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## LUXURY TRAVEL REPORT: THINGS ARE LOOKING GOOD FOR 2015

by Mimi Kmet / February 05, 2015



Luxury travel is on the rise, and travel agents are seeing a growing share of the business.

In a new report from Zicasso, nearly 90% of specialist travel agents who partner with the referral service said the number of luxury travelers they serve has grown over the past two years.

Steady growth in the luxury market is forecast for 2015 as well, according to Zicasso's 2015 Luxury Travel Trend Report.

Zicasso is a Mountain View, Calif.-based service that matches high-end clients with agents. The firm's luxury travel report was compiled from Zicasso's own findings and input from its travel specialist partners.

Luxury travel agents contacted by *Travel Market Report* said they are seeing the same positive trends.

### A solid trend

"We had far and away the best sales record we've ever had," Jay Johnson, president of Coastline Travel Advisors, said of the agency's 2014 results. Last year, luxury sales at Coastline Travel, a Virtuoso member in Garden Grove, Calif., were up 18% to 19% over 2013.

The luxury travel market has been growing for a few years, Johnson told *Travel Market Report*. "It took three years to get back to where

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*We're very, very busy. We're having trouble keeping up with it all.*

Linda Cleveland, Antietam Travel

### TOP OF THE WORLD

Top international destinations for North American luxury travelers:

- Italy
- Australia/New Zealand
- Greece
- Africa (safari countries)
- Spain
- France

Top up-and-coming international destinations in the luxury market:

- Peru
- Argentina
- Japan
- Thailand

Source: Zicasso's 2015 Luxury Travel Trend Report

we were before the recession, and we blew right past it.”

Travel agents are seeing an upward trend for 2015 as well.

“We’re very, very busy,” said Linda Cleveland, president of Antietam Travel in Frederick, Md., an Affluent Traveler Collection/TRAVELSAVERS agency. “We’re having trouble keeping up with it all.”

Agents said the improving economy was the main reason for the uptick in their luxury travel bookings.

Zicasso also noted the strengthening of the U.S. dollar against many foreign currencies, notably the euro, the Australian dollar, the South African rand and the Japanese yen.

### **In need of agent expertise**

Today’s luxury clients “are looking for more unique experiences and exclusive access” and “want to learn the local secrets of the destinations they explore,” Zicasso reported. For those reasons, luxury travelers are increasingly turning to travel agents who specialize.

According to the report, 42% of Zicasso’s specialists “noticed a marked increase in requests for expert advice” over the past five years.

“People don’t want cookie cutter experiences anymore,” agreed Ruth Turpin, owner of Cruises Etc., a Virtuoso agency in Fort Worth, Texas. “We spend time making their vacation time valuable.”

At Antietam Travel, Cleveland pointed to the perks that travel professionals provide for luxury travelers: “We can usually get better deals and special amenities for them because of our relationships with suppliers. People in the luxury travel market realize that.”

Another benefit for luxury travelers: Agents provide help to clients when they need it most.

“When you use a travel agent, you have recourse if something goes wrong. The Internet can’t do that,” said Rose Mary Kiniry-Luddy, CTC, owner/manager of R.M. Kiniry Travel, Inc., an Affluent Traveler Collection and NEST agency in New Britain, Conn.

### **The luxury traveler**

According to the Zicasso report, most luxury travel clients are between the ages of 51 and 64, although many are in two other age groups: 31 to 50 and 65-plus.

Travel agents confirmed that younger clients are starting to go for higher-end travel.

“People are upgrading from entry-level to premium cruises and from premium to luxury,” said Turpin, referring both to older clients and Gen Exers.

For example, she said, the number of clients in their 40s and 50s who have booked a Crystal Cruise “has grown exponentially in the last couple of years.”

Cleveland said she is booking more millennials, although they tend to opt for premium more than luxury trips. However, she added, she sees the possibility of upselling millennials to luxury vacations as they age, because they like to be pampered.



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### Luxury vacation trends

The two most common luxury trips are honeymoons/romantic getaways and family/multigenerational vacations, Zicasso found.

Luxury travelers also continue to ask for unique, off-the-beaten-path experiences, such as African safaris, a trend cited by 76% of Zicasso partners.

Travel agents who spoke with *Travel Market Report* said they were also seeing that trend. Cleveland said she was booking more safaris, river cruises and luxury cruise lines.

### Self-drives are up

Johnson said his agency was booking more self-drive vacations.

“People have an itinerary, but they’re doing it on their own.

“Africa self-drive vacations are up, which is something we’ve never seen before,” he added.

“It’s about experiencing new destinations,” Johnson said, noting that he is sending more people to places like Bhutan, Myanmar, Cuba and Namibia.

River cruising continues to gain popularity among his clients too, though perhaps at the expense of other sectors. “River boating has gone through the roof in the last two years,” Johnson said. “It has diverted clients away from escorted bus tours.”

Culinary experiences and private small-group tours also are popular among affluent travelers, according to Zicasso and travel agents.

### Bonding with clients

As luxury clients seek out unique travel experiences, agents are finding ways to position their services effectively.

“I stress with my agents that they ensure that new clients understand the extra things we can do for them,” said Turpin of Cruises Etc. “I tell them to offer each client one very special experience when they make a booking. In so doing, my agents tend to bond with their clients.”

At Coastline Travel Advisors, Johnson is having his agents share more about who they are and how much they’ve traveled. The agency now includes photos of its agents’ travels in its newsletters and blog and spotlights agents’ travel experiences in their bios.

“We’re being much more personable about how we introduce our agents to customers,” he said. “We’re showing them that we live our careers.”

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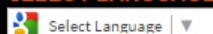
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