



# RETIREMENT AND TOURISM

## Themes in Retirees' Narratives

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**Abstract:** This article examines central themes in traveling retirees' perceptions of tourism and travel. It aims to understand the place and value of tourism in retirement. The study described in this article focused on relatively recent retirees, and utilized in-depth semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 20 male and female retirees involved in a "Learning in Retirement" program in a mid-sized southeastern U.S. city. Results identified five themes, associating post retirement tourism not only with the new life phase, but also with lifelong interests, leisure activities, retirees' social networks and perceived constraints. These findings are discussed in light of general theories of adaptation and aging. **Keywords:** old age, adaptation, family, continuity, constraints. © 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

### INTRODUCTION

During the past decade older adults have been drawing increased attention from tourism researchers, as well as from service providers. Several trends have influenced this interest, including the aging of populations all over the world, as well as changes in older adults' sociodemographics and travel patterns, making them an appealing target population for the global tourism industry (for review see Patterson 2006, ch. 4; Schröder and Widmann 2007). The older adult segment is attractive not only because of its current size and purchasing power, but also as a result of demographic and social forecasts (e.g., Hossain, Bailey and Lubulwa 2003; Lohmann and Danielsson 2001; Schröder and Widmann 2007), which argue that it is going to continue to grow rapidly in the next decade or two.

Studies examining tourism in later life have explored several areas of interests. Some of them have focused on descriptive characteristics of older adults' tourism behavior (e.g., Georggi and Pendyala 1999; Hossain et al 2003; Javalgi, Thomas and Rao 1992) and on the associations between various sociodemographics and seniors' tourism (e.g., Peterson 2007; Zimmer, Brayley and Searle 1995). Other studies examined psychological aspects of tourism such as motivations for tourism

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(e.g., Sellick 2004; Shoemaker 2000), factors influencing decision making (e.g., Bai, Jang, Cai and O'Leary 2001; Kerstetter and Pennington-Gray 1999), and the benefits resulting from tourism (e.g., Botterill and Crompton 1996; Milman 1998; Roberson 2001; Statts and Pierfelice 2003). Several researchers (e.g., Blazey 1992, Fleischer and Pizam 2002; Hong, Kim and Lee 1999) have examined constraints on tourism at an old age, and some have focused on older adults with chronic health conditions or physical impairments (e.g., Burnett and Bender Baker 2001). Another stream of research has addressed specific tourism forms such as adventure tourism (e.g., Muller and Cleaver 2000), educational tourism (e.g., Gibson 1998), eco tourism (e.g., Cleaver and Muller 2002) or multigenerational tourism (e.g., Gardyn 2001).

Some studies that examined tourism at an old age have compared older tourists with younger tourists. Along with some similarities between these groups, certain differences were found as well. For example, You and O'Leary (2000) found that tourists' behavior changed over time in terms of travel propensity, destination activity participation and travel philosophy, and that both the age and generation cohort had an effect. Gibson and Yiannakis (2002) examined tourist role preference over the life course and found that while some roles decreased in frequency, others increased or demonstrated variability. Blazey (1992) focused on people over the age of 50 and examined the association between retirement status and travel activity. He found that retirees were more likely to travel for longer durations, with a larger number of persons in the travel party than those who were still working. They were also more frequently involved in package tours, less involved in a few travel related activities, and reported somewhat different constraints on traveling than non retirees. Other studies (e.g., Pennington-Gray and Lane 2001; Shoemaker 2000) examined older tourists exclusively, and tried to identify differentiated sub-segments within the older adults' segment. All of them came to the conclusion that the older adult segment is very heterogeneous, and that there is significant variability among subgroups within the older age cohorts.

Although studies examining tourism in later life are very diverse, they share two common features: most of them used quantitative methods, and many of them referred to chronological age when identifying older adults. Although later life may include several life-course phases, most studies have not classified different later life phases when relating to older adults. Researchers tended to not distinguish between an early retirement phase and a physical disability phase, or between seniors who have retired and those who continue to work. They simply related to a population that has passed a certain age. This approach may be criticized in light of the fact that age alone is not always effective in differentiating between older and younger people's traveling patterns (Farana and Schmidt 1999).

The dominance of the quantitative approach was recently criticized by Patterson (2006), who argued that researchers should further develop and apply qualitative methods that will enable "to gain a better and more in-depth recollection and understanding of the actual trip experience" (p. 40). In addition, Sedgley, Pritchard and Morgan (2006)

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