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An Appetite for Adventure

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How to define adventure travel to your clients

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Tour Operators



Hikers // (C) 2013 Dudarev
Mikhail

“If you can get to a gym, you can take one of our trips,” said Kevin Callaghan, CEO of Mountain travel Sobek. “They are not that demanding, and none of them involve bungee jumping.”

That will come as good news to those clients who like the idea of adventure travel but also think that it might be too dangerous. Images of people hanging off mountain cliffs or tempting a great white shark from an underwater cage dance in their minds when they hear the word “adventure.” For too long, adventure travel has been synonymous with extreme adventures, which is going a bit too far for most clients.

Luckily, people’s perceptions of adventure travel are changing. Now, clients can go on a 30-mile bicycle trip and then eat a sumptuous candlelit dinner at a five-star resort before bedtime. Or they can trek around the entire base of Mount Kilimanjaro and watch the sun set while sipping a glass of wine.

“The U.S. market is embracing adventure travel in a big way,” said Melissa McKee, marketing

specialist for G Adventures. “We see it growing tremendously in the next year. There is definitely a strong appetite to step outside the confines of all-inclusive resorts and big bus tours to experience the raw, rich and real beauty of our world.”

It is important for travel agents to find the right outfitter, and both the agent and the outfitter should work in tandem to design a trip that fits the needs of the client.

“There are hundreds of providers,” said San Francisco-based travel agent Vikram Seshadri, who works for Protravel International. “You want to whittle it down to those that are best for your client.”

Seshadri recently had a client who wanted to go to Vietnam. So he called up a travel company that dealt with Southeast Asia trips.

“I suggested that all three of us get on a conference call,” said Seshadri. “I listened and jumped in when I thought I could be helpful. I could be as involved as I needed to be.”

One outfitter, Tom Hale of Backroads, which is a biking, hiking and family vacation company, suggested that both the travel agent and the client become very involved in the planning process.

“When a travel agent interacts with a company,” said Hale, “he/she should make sure that they get both the positive and negative information that they need for a trip. Not all trips are good for everyone. If a travel company is in a hurry to sign you up, I’d be suspicious.”

Hale also noted that there still is the possibility that misinformation will get transmitted to a client and that can lead to problems.

“We don’t want to take over a travel agent’s commission, but sometimes there can be a colossal miscommunication, and people get on the wrong trip,” said Hale. “Our interaction with travel agents is good but, in the end, the burden is on the agent to be responsible to the clients. We can give as much information as agents need, but we are not mind readers.”

Adventure travel companies will go a long way to alleviate a potential client’s fears about taking the big leap into the unknown, both figuratively and literally.

“We can hear the nervousness in the voice of the mature trekker who is worried that he/she might be slower than the rest of the group,” said Ina Steinhilber of Thomson Safaris in Boston. “We pick up on the confidence of those who are just checking off Mount Kilimanjaro from their bucket list, along with the New York City Marathon, a shark dive and some bungee jumping. We can also tell when someone is less used to ‘roughing it’ and might need a little more comfort along the way.”

Adventure travel companies are often staffed with people who have experienced the trips that they are selling, which makes for better communication with the client regarding what the risks and rewards are on a particular trip.

“We’ve got people on the phone all day talking about what it feels like to raft down the Zambezi River below Victoria Falls or track gorillas up a slippery mountain slope or to walk along a dry river bed and encounter elephants or lions,” said Kent Redding, president of Africa Adventure

Consultants in Denver. “And if we don’t have somebody in the office who can talk to the client about an experience, then we find someone — a supplier, a representative or a third party — who can.”

At Absolute Travel, a tour company in New York City, the staffers are often traveling themselves, which only enhances the appeal of their knowledge of the products.

“We’ve done it,” said Absolute Travel marketing manager Katie Losey. “Anyone who talks to us knows that they are speaking to somebody who has experience. We will talk to clients about their activity level, budget and timeline. Nobody buys off-the-shelf trips from us. Everything is customized.”

Safety is always a big concern for clients, especially when they are venturing into an unknown part of the world.

At Brown & Hudson, a bespoke travel company in London, a client recently wanted to go on a safari in Kenya but was concerned about political strife in nearby Tanzania.

“Our Africa expert used his firsthand knowledge to reassure her that not going on safari for this reason was a bit like avoiding Canada because of turmoil in Mexico,” said Philippe Brown, the company’s founder.

“We don’t just rely on BBC news reports to know what’s going on,” he said. “We blend our personal knowledge of each region with on-the-ground contacts to ensure safety.”

Citing another, perhaps more extreme example, he said that Brown & Hudson recently commissioned an independent risk assessment for a proposed biking trip through Colombia. It identified pollution levels, traffic accidents along dangerous routes and then adapted the itinerary accordingly.

“We also arranged for a vehicle with parking lights to ride behind the cyclists and we put an armed guide up front in the more remote areas,” said Brown.

Fortunately, most adventure travel isn’t that hazardous, or at least it isn’t unless the client wants it to be. More typical are biking, hiking and river rafting trips that are tightly controlled for safety and security and accompanied by trained guides.

“Adventure travel is not limited to just physical activity,” said travel agent Seshadri, “but to a sense of stretching one’s limits and doing things that they are not used to.”

Seshadri said that a big part of his job is to help his clients see the benefits and pleasures of going off the beaten track.

“It’s easy to send people on cruises where they skim the surface of a destination during excursions while spending most of their time onboard the ship dining and entertaining like they could have at home,” he said, “and likewise for guided tours of Europe’s capitals with busloads of other Americans who ‘Ooooh’ and ‘Ahhh’ at the standard sights in Paris. Such trips, while lucrative, don’t feed my soul and certainly aren’t what I’d promote to clients to feed theirs.”

Getting Fit For Your Trip

To help intrepid travelers better prepare for their trips, Abercrombie & Kent recommends “Fit For Trips,” a service that provides itinerary-specific fitness programs designed to get adventurers at any level of conditioning into shape for their planned adventure. It offers customized resistance and endurance programs that get travelers ready for all types of trips, including trekking, paddling and road and mountain biking. Both in-home and gym programs are available.

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