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HOW LOW YOU CAN GO

Being Down in the Dumps can be so uplifting

Steve Gillick

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05 JUL 2013: When your clients say they want to travel 'down under', you can no longer assume that Australia is on their mind. Previously, I've written about the heights to which travellers will aspire in order to enhance the experiential aspects of travel.

But there are a significant number of travellers who happily descend to the depths in order to add thrills and chills to their travel experiences.



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Technically, these people are called bathophiles (lovers of depths, from the Greek, 'bathys', meaning 'deep'), but the term "depth-chargers" has also been bandied about to describe those who willingly and energetically charge or plummet into the earth and/or the sea as often as they can.

Scuba diving is an obvious 'depth' activity, but those who enjoy submerging themselves can also enjoy underwater aquariums, underwater hotels and resorts, and underwater restaurants, all found in such diverse venues as Fiji, UAE, Florida, Sweden, Israel and The Maldives. You can even visit the Guinness Deep Sea Bar off the coast of Norway in the Baltic Sea and quaff pints of delicious black stout. And for those who want to enact their own 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea adventure, there are several destinations where your clients can enjoy submarine rides including

Honduras, The Maldives, Bali (Indonesia), Waikiki (Hawaii, USA), Barbados, Spain and Taiwan.

If you and your clients are “land lubbers” (supposedly pirate lingo for those who prefer the land to the sea) there are tons of attractions and activities that attract bathophiles including bunkers, bomb shelters, caves, caverns, catacombs, mines, cisterns, sewers, subways, tunnels, underground cities and more.

A bunker is a defensive military structure to provide protection against aerial attacks and other threats. In Canada we have our very own Diefenbunker in Ottawa that harkens back to the early 1960's when then Prime Minister John Diefenbaker had a hidden facility, now open to the public, which contained living quarters, a war cabinet room, a Bank of Canada vault and even a CBC studio.

In the US travellers can visit the Greenbriar Bunker, in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, which for 30 years served as a secret emergency command and relocation centre for the government, starting with the administration of Dwight Eisenhower. There are other bunker tours in the US as well as in Moscow, Berlin, Rome, and various locations in the UK.

Bomb, Air-Raid and Fall-Out Shelters are similar to bunkers and were built during the Second World War, the Cold War and during more recent times of trouble. Tours are available through the labyrinth of tunnels in Stockport, UK. Other countries, notably the US and Israel have many shelters, some of which are publicly accessible but most of which are preserved for actual use.

Caves are popular tourist attractions throughout the world. Who can resist gazing at totem poles, fountains, fried eggs and concert organs –all names of rock formations showcased by the more touristy caves, such as the Luray Caverns in Virginia and the Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. And there are more rustic caves, some of which I've explored over the years: Akiyoshi and Gyonkusendo in Japan, the Manjanggul Lava Tube on Jeju Island in South Korea, Gunung Mulu National Park in Borneo (boasting the world's largest cave chamber), and the nearby bat caves in Niah National Park.

As a segment of the adventure niche market, serious cavers or spelunkers don helmets and lights and crawl through narrow, dark passages to see what few others have seen before.

Catacombs are sometimes bunched into the niche of 'dark tourism'. They consist of subterranean passageways used as burial places. Wikipedia lists many of the more popular catacomb tours around the world including those in London, Rome, Vienna, Paris, Malta, Lima, Granada and Alexandria.

Mining tours are often included with the niche of 'thrill tourism'. Participants wear protective helmets equipped with lights and descend into the earth to walk along wet and often dimly lit tunnels. Organized tours can be found all over the world: Sudbury in Ontario, Bellevue in Alberta, Potosi in Bolivia (the source of Spanish silver), the salt mines in Krakow, Poland and in Salzburg, Austria (one of the oldest in Europe), and the Central Deborah Gold Mine in Victoria, Australia.

A cistern is a receptacle or structure built for

catching and storing rain water. Istanbul has several that are open to the public including 1700 year old Binbirdirek where, amidst 212 stone support columns, I joined hundreds of ASTA members at the 2010 I.D.E. for dinner and a reception. The Portuguese Cistern in El Jadida, Morocco was used as a movie set for Orson Welles' production of Othello, and the Arab Cistern-Well, part of Silves Castle in Portugal is a major area attraction.

Sewers are not a drain on bathophiles in fact, they energize them! You'll be pleased to know that according to TripAdvisor, "bathrooms are available" on the one-hour tour of the Paris sewer system. You can also enjoy the underpinnings of cities such as Brighton, London and Vienna.

For those in search of underground cities, you can roam the subterranean passages in Seattle, Beijing, Moose Jaw, Portland, Coober Pedy (meaning 'white man's hole') in Australia, Kish (Iran) and Burlington, (UK). And then there is Cappadocia, Turkey with underground cities dating as far back as 1000 BCE. Most visitors engage the many steps - and squeeze through the narrow passageways - in the underground city of Kaymakli, while others choose to visit the multi-leveled city of Derinkuyu, where up to 20,000 people lived as they hid from religious persecution. In Akko, Israel your clients can visit the 12th century underground Crusader City, and in Tunisia they can explore the troglodyte (Greek for "cave goers") homes in Matmata, where the opening scenes of Star Wars were filmed.

Focusing our vision on tunnels, those in Cu Chi, just outside of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) are possibly the best known. Squeezing through tiny

holes in the earth, the Viet Cong entered an underground system providing communication, supply routes, a hospital, food storage, weapons caches and living facilities during the Vietnam War. Wider entrances have been constructed so that girth-challenged tourists can get an idea of what life was like in the dark, extremely humid and claustrophobic tunnels. (When I was there several years ago we had to crawl or duck-walk with our head tucked down in order to pass through one of the tunnels).

Bathophiles also love to explore subway systems. This could include hidden or 'ghost' subway stations in cities such as New York and Toronto, lavishly chandeliered stations in Moscow, or just 'riding the underground rails' in places as diverse as Buenos Aires, Tokyo, Algiers, Medellin, Paris and Boston (the latter being the venue where 'Charlie' became 'the man who never returned' while riding the MTA, according to the folk song).

Going to the depths of travel is very above-board as a travel niche. Travellers are willing to take the plunge and come up with experiences that are different-for-the-sake-of- being-different, but also allow for an experience. And we know that it is the 'doing' and not just the 'seeing' that makes the crucial difference in satisfying the needs of travellers of all generations.

Travel professionals who collect niche ideas are often best suited to up sell, cross sell, expand, customize and in general, have solutions at their finger tips to respond to client needs and generate revenue.

Pamper your bathophiles! Know who they are by asking the right questions when you interview

your clients and keep tabs on them in your database and CRM systems.

Remember that for some travellers, being down in the dumps can be very uplifting.



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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