

FEATURE

Agencies respond to need for 'meaningful' tours

By Nancy Hartnagel
Catholic News Service

Affinity travel — linking people with common interests for joint travels — is perfect for seniors on the go.

Many travel agencies and nonprofits specialize in such travel. The shared interests making seniors traveling companions include religion, history, education, adventure, disabilities, and even grandchildren.

Affinity travel is "an old, old concept," said Helena Koenig, owner of Grandtravel, an agency in Chevy Chase, Md., that runs escorted tours for grandparents and their grandchildren to 20 destinations in such places as Kenya, the Galapagos Islands, Israel, Europe and the United States.

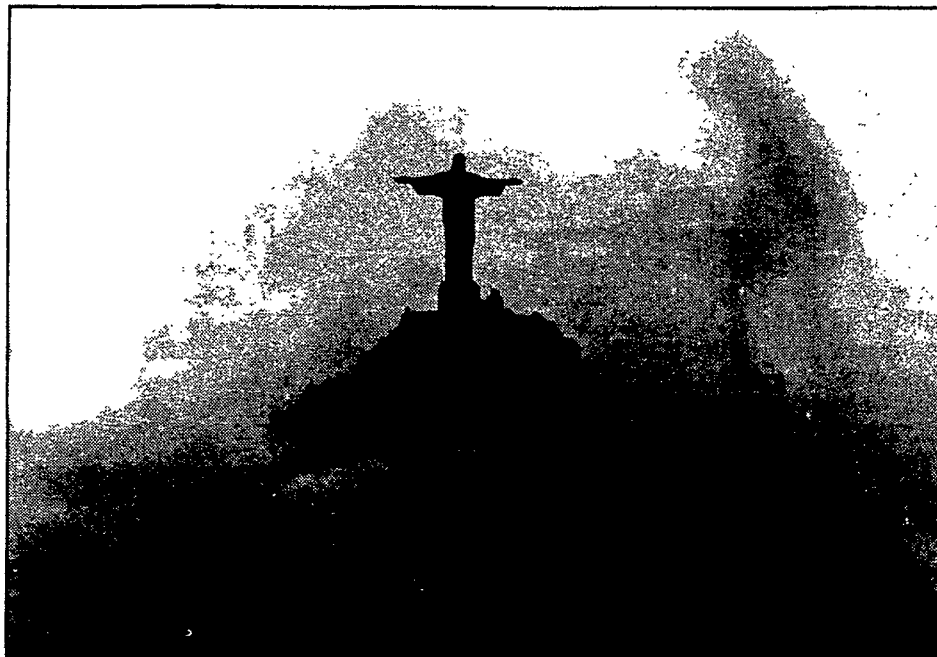
What seniors want is not so different from travelers in general, Koenig said. "They want it to be organized. They want it to be meaningful. They don't want it to be dangerous. They want to know what they're getting and to be in the right place at the right time."

Ward Luthi, owner of Walking the World, an agency in Fort Collins, Colo., plans walking and outdoor adventures for people 50 and older in Central and South America, New Zealand, Europe, Turkey and the United States.

Like Grandtravel, education is a big component of Walking the World trips, he said, which combine the adventure of hiking six to nine miles a day with natural history, local history and culture and scenic beauty.

The trips are small — about 14 people — and avoid five-star hotels or chains, choosing a bed and breakfast, when possible, to take advantage of "the local flavor of the place," Luthi said.

Walking the World clients tend to be 60 percent singles and 40 percent couples, Luthi said, adding that a number of the women who take trips have experienced



Reuters/CNS

The 125-foot statue of "Christ the Redeemer" rises above the clouds over Rio De Janeiro. A \$1.8 million facelift will include the addition of a panoramic elevator.

the recent death of a spouse or a divorce. "Traveling with a group of other similar-aged people is a good way for them to have a community again, meet some new people and do active things," he said.

Another source of "educational adventures for adults who are 55 and older" is Elderhostel Inc., a Boston-based nonprofit offering enrichment programs in some 2,000 settings.

Spiritual health is another travel draw for older Americans. James Adair, president of Regina Tours Inc., a Catholic pilgrimage agency in Chardon, Ohio, offering 300 tours annually, said his clients are predominantly seniors. "They have the time and the means to do this."

Pilgrims, he said, are seeking "a time and

a place away from everyday activity, almost a retreat atmosphere, yet still have the excitement of traveling to, especially, Europe and the Middle East."

Tours feature an accompanying priest for daily Mass, as well as the daily recitation of rosary on the bus.

Each tour day also ends with time for reflection, as pilgrims are asked to gather "for their thoughts about the day," he said, "what they saw, what they experienced, how they feel."

Adair said one part of the job is especially gratifying. "We hear about either physical or spiritual conversions, more spiritual than physical," he said.

Another agency catering to seniors with a "Catholic" affinity is Golden Frontier

Tours, sponsored by Catholic Shrine Pilgrimage in Swansea, Ill.

The agency's 100 domestic and international tours each year "are all to destinations that are of importance principally to Catholics," said Craig Simoneaux, Golden Frontiers daily operations manager, adding that there is usually a priest along to celebrate Mass.

The trips revolve around a religious shrine or shrines or something historic in the Catholic Church, such as retracing the footsteps of the first Apostles, he said.

Clint Grosse, director of the Access Institute, a nonprofit in Victor, Idaho, and Jackson, Wyo., said, the institute's Access Tours attempt to make travel experiences possible for the individual who has "a mobility problem."

"We do travel programs," in the western United States, Grosse said, "for people who are slow walkers or wheelchair users, and the people who ... accompany them."

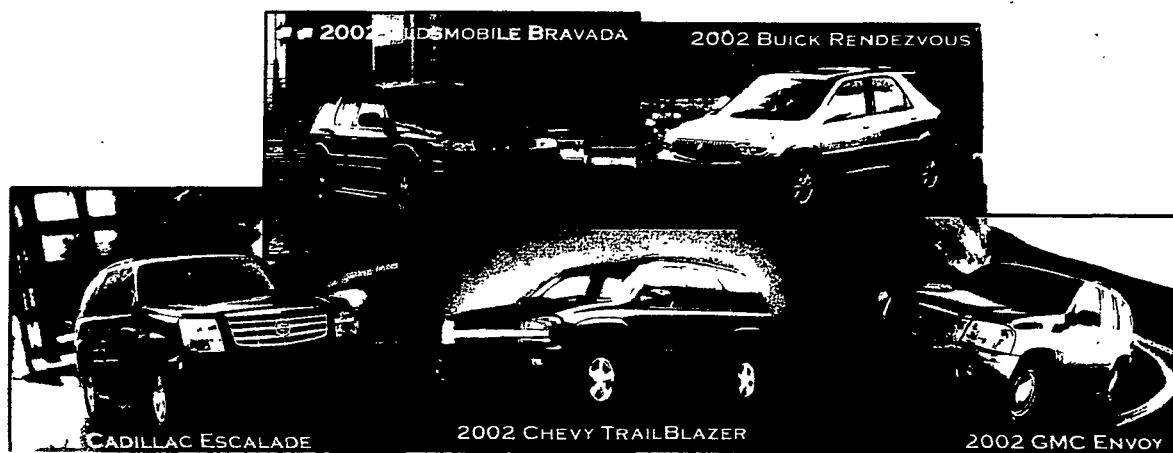
The 10-person warm-month-only tours, utilizing airport-style shuttles, include many seniors suffering from arthritis or strokes, as well as younger people with multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy or cerebral palsy.

Many of them "just don't want the pace of a motor-coach tour," he said. "They don't want that high-speed kind of travel. They want to maybe smell the roses a little more."

EDITORS' NOTE: The following is a list of several agencies and how to contact them: Grandtravel, based in Chevy Chase, Md., 800-247-7651, www.grandtrvl.com; Walking the World in Fort Collins, Colo., 800-340-9255, www.walkingtheworld.com; Elderhostel Inc., based in Boston, 877-426-8056, www.elderhostel.org; Regina Tours Inc., based in Chardon, Ohio, 800-228-4654; Golden Frontiers Tours of Swansea, Ill., 618-234-1445; and, Access Tours in Victor, Idaho, and Jackson, Wyo., 800-929-4811.

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