

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

Luxury hotels, agencies cater to eager, vaccinated seniors

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Some luxury hotels are helping grandparents and grandchildren reconnect. Image credit: Deer Path Inn

By SARAH RAMIREZ

Older travelers are driving new bookings as they look at being fully vaccinated as an opportunity to seek out new luxury experiences.

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Among the first to be vaccinated against COVID-19 in countries including the United States and United Kingdom, older travelers are getting a head start on other consumers who were hesitant to travel without being vaccinated. Older consumers are gravitating towards small group excursions, themed experiences and domestic trips.

"We are seeing that senior travel is having a comeback, and something we will see grow through the balance of this year," said Edward Donaldson, director of sales and marketing for **Alaia Belize**, an Autograph Collection Hotel.

"This segment was also the first to get the vaccines in the U.S., they have probably done well with their investments during the shutdown and, in some cases, may have found themselves retired.

"We are seeing this generation's want for travel growing," he said. "For senior travelers, we are also seeing that they want to know that they are going to be safe and secure not very different than the family traveler but they also want to have experiences."

Seniors splurging

COVID-19 restrictions have contributed to pent-up demand for travel, and older affluents are no exception.

A recent survey from high-end hospitality network **Virtuoso** found more than 80 percent of respondents 77 years of age or older are more ready to travel more in 2021 than they were in 2020.

More than half of this year's reservations through private vacation club **Exclusive Resorts** are by members 65 years and older. Almost a third of the membership identifies as "empty nesters," and Exclusive Resorts' average stay has increased from four nights in 2020 to six nights.

Alaia Belize's Mr. Donaldson also noted that adding a complimentary seventh night is very appealing to senior guests since they have more flexibility to extend trips.

Along with the desire to travel comes the desire, and means, to splurge among older affluents.



Egypt has emerged as a popular destination for senior travelers. Image credit: Black Tomato

According to data from bespoke travel company **Black Tomato**, the senior segment tends to have the highest overall trip spend, averaging about \$14,000 per person.

With more time to travel and larger budgets, older travelers are often drawn to specialized packages that reflect their priorities.

"For our older travelers, 75 years and up, we find that they are looking for guided travel in small groups," said Grace DeVita of Florida's **PostHaste Travel Service, Inc.**, a Virtuoso agency. "Most are still very active and ask for themed travel: history, art, music or food experiences.

"For the near future, we are seeing more domestic travel such U.S. river cruises and longer resort stays with locally-guided day trips or close-by international destinations," she said.

Many of Ms. DeVita's older clients are also booking "bucket list" trips, such as vacations to Iceland or safaris. River cruises are also a consistently popular choice.

Black Tomato has identified similar trends.

"In terms of destinations, our senior clients tend to gravitate more towards adventurous places," said Carolyn Addison, head of product at Black Tomato, London. "The trends point to the following based on sales and inquiries: Morocco, the U.S., Iceland, Egypt, Italy, Japan, Greece, France, Mexico, Peru and Norway.

"It's a bias towards culturally-rich destinations and more active experiences," she said.

Smaller destinations are also seeing increased interest from older travelers.

Charlestown Hotels' Deer Path Inn, a boutique property north of Chicago, saw a jump of almost 20 percent in bookings in February 2021, primarily from senior travelers.

"We're noticing seniors are seeking a more elevated and customized travel experience than ever before," said Patrick Lacassagne, innkeeper at **Deer Path Inn**. "After being cooped up for more than a year and having to cancel or put many retirement trips on hold, senior travelers are embracing the bespoke approach to travel, taking full advantage of having experiences catered just for them."

Extended families, expanded offerings

Traveling with extended family has also emerged as a trend as vaccine rollouts continue.



Affluents are splurging on multigenerational travel and family reunions. Image credit: Virtuoso

"Many senior travelers are also more inclined to bring their older children or multi-generations and are happy to pay for a larger group, especially now as there's been so much time spent apart and travel experiences can provide such a joyous reunion," Ms. Addison said.

Similarly, Exclusive Resorts has more than 500 reservations between June and December 2021 for extended families staying at two or more residences.

Recognizing that grandparents would want to reconnect with their grandchildren after a long year of distance, Deer Path Inn relaunched its bespoke "[Gramping Getaway](#)" package. The experience includes a private afternoon tea, tickets to Chicago's Botanic Garden, an in-suite milkshake experience, a curation of children's books for bedtime stories and more.

"Designed to be completely customizable, grandparents can pick and choose the package experiences that suit their interests and their grandchildren's interests best," Mr. Lacassagne said.

Another Charlestown Hotels' property, the [HarbourView Inn](#) in Charleston, is also developing its own offering for grandparents and grandchildren, the "Skip-Gen Getaway" package.

HarbourView Inn's "Celebrate Romance" package has also been popular with older demographics celebrating milestones such as 25th, 30th and 50th wedding anniversaries, according to general manager Mark Henry.

"The HarbourView Inn has consistently provided luxurious and safe accommodations that appeal to all age ranges," Mr. Henry said. "However, the senior demographic has been more pronounced since the vaccine has been rolled out as there has been a large influx of older travelers that specifically choose the HarbourView Inn for its safety protocols, location, and services."

Travel marketing

Less likely to be swayed by travel influencers, hospitality groups and travel agencies rely on different strategies to reach senior affluents.

"Marketing to older travelers needs to be age-specific, especially since we must be aware of health or mobility issues, and older travelers have more time to travel longer," Ms. DeVita said. "Carefully thought-out marketing will motivate older travelers to book now, especially if the marketing focuses on their specific needs and desires."

Word-of-mouth marketing is essential, particularly for smaller hotels, as is targeting key markets with favorable demographics. Partnerships are also important, such as discounted rates for AARP members or advertising with publications or sites with passionate readerships who would appreciate themed travel.

Emphasizing services, amenities and other unique offerings is also crucial for senior travelers, and luxury hospitality as a whole.

As consumers return to leisure travel, there has also been increased demand for "buyouts," with guests interested in booking entire properties for stays with extended families and friends. Long-term inquiries are also up, as more people are working from home as children are participating in virtual learning ([see story](#)).

Last summer, hospitality group Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts invited guests to stay longer at their properties in a comforting campaign playing on the trend of "workcations." Through the Four Seasons "Extend Your Stay" initiative, guests can unlock special services and benefits once they book stays that are 30 days or longer ([see story](#)).

"Our focus tends to be more on passion points, and this really resonates with older consumers in terms of what drives them to travel," Black Tomato's Ms. Addison said. "When marketing to senior clients the key is determining their own pace and trip cadence and creating unheard of experiences and access and bringing this to life creatively."

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