

# New Homes Senior Living

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## A Taste for Adventure

Forget the air-conditioned buses. Some seniors are opting for vacations with an edge of excitement.

By DALE LEATHERMAN, Special Sections Advertising Writer

The tears on Red Barber's cheeks glistened in the light of the campfire. At the same time, he was grinning, and we all grinned back.

"It's been worth living 81½ years to get to the biggest adventure in my life," said the Myrtle Beach, S.C., resident, "and to spend quality time with my daughter and all of my new friends."

It was our last night of camping on the banks of the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon. Behind us were 10 days of clinging to inflatable rafts as we plunged through unnerving rapids; dousing by bone-chilling river water; sleeping on the sand; climbing into side canyons; showering under waterfalls; and dining alfresco around a campfire.

Barber was the senior member of our 26-person band that also included his daughter, Sherisue Barber. About half of us were over 50, including Breck Poulson, one of our guides who has been an integral part of the river scene since the 1970s. Today he directs the rafting program for Wilderness River Adventures (WRA). "We don't get too many 80-year-olds like Red," said Breck, "but about 10% of our guests are over 60. Our guides love sharing the Grand Canyon and are trained to give special care to those who need assistance. All of the hikes into side canyons are guided and the pace is adjusted to keep everyone comfortable. WRA and most of the other river outfitters have trips geared to special population clients [those in wheelchairs or with disabilities]. River trips are enjoyable for everyone."



Photo by DONNELLE OXLEY

While 10 nights in a sleeping bag on a sandy river bank may not be every senior's idea of a vacation, an increasing number of travelers older than 55 are opting for "soft" adventure vacations rather than seeing the world through the window of an air-conditioned bus.



Photo by DONNELLE OXLEY

In contrast to hard-core adventures for the young, with high levels of physical exertion and risk and spartan accommodations and food, soft adventures have less exertion and risk and more amenities. Daily activities such as biking, hiking and horseback riding may be strenuous, but there are ample breaks, sag wagons (providing support and carrying gear), comfortable to luxurious lodgings, and meals ranging from wholesome to gourmet.

Among travel companies catering to mature adults is ElderTreks, a Toronto-based company, founded in 1992, that offers small-group adventures to more than 50 countries. Founded the company in Gary Murtagh, the company's president and founder, said the demand for senior adventure travel began in the early '90s as out-of-the-way places became more accessible, with good transportation and comfortable accommodations available.

Having the option of experiencing "adventure by day and comfort by night" really fueled seniors' interest in the trips, he said.

"Antarctica is big now, as are Peru, the Galapagos, Costa Rica, Transylvania, Southeast Asia and Africa – always Africa," he said.

Sharon Hosler, a retired nurse from Napa, has traveled many times with ElderTreks. "The advantage of traveling with ElderTreks is that some trips would be impossible on your own," said the senior. "The guides are very caring, very sensitive not only to our needs but also to the areas where we go and the people we meet. Groups are always small so we are invited into the homes of indigenous people – rare and wonderful encounters. One time our guide said, 'Leave your cameras in the vehicle. Just go in and meet the people and get to know them.'"

"Adventure is important to me, but it's not for everyone," she added. "In Borneo we left our big suitcases in the city and traveled with small bags up a jungle river for a two-night stay in a remote village. We saw a few shrunken heads from the headhunting days and were treated to demonstrations of blowgun use and trapping game."

### **'You call this fun?'**

"We stayed in a longhouse [that was] the same style as the villagers live in. [The homes] open into a central room with doors leading off to individual family quarters [housing] about 70 to 80 people. Ours had a concrete slab running around the perimeter with pads for our sleeping bags and mosquito netting ¼. In the darkness we heard one man say to his wife, 'And you call this fun?' We all cracked up."

"In contrast, on our West Africa adventure we had a man with Parkinson's disease traveling with his wife, trying to do as much as he could before the disease incapacitated him. He climbed steep hills and slept on the ground like the rest of us and never complained. We all admired him so much."

Anne Shalauta, 66, of Laguna Niguel, travels with Elderhostel, the world's largest education and travel organization for adults 55 and older. The company offers 10,000 yearly programs in about 100 countries. Shalauta's recent adventures included snorkeling in the caves of the Yucatan Peninsula, rafting in Costa Rica and swimming with sharks off Belize.

"My husband and I did a lot of things with our children when they were growing up, but as I get older I find I'm braver," she said. "I figure I have about five more years for adventure and if I get hurt now no one is depending on me to take care of them or go to work the next day. My children think it's great. My friends say I'm nuts, but I tell them, 'Get off the couch or push away from the bridge table and try it. See how much fun it is.'"

"Older adults are more active than ever before," said Despina Gakopoulis, a spokesperson for Elderhostel. "We have seen an increase in interest in our active outdoor programs, which include biking, birding, hiking, camping, fishing, kayaking and rafting. Consequently, we increased our offerings to roughly 700 active programs with 1,400 departure dates this year."

Hope and Rick Jacobs, both 57 and founders of the Old People's Riding Club based in Lothian, Md., recently went with other club members on a trip to Spain with Cross Country International. CCI is primarily an equestrian travel company that branched into walking vacations due to consumer demand.

"Riding Andalusian horses along the Mediterranean was a real treat – but also hysterical," said Hope Jacobs. "I was prepared for nude bathers, but not up close! When an elderly gentleman, stark naked, came up to pat my horse, I was nonplused. But I think the horses enjoyed the beach gallops as much as we did."

While CCI's offerings are for all ages, owner Karen Lancaster is attuned to the senior market.

### **Age and sex immaterial**

"Riding is a sport you can do 'til you drop," Lancaster said. "We have a lot of women 75 and older going on trips with their 50-something daughters and grandchildren. Our senior numbers are increasing, partly because many people are beginning to ride at 60. In riding, age and sex are immaterial."

Like CCI, Butterfield & Robinson (B&R) offers trips for all ages. Its specialty is luxury biking and hiking excursions in Europe.

"The average age of our clients is 50, but we have always had a good number of seniors on our trips," said Cari Gray, a B&R spokesperson. "Mature travelers have the income, the time and the appreciation for places and activities off the beaten track such as Peru, Patagonia, Russia, Eastern Europe, South Africa and New Zealand. We focus on the individual's comfort, with soft adventure, a support van, [a two-night stay] in each hotel and a flexible schedule."

### **Dive into adventure**

The Aggressor Fleet, which has 12-cabin yachts that sail to such exotic places as Palau, Truk, Coco Island and several Caribbean locations, has attracted seniors for its scuba diving excursions.

"Trips are a lot more pampered than they used to be," said spokesman Matthew Armand. "Our clients [have grown children], have the income and the time for scuba adventures. Whale snorkeling trips in the Turks & Caicos have many repeat 60-year-olds."

On a recent Aggressor trip to swim with humpbacks in a remote preserve, I found myself noticing the proliferation of gray hair among my comrades. Most of them, like me, were pushing 60 but as enthusiastic and energetic as teenagers about interacting with the gentle giants of the sea. Unlike teenagers, none of them uttered the words "whatever" or "boring" during seven days at sea.

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