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## Adventure Travel Takes Off The niche is growing as people seek authentic experiences in new locations.

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Beth Kormanik

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You don't have to be certified in scuba diving or know what a crampon is to be an adventure traveler.

"Adventure travel has come a long way in the last few years," said Shannon Stowell, president of the Adventure Travel Trade Association, speaking at the New York Times Travel Show last week. "Ten years ago, it was, who let the hippies in the building?"

The segment is important for hoteliers because not every adventure traveler wants to spend the night in a tent.



Adventure travel represents an \$89 billion market globally, according to research the ATTA commissioned from George Washington University and Xola Consulting. People take about 150 million adventure trips a year, both with operators and on their own.

The association, which counts among its members hotels and resorts, tour operators, tourism boards, service providers, defines adventure travel as having three components: physical activity, cultural immersion and the outdoors. Travelers can engage in rigorous activities including snorkeling and diving, to less rigorous volunteer tourism to birdwatching.

The study, which surveyed 855 respondents in the three largest outbound markets – Europe, North America and Latin America – found that 26 percent of respondents indicated that they participated in adventure travel activities and 16 percent of all international departures from these three regions were for adventure travel.

"It was surprising to us," Stowell said of the later figure. "We expected the number to be lower, but that's the case."

The research found that "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."

Adventure travelers tend to be a more affluent and educated group, the research showed, and spends a lot on gear and clothing – an important note for hotel shops.

But like other segments of the tourism industry, adventure travel operators felt the sting of the recession. Booking windows shortened and trips were down. But from 2009 to 2010, nearly two-thirds of tour operators said their total gross revenue was up, according to an ATTA survey of 300 tour operators. They also reported to the ATTA that they were hiring more full-time employees.

To attract adventure travelers, hotels should get to know tour operators and travel agents who can steer these guests to your hotel.

The 26-room Minnewaska Lodge in Gardiner, N.Y., has become a destination for adventure travelers. The lodge is located on 17 acres at the base of the Shawangunk Mountains, and sales manager Gunter Spilhaus estimated that about three-quarters of the lodge's guests come to hike and bike.

Spilhaus said Minnewaska Lodge has an "adventure concierge" to help its guests, whether they are first-time adventure travelers or experienced people who are coming to train in the area. The concierge program began as a marketing tool, Spilhaus said, but it has become an important point of contact for guests.

The concierge can go beyond providing hiking and biking trails. Some guests don't have their own gear or don't want to travel with it. The lodge's staff can arrange rentals with local vendors for guests who need a bicycle, cross country skis or local guides.

Chris Doyle, vice president of the Adventure Travel Trade Association, said destinations can reshape the way tourists view them by marketing themselves as adventure tourism destinations. Some operators are getting creative, combining activities such as biking in the morning and wine tasting in the afternoon.

In a survey of more than 100 tourism boards, 85 percent now recognize adventure travel as a standalone sector.

"This industry has come together," Stowell said. "Adventure travel has now entered the minds, the budgets and the lexicon of tourism professionals, whereas years ago that was not necessarily the case."

Glوريا Guevara Manzo, Mexico's secretary of tourism, said in video comments at the travel show that tourists to Mexico have an appetite for adventure travel.

"The travelers now are experienced, they are experts and have information from the web, and when they come to the country they know exactly what to do and where to go, and they're asking for experiences that we didn't offer before."

She emphasized that Mexican President Felipe Calderon supports the effort.

"We're very lucky to have a president that is very committed to adventure travel," she said. "That's a priority for the boss, the president, and it's a priority for everyone."

Adventure travel appeals to travelers' interest in eco-tourism, and they seek companies with an authentic commitment to the practice. Stowell said adventure travel companies obviously are in business to make money, but also to practice sustainable tourism.

It's a key marketing message.

"We're a force for good in the world," he said. "Once you go on these trips, it changes you forever."

## Research

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## [Beth Kormanik](#)

Editor  
Hotel Interactive, Inc.

**Bio:** Beth Kormanik is managing editor of Buyer Interactive and editor of Hotel Interactive. She previously covered politics, government and higher education for the Florida Times-Union in Jacksonville, Fla. While at the Times-Union she won several state and regional awards, including the 2008 Freedom of Information award from the Florida Society of News Editors and the top honor in the 2007 Florida Bar media awards for large newspapers. Beth also was a ... [more](#)