2005 Travel & Adventure Report

A Snapshot of Boomers’ Travel & Adventure Experiences

Data Collected by Knowledge Networks.
Report Written by Curt Davies.
AARP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization that helps people 50+ have independence, choice and control in ways that are beneficial and affordable to them and society as a whole. We produce *AARP The Magazine*, published bimonthly; *AARP Bulletin*, our monthly newspaper; *AARP Segunda Juventud*, our bimonthly magazine in Spanish and English; *NRTA Live & Learn*, our quarterly newsletter for 50+ educators; and our website, www.aarp.org. AARP Foundation is our affiliated charity that provides security, protection, and empowerment to older persons in need with support from thousands of volunteers, donors, and sponsors. We have staffed offices in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

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Executive Summary

In Mid-August of 2005 AARP conducted a study to better understand where boomers are currently traveling, what are their most popular destinations and what they are doing when they arrive. AARP also wanted to know how adventurous this generation considers themselves and their traveling experiences.

The data for this study were collected by Knowledge Networks a national survey research company. The data collected comes from a national sample of adults ages 41 to 59. The survey was fielded between August 24th and August 29th, 2005 using the Knowledge Networks web-enabled panel, which provides a representative sample of U.S. households. In total, 1,594 respondents completed the AARP survey for this study.

Key Findings

• The leading method boomers used to book leisure air travel over the past 12 months was through an online full service travel website (38%). To make hotel reservations, boomers were more likely to speak directly with a travel provider on the telephone or in-person (29%) than other methods. This finding was also true for boomers who reserved a rental car for their leisure travel (28%) or RV (34%). Yet, boomers who made plans to travel on a cruise ship contacted a travel agency via telephone or in-person (29%).

• Important factors boomers consider for planning their leisure travel include a beautiful, scenic destination that promotes relaxation has good weather, and presents no pressure of schedules to meet.

• Findings from the current study show that compared to 20 years ago when boomers were ages 21-39, a greater percentage of boomers today, ages 41-59, have a passport (10% in 1985 vs. 28% in 2005).

• Twenty years ago, less than 5% of boomers traveled to Europe (4%), Mexico, Central America or South America (4%) or the Caribbean (4%). Today, nearly double the percentage of boomers have traveled to these international destinations; 14% traveled to Mexico, Central America or South America; 10% traveled to the Caribbean; and 7% traveled to Europe.

• A majority of boomers consider themselves adventurous (55%) and nearly 8 in 10 boomers (77%) consider their own travel experiences more adventurous than their parents.

• The top five U.S. states, cities or areas boomers mentioned regarding their adventure travel, in order, were Las Vegas, Florida, New York, Hawaii, and Colorado.

• The top five locations boomers would like to visit on their dream trip are located on the following continents or territories, in order, the United States, Europe, the Caribbean, Australia/New Zealand, and Africa.
INTRODUCTION

Last year, in 2004, baby boomers spent approximately $157 billion dollars on travel\(^1\). The average boomer spent $1,155 on leisure travel in 2004. Leisure travel alone among boomers increased by 25% since 2003. As more and more boomers reach their peak earning years we can certainly expect this figure to increase substantially. But, where are boomers currently traveling? What are their most popular destinations and what are they doing when they arrive?

In Mid-August of 2005 AARP conducted a study to answer these questions. AARP also wanted to know how adventurous this generation considers themselves and their traveling experiences. A national sample of 1,594 baby boomers age 41-59 were surveyed between August 24th and August 29th, 2005.

Currently, there are 78 millions baby boomers in the U.S. Born between 1946 and 1964 this generation was the first to experience mass-market travel for most of their lives. Boomers became familiar with air travel at an earlier age than their parents. As a result, they've had the opportunity to visit far off destinations at an earlier age than previous generations. Deregulation, the break-up of airline monopolies and an influx of low cost air-carriers only served to increase boomers' opportunities for travel and adventure.

Boomers see themselves as younger than their age might imply and a majority consider themselves adventurous. They certainly consider themselves more adventurous than their parents. Findings from the current study suggest that a fair percentage of boomers have traveled to exciting and exotic destinations. Many have participated in adventurous activities not only while on adventure travel but also as a part of their leisure activities.

This report presents general travel-planning information used by boomers. The report highlights the methods boomers use to make reservations for various modes of travel and travel accommodations. It also highlights the leading booking methods used by boomers for specific travel needs. A list of the top 10 things boomers consider when making travel plans is also provided.

Boomers reported participating in a wide range of leisure activities. They also reported doing many of these same activities while on their most adventurous travel. A section of the report compares the activities boomers engage in at their leisure and while on adventure travel.

Other comparisons include a look at where and how boomers traveled 20 years ago when they were ages 21-39 compared to today when boomers are ages 41-59. The last segment of the report offers a brief look at where boomers would travel for their dream trip. Findings suggest that while boomers have traveled to some wonderful locations, it's clear they still have travel dreams to fulfill.

\(^1\)See USA Today, Travel World Tries Catering to Gen X Splurgers, 8/30/2005.
This survey began by asking boomers some general background questions about their recent travel experiences to gain a better understanding of how this group of self-proclaimed adventurers spent their leisure time.

Most boomers are not passing up the opportunity to vacation. Nearly three-quarters (72%) have taken at least one leisure trip in the U.S. over the past 12 months. While it is no surprise that more boomers are making these trips by car/RV (59%) and airplane (31%) it is surprising that nearly as many boomers made leisure trips by cruise ship (4%) as did by bus or train (6%).

Boomers spend a significant amount of money on leisure travel. Although approximately one-quarter (26%) spent less than $500 on their leisure trip, 47% spent between $500 and $3,000 (see Figure 1). Another 26% of boomers spent between $3,000 and $10,000 and 3% spent $10,000 or more.

Today, boomers have at their fingertips a number of ways to make travel plans. Besides traditional travel agencies, there are travel clubs that cater specifically to boomers (e.g. Baby Boomer-Travel). Boomers can also book travel with online full service travel websites.

The leading method boomers used to book leisure air travel over the past 12 months was through an online full service travel website (38%) (see Figure 2). To make hotel reservations, boomers were more likely to speak directly with a travel provider on the telephone or in-person (29%) than other methods. This finding was also true for

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**Figure 1**

*Boomers’ Recent Spending on Leisure Travel*

- 3% spent $10,000 or more
- 26% spent less than $500
- 47% spent between $500 and $3,000
- 26% spent between $3,000 and $10,000
- 3% spent $10,000 or more

**Figure 2**

*Preferred Travel Booking Methods for Boomers*

- Air Travel: 38%
- Hotel Booking: 29%
- Rental Car Booking: 28%
- RV Booking: 34%
- Cruise Booking: 29%
boomers who reserved a rental car for their leisure travel (28%) or RV (34%). Yet, boomers who made plans to travel on a cruise ship contacted a travel agency via telephone or in-person (29%).

These findings suggest that boomers use a variety of methods to make travel reservations. Nevertheless, when boomers were asked generally, what types of travel they booked on the Internet in the past 12 months approximately 4 in 10 (39%) booked air travel online (see Figure 3). A similar percentage (38%) made hotel reservations online and 20% reserved a rental car. A lesser percentage of boomers used the Internet to schedule vacation packages (6%), reserve an RV or RV resort (3%) or book an escorted or guided tour. Younger boomers ages (41-49) were slightly more likely than older boomers (50-59) to use the Internet to make travel reservations.

There are many things to consider when making travel plans especially when it comes to picking just the right place to visit, relax and enjoy. Boomers told us what they consider important factors for planning their leisure travel. Generally, they seek a beautiful, scenic destination that promotes relaxation has good weather, and presents no pressure of schedules to meet. Figure 4 presents the top ten factors boomers consider in planning leisure travel.

Boomers were asked to report what leisure activities they have done in the
past year. This question was asked to provide a baseline for activities in which boomers typically participate. This allowed us to compare boomers’ day-to-day activities to activities they participate in while on travel.

**Leisure Activities**

Boomers typically partake in a number of leisure activities. While many of these activities were quite adventurous such as scuba diving, white water rafting, and camping, others could be considered "experiential" in nature. Experiential activities expose people to new experiences, cultures, and environments such as wine tasting, cooking classes or visiting historic sites and museums.

Figure 5 below presents two top ten lists of activities boomers have participated in over the past 12 months categorized into "adventurous" activities and "experiential" activities. Among adventurous activities, boomers were more likely to go fresh or saltwater fishing, on an escorted or guided tour, camp in a tent, camp in an RV, go motorcycling, or ride horse back in the past 12 months than other similar activities. As it relates to experiential activities, boomers were more likely to go shopping, enjoy fine dining, tour scenic byways, gamble in a casino or riverboat, or visit a zoo more than other similar activities.

**Travel Comparisons of 1985 Data to 2005 Data**

Travel data collected by Media Market Research Inc. some 20 years ago when boomers were ages 21-39 allowed for comparisons between their past responses and...
today's responses; when boomers are ages 41-59\(^2\).

Findings from the current study show that compared to 20 years ago when boomers were ages 21-39, a greater percentage of boomers today, ages 41-59, have a passport (10% in 1985 vs. 28% in 2005). This finding was a precursor to the increase in travel experiences found for boomers between 1985 and 2005.

In 2005 a greater percentage of boomers traveled in the U.S. by car (43% in 1985 vs. 59% in 2005) and by plane (21% in 1985 vs. 31% in 2005) than in 1985. Domestic cruise ship travel for boomers also increased in this 20 year period; from less than 1% in 1985 to 4% in 2005.

These findings of increased domestic travel by boomers are consistent with the increase in domestic travel vacations boomers reported from 1985 and 2005. In 1985 less than 4 in 10 boomers (37%) ages 21-39 reported traveling within the U.S. for vacation (see Figure 6). Yet in 2005 this figure increased to 72%; this is almost double the percentage in 1985.

There has also been increased travel by boomers to international destinations. In 1985 less than one-fifth of boomers traveled outside of the U.S. in the previous 3 years (17%). In 2005, approximately one-quarter of boomers (24%) traveled outside of the U.S. in the previous 3 years.

In 1985, boomers were just as likely to travel to Europe as they were to the Caribbean, Mexico, or South America (see Figure 7). In 2005, it seems a greater percentage of boomers are choosing to travel to Mexico, Central America or South America more than to the Caribbean or to Europe. Twenty years ago, less than 5% of boomers traveled to Europe (4%), Mexico, Central America or South America (4%) or the Caribbean (4%). Today, nearly double the percentage of

\(^2\)Media Market Research Inc. conducted one-on-one interviews with adults age 18+ from 1985-1986. Further details about the 1985-1986 data available upon request.
 boomers have traveled to these international destinations; 14% traveled to Mexico, Central America or South America; 10% traveled to the Caribbean; and 7% traveled to Europe.

**Adventure Travel**

A majority of boomers consider themselves adventurous (55%) and nearly 8 in 10 boomers (77%) consider their own travel experiences more adventurous than their parents. When asked about their most adventurous trip boomers most often reported a stateside destination (50%).

Other countries, continents or territories boomers reported more often when describing their adventure travel included, in order, Europe, Mexico, the Caribbean and Canada (see Figure 8). The top five U.S. states, cities or areas boomers mentioned regarding their adventure travel, in order, were Las Vegas, Florida, New York, Hawaii, and Colorado.

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**Figure 8**

*Top Boomer Adventure Travel Destinations*

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**Adventure Travel Activities**

Boomers were asked about a variety of activities they participated in during their adventure travel. Although boomers visited a museum, toured scenic byways, sipped wine or toured a winery during their most adventurous trip they also engaged in a variety of adventurous activities such as Scuba diving and white water rafting.

Findings suggest that adventure travel is truly a time for boomers to indulge their adventurous spirit.

Although boomers reported engaging in leisure activities similar to those they reported engaging in during their adventure travel the ranking of the top ten most reported activities for both is quite different (see Figure 9). Some of the more "soft adventure" activities (i.e. less strenuous adventure activities) boomers reported engaging in
when asked about their leisure activities moved down in the top ten rankings relative to activities boomers engaged in during their adventure travel. Fresh or saltwater fishing sunk from number one on the top ten leisure activities list to number 5 on the adventure activities top ten list.

Similarly, biking, which ranked number two on the leisure activities top ten list, moved down to number six on the adventure activities top ten list. Other activities that could be labeled "hard adventure" activities moved up in the rankings. For example, snorkeling which ranked number eight on the top ten list of leisure activities rose to number three on the top ten list of most adventurous travel activities. The same is true for hiking/backpacking/rock and mountain climbing which was ranked number four on the leisure activities list but moved up to number one on the top adventure travel activities list.

On their adventure travel a majority of boomers stayed at least a week or longer (52%) (see Figure 10). Nearly one-quarter stayed two weeks or longer (23%) and 17% of boomers stayed 8 to 13 nights away from home. Approximately 4 in 10 (39%) stayed 4 to 7 nights and 21% stayed away from home fewer than 4 nights.

A majority of boomers on adventure travel were accompanied by their spouse or partner (57%) (see Figure 11). More than one-third were accompanied by friends or other travel companions (36%) and approximately 3 in 10 (29%) traveled with their children or grandchildren. Less than 1 in 10 boomers traveled alone (9%), with their parents (8%), or with their pet (4%).
While on their most adventurous travel slightly more than one-quarter of boomers (26%) spent $500 or less (see Figure 12). A majority of boomers (52%) spent between $500 and $3,000. Another 20% of boomers spent between $3,000 and $10,000 and 2% spent $10,000 or more. These findings are very similar to the proportions and amounts of money spent on leisure travel.

**Dream Travel**

Finally, boomers were asked where they would like to travel if money was no object and what would be the backdrop for such a dream trip. Their responses ranged from going on safari to playing golf at a resort. The top five settings picked most often by boomers is in order as follows: beach/ocean/sea resort, ocean cruise, major international city, mountains, and tropical climate.

With regards to actual dream locations, it’s clear boomers still have travel dreams to fulfill. Some of the most mentioned continents or territories boomers dream of visiting were not among those most mentioned when boomers were asked about their most adventurous travel (see Figure 13). The top five locations boomers would like to visit on their dream trip are located on the following continents or territories, in order, the United States, Europe, the Caribbean, Australia/New Zealand, and Africa. Note that Australia/New Zealand and Africa were not mentioned when boomers described the location they visited on their most adventurous travel.

**Figure 12**

*Boomer Money Spent on Adventure Travel*

**Figure 11**

*Boomers’ Adventure Travel Chosen Companions*

- Spouse or Partner: 57%
- Friends: 36%
- Children or Grandchildren: 29%
- Alone: 9%
- Parents: 8%
- Pet: 4%

**Figure 13**

*Top 5 Places Boomers Dream of Exploring*

1. United States
2. Europe
3. Caribbean
4. Australia/New Zealand
5. Africa
**CONCLUSION**

Boomers have certainly traveled to exciting locations and engaged in a variety of adventurous travel. As boomers age, a greater percentage will retire and others will hit their peak earning years. As such, we can expect to see more and more boomers travel for leisure and adventure. We can also expect them to use the Internet more often to make their travel plans; findings show nearly 4 in 10 already use the Internet to book travel.

A greater percentage of boomers traveled internationally in 2005 than in 1985. In the future, boomers may elect to make their dream travel a reality in which case more boomers will travel to places in the U.S. but also international destinations such as Europe, the Caribbean, Australia/New Zealand, and Africa.

When boomers start to realize their travel dreams they will likely opt for locations that provide opportunities to participate in outdoor activities such as hiking, backpacking, rock or mountain climbing. They may also search for escorted or guided tours, snorkeling, camping or fishing; all of which were highly ranked on boomers’ list of adventurous travel activities.

Regardless of the destination, boomers are looking for locales that offer a beautiful scenery, promotes relaxation, has good weather, and presents no pressure of schedules to meet. These findings are consistent with a host of literature that profiles boomers; basically, boomers want it all and on their own terms.
Methodology

The data for this study were collected by Knowledge Networks, a national survey research company. The data collected come from a national sample of adults ages 41 to 59. The survey was fielded between August 24th and August 29th, 2005 using the Knowledge Networks web-enabled panel, which provides a representative sample of U.S. households. In total, 1,594 respondents completed the AARP survey for this study. The final post-stratification weights were produced using benchmarks representative of the U.S. population. This national survey has a sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points. This means that in 95 out of 100 samples of this size, the results obtained in the sample would fall in a range of 3 percentage points of what would have been obtained if every adult between the ages 41 and 59 in the United States had been surveyed.

For presentation purposes, percentage points have been rounded off to the nearest whole number. As a result, percentages in a given table column may total slightly higher or lower than 100%. For questions that permit multiple responses, columns may total to significantly more than 100%, depending on the number of different responses offered by each respondent. Similarly, when only selected responses are shown, percentages may total less than 100%.

3 The Knowledge Networks probability panel is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. Initially, participants were chosen scientifically by a random selection of telephone numbers. Persons in selected households were then invited by telephone to participate in the web-enabled panel. Those who agreed to participate were sent an Internet appliance and received an Internet service connection provided by Knowledge Networks. In some cases, people who already had computers and Internet service were permitted to participate using their own equipment. Panelists then received unique log-in information for accessing surveys online, and then were sent emails three-to-four times a month inviting them to participate in research.