

Caribbean Niche Markets
Quick View Summary
2011 Caribbean Week Presentation by Geri Bain

When business is slow, the specialists are the ones with a steady source of business,” says Bob Stalbaum, travel agency sales and marketing consultant. It seems everyone is thinking about niches these days, and for good reason. A niche gives you a hook to promote and specialized knowledge that brings confidence to you and your clients.

Snow sports aside, whatever the interest, it can probably be pursued in the Caribbean. This becomes more true every day, as island businesses find new and creative ways to help visitors experience their islands: from zip lining, river rafting and mountain biking to music and art festivals and cooking classes.

Here’s a quick overview of a view some popular Caribbean niche possibilities:

Beaches: Beaches top American’s list of preferred vacation spots both domestically (California, Hawaii and Florida, and internationally (Caribbean).

How many:

- 46% of Americans with income over \$50,000 a year are interested in going to the Caribbean and those glorious beaches are usually why.

Where to reach them:

- Everywhere. Is this casting too wide a net? Perhaps not. For example: where can I body surf in winter? Where is the water baby-calm? There is specialized knowledge. For example, look at Dr. Beach and his 16 books.

Divers:

How many: About 4.2 million active divers in the US, plus recreational/potential divers

What to know: Divers tend to be:

- Under 50, with a growing over 50 segment as boomers age
- Single, male, frequent travelers
- Average income of \$100,000.

Where to reach them:

- Take advantage of agent certification courses which provide leads; combine diving with a destination specialty: e.g. Dive Belize
- Include the specialty in your ads, cards, social media
- Include the specialty in your ASTA and lead gen listings
- Network with dive equipment suppliers, local sports shops
- Host dive nights, etc

(Data Source: Acorn Consulting Ltd, 2008)

Medical Travel: This may become a big market but the role of travel agents is still evolving.

How many:

- An estimated 60,000 to 85,000 (not counting dental) today which could grow to 1.6 million travelers **

What to know:

- Travel agents need to beware of liability issues. DO NOT recommend procedures or facilities. Stick with travel arrangements.
- Requires special knowledge
- See ASTA webinar: “Should You Be in the Medical Travel Business?”
- Cost savings, big motivator
- Caribbean sites: Barbados Fertility Clinic; Costa Rica, Bahamas gearing up
- Joint Commission International (JCI), the US health facility accreditation program

Data sources: McKinsey & Co; **2010 Portrait of American Travelers, Y Partnership/Harrison Group

Voluntourism: Trips that include volunteer experiences as all or part of the focus.

How many:

- More than 3.4 million Americans traveled to volunteer; about 822,000 went overseas.
- About 66% of high school students and 50% of college students report having discussed traveling to volunteer; nearly 50% of the adult population and one-quarter of retirees have.

What to know:

- Volunteer vacations come in all degrees of comfort and commitment.
- For more insight, see my upcoming ASTAnetwork magazine for feature story on voluntourism.
- Caribbean Luxury options include:
 - Find blue iguana nests; paint fences at Cayman Island preserve (Ritz-Carlton, volunteaming)
 - Protect turtle nests (Fairmont Royal Pavilion, Barbados)
 - Help on a farm in St. Lucia (The Landings).
 - Tour operators offering commission and expertise to agents: Gap Adventures, Hands Up Holidays; also see voluntourism.org,
 - Key: Ascertain clients’ desired level of comfort, motivation, and how volunteering time on trip
 - Sources of business: Religious and other volunteer organizations often do annual trips.

Where to reach them:

- Religious, school, community groups may be doing these trips without an agency.
- Individual travelers looking for more in-depth cultural or ecological connection

Data sources: Corporation for National and Community Service data; Center for Global Volunteer Service (by UC San Diego Extension)

Honeymoons

Size of Market: 2.3 million weddings per year; 80 percent honeymoon within a week

What to know:

- Average honeymoon spend: \$4,847
- 39% spent more than \$5,000,

- Average stay: 8 days
- Stress value over cost
- Top destination: Caribbean
- 3/10 couples go to Caribbean

How to reach them:

- 90% say internet important
- 66% shop via online agencies
- **34% consider travel agents very or somewhat influential**
- See destination wedding tips below

Data Source: The 2009 Knot Market Intelligence Bridal Series

Destination weddings: The trend is up in both number and number of guests

How many:

- Total 2009 destination wedding spend: \$7.1 billion.
- 15 to 17 percent of weddings
- Number of attending guests is up 50%
- Average number of guests: 75 (but often less when offshore)

What to know:

- Most upgrade from free option at resorts
- Guests usually pay their own way
- Cost is usually less than traditional home-town wedding
- Pre-wedding trip recommended, because it makes for less stress for the couple, and enhances commissionables.
- Double check documentation

(Data Source: The 2009 Knot Market Intelligence Bridal Series)

Honeymoons and Destination Weddings

What to know:

- Lot of work, lot of responsibility
- big payback in terms of word of mouth
- Requires working closely with suppliers to ensure VIP treatment and smooth out last minute crises
- Issue bride's documents in maiden name

How to reach them:

- Take advantage of agent certification courses which provide leads and combine with destination specialties
- Brand you agency ads, business cards, email signatures, website and social media with your specialties
- Include the specialty in your ASTA and lead gen listings
- Network with local bridal suppliers, wedding venues, etc. for cross promotion
- Host honeymoon/destination wedding nights in conjunction with travel suppliers and/or local wedding gown shops, etc
- Attend/exhibit at bridal shows (choose carefully and measure results)

For more on these topics see:

- Spring edition of ASTAnetwork magazine cover story about Honeymoons and Destination Weddings
- Upcoming summer edition of ASTAnetwork magazine feature article on voluntourism
- August edition of JaxFax feature on sales tips for travel agents
- ASTA webinar: “Should You Be in the Medical Travel Business?”

Gerí Bain is a travel journalist specializing in romance, honeymoons, destination weddings, luxury travel and travel agency marketing. She has worked as an editor at Travel Agent, Modern Bride, and Endless Vacation magazines. She is always looking for information and expert travel agents and suppliers to interview on these topics. Email her at geribain@aol.com and follow her on twitter at gbain.