & Muller, 2002](#)). This age difference gap seems to become larger as a person ages, for example, travellers from the United States who were aged 80 years and older still felt that they had a subjective age of around 65 years ([Smith & Jenner, 1997](#)).

## Segmentation based on income

There is a growing market of wealthy seniors that are able to afford a higher quality of travel. [Penalta and Uysal \(1992\)](#) noted that the financial health of a large number of older people made them with an excellent market for luxury goods and services. As a result, resorts and hotels are specifically designing programs and activities that target older people. Group travel and package tours were also popular with older travellers, as well as the provision for quality travel, and travel related products and services. Package tours are very popular because many middle and upper class people are often too busy to spend time organising their trip plans themselves, and as a result prefer to leave this task in the hands of professionals such as travel agents.

Special interest tourism has become more popular in recent years and trips are very expensive because of the tour companies desire to cater for the older adult's need to travel to exotic locations. This is because older adults are more likely to have the financial resources to afford safaris, white water rafting, and other specialized activities. The nature of older adults' travel is often more remote and less crowded ([Sorenson, 1993](#)). However, there is a general trend towards more specialized and expensive travel for older adults (Jensen, 1993).



## Segmentation based on gender

Women are more likely to be educated and have a higher income than men, and as a result, they are more likely to travel. This type of travel is often more expensive and less crowded, and it is more likely to be organized by travel agents.

cultural and heritage activities, and festivals. Many single, widowed or divorced older women prefer to join a group package tour because it provides them with greater opportunities for social interaction as well as increased safety and protection from terrorism. Men on the other hand prefer activities that are outdoors and emphasise their health and fitness through such sporting activities as golfing, fishing and hiking.

[Statts and Pierfelice \(2003\)](#) found strong support for the belief that travel is a frequently desired and continuing activity for groups of long-term retirees, most of whom were women. [Lehto, O'Leary and Lee \(2001\)](#) also found that females were more sensitive to safety issues than men, and requested greater opportunities to socialise and interact with other people. Most women prefer shorter trips possibly because they do not want to be away from their family and pets for longer periods of time.

### Segmentation based on education

When baby boomers reach their later years, they will have attained significantly higher levels of formal education than their predecessors. In 1990, about 46% of Americans aged 65 and over had completed less than four years of high school, 33% had received a high school diploma and 13% had completed 4 years or more of college (United States Department of Commerce, 1993). In contrast to this, presently, well over half of all baby boomers have earned at least a high school diploma, and approximately 1:4

will have completed a college degree. This is a significant change from previous generations. For example, in 1990, only 13% of baby boomers had completed a college degree, compared with 27.3% of baby boomers in 2000. This increase in education levels is a significant factor in the time spent on leisure activities.

The research also found that baby boomers are more likely to engage in leisure activities that require a high level of education and skills. For example, they are more likely to engage in activities such as reading, writing, and using technology. This is a significant change from previous generations, where leisure activities were more likely to be physical or social in nature.

### Segmentation based on health

Health status is another important factor in the segmentation of baby boomers. Health status varies significantly among different cohorts, with the oldest cohorts having a greater proportion of individuals with chronic health conditions. However, the younger cohorts have a greater proportion of individuals who are healthy and active. This is a significant change from previous generations, where health status was more likely to be a limiting factor in leisure activities.

physical activities as walking and gardening, eating more nutritious and low-fat foods as well as still remaining socially active ([Kendig et al., 1996](#)). Because many seniors are now more health-conscious, retirement communities are promoting health and fitness through their emphasis on swimming pools and spas, gymnasiums and walking trails. Swimming and aqua aerobic classes have become popular because of their well known therapeutic benefits, particularly for older people who have arthritis and osteoporosis.

Retirement communities such as Sun City in Arizona, USA has emerged from nothing but desert in 1959, to a large community of 46,000 seniors. The success of Sun City has encouraged DEVCO, the developer to expand their concept to provide residents with the choice of living in eight different retirement communities in Arizona, South Carolina, and California. The emphasis of their advertising campaigns has been to promote active adult communities and is pitched at encouraging older people to enjoy the freedom of a range of leisure activities such as croquet, ceramics, golf, gardening, and swimming that highlights a 'golden' or 'treasured' time of life ([Luken & Vaughn, 2003](#)).

These 'young at heart boomers' prefer to enjoy their holidays with younger people and still want to be involved in active and more adventurous leisure experiences ([Cleaver & Muller, 2002](#)). It has also been found that many older people are becoming younger in outlook, with similar types of leisure behaviour overlapping with younger and older age groups. As a result, leisure activities such as going to the movies, undertaking do-it-yourself projects, and travelling are becoming more popular. It has also been found to be blurred between the young and old.

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While it can be said that the renewed interest in better servicing the needs of baby boomers is in part because tourism agencies have begun to appreciate more fully the sheer size of the market numbers involved, it also has much to do with the recognition of the diverse lifestyle patterns and consumption habits of this cohort where the “one size fits all” mindset just does not cut it. It is a group which is very clearly different across a range of characteristics in comparison to previous generations of older people. The average age of retirement is falling and many people in this “young old” age group are now ‘empty nesters’ whose children have left home. They are generally healthy, more highly educated and financially secure, and as a result, this group wants to increasingly enjoy special interest travel that caters for new and innovative ‘hands on’ experiences. This is especially true for older women and those who are widowed and single who become

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- As a cohort, baby boomers are more resistant to absolute propositions. The implication of this is that tourism agencies need to present information on services and products in a qualified, even differential manner.
- They are more sensitive to metaphorical meanings, nuances and subtleties. The implication of this is that tourism agencies need to take greater heed to the importance of expanding the content of a given message, especially in terms of its metavalues. That is, to emphasise values that transcend the generic value of a service or product and expand its perceived attractiveness.
- They are more sensitive to narrative-styled presentations of information, and less responsive to information presented in an expository style. The implication of this is that tourism agencies should make greater use of story-telling techniques to convey

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At present, the tourist industry is focussing on the young, wealthy and able-bodied tourist, however this is beginning to change as marketers become increasingly aware of the more active and adventurous older, baby boomer market. This type of tourism is poised to become a larger part of the leisure market. The over 50's are more adventurous than their parents, and are driven to discover new destinations and to try new and exciting leisure activities. Tourism operators must quickly adapt their marketing strategies to this emerging market otherwise they will be left behind. As noted by [McDougall \(1998\)](#), those products and services that can best cater to the sophisticated travel tastes of the baby boomer generation and, at the same time, meet the sensitivities of older travellers may well be the winners in the market place in future years.

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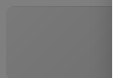
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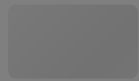
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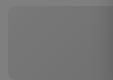


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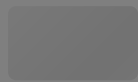
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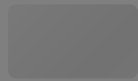
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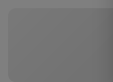
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