

Scuba Diving Travel – Niche Market For a Tough Economy

With the economy in turmoil, travel professionals may be searching for the answer to keeping their operations busy and their customers happy. Recreational scuba diving offers many opportunities to satisfy the savvy travel customer and for many travel agents it is a brand new niche that could help their business for years to come. Dive travel is commissionable and often offers incentives much higher than the standard Travel Agent commission.

Who is the potential customer?

Diving is truly a niche market – there are about 3 to 4 million certified divers in the US and more internationally. That's about 1% of the general population. The small numbers of this highly recognizable activity make it interesting to all – its often perceived as exotic. And it can be! Think of diving, and you think of warm, clear water, tropical breezes, healthy people participating in a healthy activity. All of those are correct! But many people think of diving as being dark and mysterious. It can be uplifting, fun and just relaxing. In fact, one of unique things about diving is that, with the right training, equipment and guidance from the travel agent, it can be just about anything the customer wants it to be!

Research shows that the most active diving customers are affluent adults. According to the Diving Equipment and Marketing Association (DEMA), the most active divers have the money and the time to spend on recreational activities and they like to travel. The most active divers fit the following profile:

- **Age – Between 38 & 53 years old – Mean: 45 Median: 46**
- **76% are male**
- **Household Income – 56% make between \$75,000 and \$100,000**
- **Occupation – 80% are White-Collar/ Professional/ Technical/ Management**
- **Home ownership – 93% own their own home**
- **Mortgage amount – Median of \$148,000**
- **Marital Status – 71% married**
- **Presence and age of children – 17% have kids under 18**

These customers are mostly “empty nesters” with the time, money and desire to travel, even under the current economic circumstances. There may be fewer of these at this economic juncture, but as a group it makes sense to continue targeting them, especially at the higher end of the income spectrum.

Getting started

For the travel professional it is important to be able to explain to a customer how they can experience diving as part of



For your clients with minor children, there are great programs for the entire family.

their vacation, or how diving can become the central theme of their travel experience. There are a few ways for these active adults to participate in diving, and being knowledgeable about those ways will help sell the trip.

If a customer is new to the sport, they can “try diving” at a warm water resort that offers “Discovery” experiences or other “resort courses.” These experiences present the traveling customer with the chance to try diving with a certified diving instructor using equipment provided by the resort. The experience is a few hours long, covers the basics, and includes diving with a certified professional. And the traveler gets into the warm shallow water right away. It's a safe and exhilarating experience and often leads to the customer repeating it on every warm water trip they take!

For those customers that want to skip the requirement of going through the introductory stuff on every vacation, there is the alternative of getting “certified” as an “Open Water” Diver. That's the entry level diver instruction that will get the customer the “ticket” to go diving in most locations to depths of 60 feet (18 meters) or less. Resorts that offer dive trips on their boats or diving from shore will recognize these “certification cards” and allow the certified diver to rent air tanks and other needed equipment. Many divers bring their own diving equipment (like masks, fins, snorkels, wetsuits, etc), but resorts often have rental equipment too. Here's a hint to pass along to the diving traveler; its actually less expensive overall to buy the gear and bring it – even higher ticket items like the breathing “regulator” – rather than rent it for a week of diving. About 70% of all traveling divers do this. Even with the baggage fees involved on most airlines, the convenience

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and security of having one's own gear is always a plus.

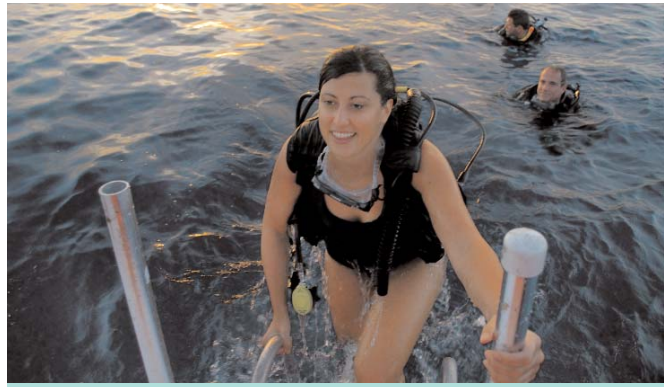
Interestingly, studies show that about 78% of divers who become "certified" travel to a warm water destination within the first 12 months after they complete their instruction, and they each spend nearly \$1,000 on the trip. Studies also show that most divers book their trip to be 4 to 7 days long. Travel professionals should hook up with a local dive center to help book travel for these newly certified, interested travelers. Working with a local dive center will always be a great source of new customers. You can find a complete listing of dive centers in the US on www.BeADiver.com.

What about traveling families?

The great thing about the diving niche is that, with very little effort, diving can fit in with just about anyone's travel circumstances. For families with minor children, there are great programs, including snorkeling for the entire family, scuba diving instruction starting at age 8, and destination-based "camps" that get the little ones excited about marine life and the environment. One organization, Kids Sea Camp, runs such programs on several islands in the Caribbean, including Grand Bahamas, Grand Cayman and Bonaire. For "tweens and teens there are Junior Open Water Diver courses offered through the retail dive center and sanctioned by the diver instruction organizations. And there are plenty of other opportunities for divers; photography, wrecks, reefs, environmental involvement, and just looking at the amazing marine life - no matter what the diver's age. Divers can be involved in a variety of activities and they can do as much (or as little) as they want and still have a great vacation that includes diving.

Where can your customers dive?

More than 70% of all newly certified divers want to travel to a warm water destination. Depending on the amount of instruction the customer has received, they may want to dive in shallow water sites where there is lots of light and lots of colorful fish, or they may want to go deeper and see some of the terrific wrecks that can be found around many coastal and inland lake areas. There are great examples of shallow, exciting dives in places like Stingray City on Grand Cayman Island, and the lava tubes and living reefs off Oahu or Hawaii. However, there are also many divers who want a more intense adventure, and are trained and certified to participate in deeper dives - from 60 feet down to 130 feet or even deeper. The artificial reef dive on the aircraft carrier wreck "Oriskany" off the coast of Pensacola, Florida offers experienced and certified deep divers a great adventure on the world's largest intentional artificial reef. A list of resorts around the world that offer diving as part of their destination portfolio, and are also members of DEMA can be found at www.BeADiver.com.



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What's different about divers?

Divers will continue to travel and dive, even in this tough economy. It's seen as fun, enjoyable, and exciting by those that are currently certified. Divers see their sport as a way to socialize as well as participate in a healthy activity, and describe their favorite activity using words like, Fun, Enjoyable, Exciting, Exploring, and Adventurous.

Part of the reason for the resistance to economic downturn has to do with the relative affluence of the target customer, but customers, once they try diving, consider (and call) themselves "divers" even if they never actually become certified. Divers will come back to dive over and over again, which probably explains why operators that offer or specialize in diving in a given resort area do well.

How can a Travel Agent get involved?

Travel professionals can become involved with the diving niche in a number of easy ways. First by networking with local dive retailers that are creating new travel customers. This lucrative niche starts there. But there are different ways to learn more. One is for Travel Agents to attend trade shows that help promote diving and provide education on the destinations that offer it.

For the first time, DEMA Show, the largest diving and watersports show in the world, is offering educational opportunities to teach diving specialist programs for travel professionals. Travel Agents will be able to try diving at the show ABSOLUTELY FREE in the warm comfortable Be A Diver Pool, and can register to win a diver free certification course from their local DEMA Member Retail Store. DEMA Show will be held November 4 to Nov 7 in Orlando's Orange County Convention Center, and will attract Government Ministries of Tourism from all over the Caribbean and the World. One of Trade Show Week's top 200 trade only shows in the US, there's no better place to connect with hundreds of exotic diving destinations, diving retailers and professionals in all aspects of diving. Mark your calendars.

DEMA Show, www.demashow.com