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Hedonism gives way to "recession chic" in travel

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By Claudia Parsons

NEW YORK (Reuters Life!) - Hedonism is out in the travel business and "recession chic" is in, according to experts at a travel show in New York where customers were looking for bargains to brighten the gloom.

"People are being more value conscious, but just as important, they're being more conscious of their values, and what that means is that they're looking for experiences that speak to their heart," said Daniel Levine, a trend spotter at the Avant-Guide Institute who analyzes social trends.

Levine says as Americans see their savings dwindle and the economy crumbling around them, they are focusing on what is most important -- friends, family, health or the environment -- and taking that into account in planning vacations.

"It's not about hedonism any more," Levine said at the New York Times Travel Show in Manhattan.

"Destinations that are just offering expensive pampering are going to be hurting," he told Reuters. "The ones that are offering experiences that speak to 'recession chic' values are going to do well."

He pointed to a program set up by Ritz-Carlton hotels called "Give Back Getaways," which gives guests at its luxury hotels an opportunity to spend half a day volunteering in the community where they are visiting.

Lydia Dean founded a company called GoPhilanthropic two years ago to design custom-tailored, high-end vacations that incorporate support for social and conservation projects in places such as Vietnam, India and Central America.

"In Vietnam, they're given an opportunity to purchase and donate a portable mobile library to a village that has no books," Dean said. "They get to deliver their book box, spend the afternoon with the children and really get to meet them."

The company is still in its early days, with just three staff planning around 10 to 20 customized trips a month that are priced around \$2,500 to \$3,500 a person, but Dean said the market is growing.

"That baby-boomer generation, they're very conscious. Many of them are seeing success and wealth beyond what they would ever have expected," Dean said. "When the economy gets back on its feet, I think we're really going to be overwhelmed."

Jeff Duford, sales manager for G.A.P. Adventures which offers "responsible and sustainable" adventure travel in more than 100 countries, said there had been steady growth in the market for five years.

He said the kind of traveler who visits a developing country with G.A.P. was one who considered such travel a central part of their lifestyle, and was determined to go even in hard economic times.

"They will give up that Starbucks coffee every day as opposed to giving up that trip."

One company seeking to ease the pain at a time of rising unemployment is Intrepid, an adventure travel firm that has come up with a special offer called "Laid Off, Take Off," -- a 15 percent discount for the newly unemployed.

The company's web site urges people to take advantage of a bad situation, saying: "When the going gets tough, the tough get traveling."

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