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SENIOR VISITORS TO NORTH CAROLINA:  
CHARACTERISTICS AND BEHAVIORS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to describe the travel behaviors and characteristics of senior visitors to North Carolina. Specifically, three dimensions of senior travel are described: (1) trip planning behaviors, (2) trip behaviors and characteristics, and (3) traveler characteristics.

SENIOR TRAVELERS TO NORTH CAROLINA:  
CHARACTERISTICS AND BEHAVIORS

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 10 years, travel destinations have focused increasing effort on attracting older or "senior" travelers. Variouslly called the "mature market" (5), the "older market" (1), "classic adults" (12), the "senior market" (9), and the "muppie market" (8), the demographics underlying this marketing focus on people aged 55 and older are overwhelming. First, the United States population is rapidly becoming older. By the year 2000, an estimated 59 million people will be aged 55 and over (10). Second, the senior market is disproportionately affluent. In 1984, people 50 years of age and older controlled 50 percent of the U.S. population's discretionary income and 77 percent of the total financial assets (6). Some estimates suggest that people over 55 spend 80 percent of all vacation dollars in the United States (3). Third, senior travelers have greater freedom to schedule travel during the off-peak or shoulder seasons of most destination areas. The increasing focus on shoulder season promotion by many destinations has, thus, contributed significantly to the emphasis on senior travel.

Along with this growth in marketing emphasis, there has been a corresponding growth in research on seniors' travel behaviors. In 1980, Tongren (11) examined the pre and post retirement travel plans of seniors, finding that for 52 percent of the respondents pre-retirement plans were to take three to four trips per year. However, post-retirement behaviors were lower; 20 percent took three to four trips, 34 percent took one to two trips, and 24 percent averaged less than one trip per year. Anderson and Langmeyer (2) examined the differences between under-50 and over-50 travelers. Their findings suggested that over-50 travelers were more likely to prefer a less hectic, more carefully planned travel experience. O'Leary, Uysal and Howell (7) examined the travel behaviors of seniors, finding significant differences in travel behaviors by the primary trip activities. Hawes (4) examined lifestyle profiles of senior women classified both by five year increments and through a AIO segment process. His findings suggest that many older women have the energy and desire to be active and travel overseas. Finally, Shoemaker (9) conducted a benefit segmentation study of seniors, finding three segments "family travelers, active resters, and the older set". However, Shoemaker did not establish that these groups were actually different in terms of their travel behaviors. Thus, while there has been a substantial growth in the amount of research being conducted, many unanswered questions remain.

None of the studies that have been reported to date focus on travel to a particular destination. Clearly, different destinations have the potential to significantly affect both the age composition of visitors and their respective behaviors. The purpose of this article is to describe the travel behaviors of senior visitors to a specific destination, North Carolina during 1989. Specifically, the paper describes senior travelers on three dimensions: (1) trip planning characteristics, (2) trip behavior characteristics, and (3) traveler characteristics.

#### METHODOLOGY

The data reported in this article were collected as part of the 1989 North Carolina Visitors Survey. The study population for the survey consisted of those nonresidents who visited North Carolina between April 1 and December 31, 1989. A stratified random sample of visitors to North Carolina was selected by randomly assigning ten sampling days to each of 13 selected interview sites. These interview sites included the eight Welcome Centers at the state border on the following interstate highways: I26 south, I40 west, I77 north and south, I85 north and south, and I95 north and south. In addition, visitor information centers at the north and south boundaries of North Carolina on the Blue Ridge Parkway and the northern entry point to the Outer Banks region were used as contact sites. Finally, Raleigh-Durham and Charlotte-Douglas International Airports were used to contact air travelers to North Carolina. The sample size for the survey was determined by the number of sampling days scheduled. On each day, a maximum of 100 travel parties was contacted. The total number of sampling days was 130 and the total number of successful contacts was 10,768. The number of parties approached who were unwilling to participate in the survey was less than two percent.

Data collection was accomplished by distributing a self administered,

eight page, survey questionnaire to nonresident visitors at the selected interview sites. Specifically, visitors were approached and asked to participate in the survey. Those that agreed to participate (98%) were asked to provide their name and address on a contact card. They were then given a diary questionnaire to complete during their visit to North Carolina and return by mail afterwards. Approximately one week after the initial contact, a postcard reminder was sent to all sample members. Two weeks after the postcard mailing, a follow-up letter and questionnaire were sent to nonrespondents. The questionnaire was designed in such a manner that on completion it could be folded and mailed, postage paid to the North Carolina Division of Travel and Tourism. Of the 10,768 parties contacted, 5,956 useable responses were returned, for an overall response rate of 55.3 percent.

All data analyses were conducted using the Statistical Analysis System (SAS) software on the Triangle Universities Computing Center main frame system. For this paper, senior travelers were defined as those where the travel party leader was 60 years of age or older.

## RESULTS

Senior travelers comprised 28.6 percent of the nonresident visitors to North Carolina during 1989. Of these individuals, 72.9 percent were aged between 60 and 69 years, 24.7 percent between 70 and 79 years, and 2.4 percent 80 years or over. Retired individuals comprised 74.9 percent of the senior visitors.

### TRIP PLANNING CHARACTERISTICS

Of the senior visitors to North Carolina during 1989, 56.9 percent spent in excess of one month planning their trip. The median trip planning time was between one and three months. The sources of information used for trip planning were, in order of priority, previous experience in North Carolina, the state highway map, automobile clubs, relatives, close friends, and commercial guidebooks. Almost nine percent of the senior visitors contacted the North Carolina state travel office for travel information.

### TRIP CHARACTERISTICS AND BEHAVIORS

The primary trip purpose of senior visitors to North Carolina was to visit friends and relatives (39.6%), followed in order of priority by sightseeing, outdoor recreation, business, shopping, and entertainment. Groups staying at least one night in North Carolina comprised 68.3 percent of the senior visitors. The average length of stay for all visitors was 3.29 nights, with the majority (58.3%) staying in a hotel/motel/resort.

Over 80 percent of senior visitors to North Carolina travel with two to three other family members, resulting in a mean group size of 2.3 individuals. Only 11.7 percent of all senior parties travel in groups which include children.

The primary benefits sought by senior visitors to North Carolina are to spend time with family and friends, to have a peaceful vacation, to

experience unpolluted and natural surroundings, to get away from daily routine, and to take it easy. These benefit preferences are reflected by the relatively passive activities in which seniors participate. The most popular activities are visiting a scenic area, an historical site, a beach, or a museum followed by active participation in camping or hiking, golfing, or attending an outdoor drama or theatrical production. Highly active activities such as snow skiing, canoeing or rafting, attending a motor car race, and motor boating were generally not of interest to seniors.

The mean expenditure per senior group visit to North Carolina was \$341.29; the average per visitor night was \$44.71. The highest categories of expenditures were eating and drinking places, hotels and motels, rental cottages and condominiums, food and supplies bought at stores, and automobile operations.

#### SENIOR VISITOR CHARACTERISTICS

The senior respondents to the North Carolina Visitors Survey were predominantly male (68.4%), with a high school or higher education (91%), and incomes primarily in the range between \$10,000 and \$49,999 (70%). The senior respondents were also relatively well travelled. Further, contrary to national trends, their travel experience tended to focus on longer trips. During the five years preceding the survey, the average number of vacation trips lasting six or more days was 7.2 as compared to 6.0 get-away trips lasting three to five days, and 5.9 overnight weekend pleasure trips. Finally, the senior visitors to North Carolina are very familiar with the state; 91.0 percent have visited the state previously averaging 8.7 trips in the previous five years.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Senior visitors comprise an increasingly important market to the North Carolina travel industry. Prior to the study reported in this paper, however, very little was known of the characteristics, behaviors, or needs of this market. Through the research reported in this paper, the Division of Travel and Tourism can more effectively design its marketing programs, including its communications strategies, product mix offerings, and more precise targeting of these elements. Further, the research reported herein serves as an important baseline for future efforts to assess the effectiveness of the Division's marketing efforts.

Whether or not these results can be generalized to the senior visitor populations of other states is unknown. Comparable research in those states would be necessary to fully answer that question. However, a cautious generalization would certainly include other Mid-Atlantic and Southeastern states.

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Table 1  
 TRIP PLANNING BEHAVIORS OF NONRESIDENT SENIOR  
 VISITORS TO NORTH CAROLINA

Variable	Percent
Length of Time Spent Planning Trip	
less than two weeks	22.6
between two weeks and one month	20.5
between one and three months	27.6
between three and six months	15.8
between six and twelve months	8.4
one year or more	5.1
	100.00
Sources of Information Used While Planning This Trip*	
previous experience in North Carolina	39.7
state highway map	47.9
automobile clubs	31.0
relatives	23.3
close friends	13.9
commercial guidebooks	10.0
North Carolina state travel office	8.9
magazines	6.3
local tourist offices	5.2
travel agents	3.8
newspaper	3.0
acquaintances (distant friends)	2.6
Mean Number of Information Sources Used	1.9

\*percentages do not add to 100.0 due to individuals using more than one source of information

Table 2

## TRIP PURPOSE OF NONRESIDENT SENIOR VISITORS TO NORTH CAROLINA

Variable	Percent
Primary Trip Purpose	
visiting friends and relatives	39.6
sightseeing	24.4
outdoor recreation	11.8
business	4.0
shopping	2.8
entertainment	1.6
attend sports events or festivals	1.1
convention	1.1
medical	0.4
all other purposes	13.2
	100.0

Table 3

## LENGTH OF STAY AND LODGING OF NONRESIDENT SENIOR VISITORS TO NORTH CAROLINA

Variable	Percent
Mean Number of Nights in North Carolina	3.29
Type of Lodging*	
hotel/motel/resort	58.3
with friends or relatives	28.5
cottage/cabin/condominiums	12.2
campground	11.1
bed and breakfast/tourist home/inn	1.8
all other types of lodging	2.6

\*percentages do not add to 100.0 because of people using more than one type of lodging.



Table 4  
 TRAVEL PARTY CHARACTERISTICS OF NONRESIDENT SENIOR  
 VISITORS TO NORTH CAROLINA

Variable	Percent
Travel Party Type	
family	81.2
alone	7.4
friends	5.6
family and friends	4.7
business associates	0.5
organized group	0.3
all other party types	0.3
	100.0
Overall Travel Party Size	
1	8.8
2-4	81.8
5-7	7.1
8-10	1.3
more than 10 people	1.1
	100.1*
mean total party size	2.3
Percentage of Parties with Children	11.7

\*percentages do not add to 100.0 due to rounding

Table 5  
 BENEFITS SOUGHT BY NONRESIDENT SENIOR  
 VISITORS TO NORTH CAROLINA

Benefits	Mean*
to spend time with my family and friends	3.42
to have a peaceful vacation	3.28
to experience unpolluted and natural surroundings	3.22
to get away from daily routine	3.00
to take it easy	2.97
to get away from commercialized tourist traps	2.86
to get away from the demands of everyday life	2.84
to experience new and different places	2.63
to visit exciting places	2.57
to get away from crowds	2.54
to relax and do nothing	2.45
to do as many different things as possible	2.38

\*measured on a 1 = not at all important to 5 = extremely important scale

Table 6  
 ACTIVITY PARTICIPATION PATTERNS OF NONRESIDENT SENIOR  
 VISITORS TO NORTH CAROLINA

Activity	Percent*
visiting a scenic area	66.1
visiting an historical site	57.7
visiting a beach	31.9
visiting a museum	30.4
camping and hiking	23.9
golfing	16.5
attending an outdoor drama or theatrical production	13.2
fishing	11.6
visiting an amusement park	8.6
attending a festival	7.9
attending a team sports event	3.5
playing tennis	3.4
motor boating (not fishing)	2.2
attending a motor car race	1.6
canoeing or rafting	1.3
snow skiing	0.8

\*percentages do not add to 100.0 since people can participate in more than one activity.

Table 7  
 PATTERNS OF EXPENDITURES OF NONRESIDENT SENIOR VISITORS  
 TO NORTH CAROLINA

Expenditure Measure	Statistic
Mean Expenditure by Type	
eating and drinking places	\$68.75
hotels and motels	65.28
rental cottages and condominiums	50.63
food and supplies bought at stores	50.47
automobile operation (gas, oil, and repairs)	36.40
admissions and entertainment	12.90
airline tickets	10.02
campsites	5.99
bed and breakfast/tourist homes/inns	1.90
taxi, bus, rental car, and limousine fares	1.41
all other purchases	35.53
Mean Overall Expenditure	\$341.29
Median Overall Expenditure	\$130.00
Mean Expenditure Per Person Night	\$44.71

Table 8  
 DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF NONRESIDENT SENIOR  
 VISITORS TO NORTH CAROLINA

Variable	Percent
<b>Gender</b>	
female	31.6
male	68.4
	100.0
<b>Last Year of School Completed</b>	
grade school (1-5)	0.2
middle school (6-8)	1.9
some high school (9-11)	6.9
high school graduate (12)	32.3
some college (13-15)	21.6
college graduate (16)	18.8
some graduate school (17-18)	10.4
extensive graduate school (19-21+)	8.0
	100.0
mean number of years completed	14.2
<b>Household Income Before Taxes</b>	
under \$10,000	3.3
\$10,000 to \$19,999	13.8
\$20,000 to \$29,999	21.5
\$30,000 to \$39,999	20.1
\$40,000 to \$49,999	14.6
\$50,000 to \$59,999	9.3
\$60,000 to \$69,999	5.3
\$70,000 to \$79,999	3.4
\$80,000 to \$89,999	2.0
\$90,000 to \$99,999	1.2
\$100,000 to \$109,999	1.7
\$110,000 or more	3.8
	100.0

Table 9  
 TRAVEL EXPERIENCE OF NONRESIDENT SENIOR VISITORS  
 TO NORTH CAROLINA

Travel Measure	Mean
Travel During Past Five Years	
Vacation Trips Lasting 6 Days or Longer	7.2
"Get Away" Vacation Trips Lasting 3-5 Days	6.0
Overnight Weekend Pleasure Trips (100 miles one-way)	5.9
Previous Visitor to North Carolina	91.0
Number of Trips in last five years	8.7