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Adventure travel going mainstream - study

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By Karina Ioffe

NEW YORK (Reuters Life!) - Adventure tourism, long considered the milieu of a small group of dare devils, is becoming more mainstream, with tourists more likely to rappel down mountains, cycle or volunteer while on vacation.

These adventurers are young, affluent and spent \$89 billion last year, excluding the cost of airfare and gear, according to a study by researchers at George Washington University's School of Business.

"You have a lot of people who want to roll up their sleeves, get involved in a culture and have a more authentic experience than just laying in the sun," said Dr. Kristin Lamoureux, an author of the study, which was conducted with the Adventure Travel Trade Association, an industry group.

The researchers questioned 850 travelers from North and South America and Europe. Seventy percent of international travel originates in those regions. Countries with the most travelers are the United States, Argentina, Brazil, the United Kingdom, Germany and Spain.

Although overall tourism figures were down by 6 percent in 2009, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the study showed that when people travel, they are more likely to engage in physical activities, providing a new revenue base for tour operators.

Based on their findings and data from the UNWTO, the researchers estimate that 150 million adventure trips will be taken next year.

"There is a perception that the adventure tourism market is a very limited group of people who are seeking high-risk activity, but the reality is that it's a much broader market than we thought ... and they are willing to spend," Lamoureux said.

The typical adventure traveler was 36 years old, spent between \$450 and \$800 per vacation, excluding airfare, and owned a passport, according to the researchers.

The biggest source of news for adventure tourists was their local newspaper and information found through Google and Facebook.

Most adventure travelers did not own cutting edge technology like iPhones, a crucial point, Lamoureux said, in helping tour operators maximize their advertising dollars, especially in times of recession.

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