

Leisure Travel of the 50+

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Traditionally, people in the empty-nest stage of life (which most people reach in their 50s) travel more for leisure than either older or younger people. The 2009 National Household Travel Survey shows that people in their 50s and 60s are taking more weekend getaways in place of one big annual vacation. The shift to more frequent but shorter leisure trips means that more people will be driving to their destinations, which in turn may affect safety due to increased exposure to traffic. People aged 70 and older reported both more trips and more miles. Accessibility planning and implementation for air, rail, and bus terminals, stations, and vehicles will increasingly make a difference in the ability of older people to travel and their comfort while doing so.

In the United States, tens of millions of baby boomers are moving through the empty-nest stage, which typically occurs between the ages of 50 and 60.¹ Among the many changes this stage of life brings is a change in travel patterns. People in their 50s generally commute less,² make fewer trips to ferry children, and travel more for leisure.

An analysis of the National Household Travel data series shows that overall, people aged 50 and older reported more leisure trips of all lengths in 2009 than in 2001. On a per capita basis, the number of leisure trips per person aged 50 and older (including those who travel and those who don't) rose from 6.3 trips per year to 10.2 per year between 2001 and 2009 ("All 50+" in figure 1).

This pattern, however, was not uniform across all older life stages. People in their 50s took nearly twice as many leisure trips in 2009 as in 2001, the greatest increase in the number of leisure trips of all the age groups analyzed.

Defining Leisure Travel

Leisure travel can include trips of many purposes, from spending a lazy afternoon at the library to flying to Bali for a month on the beach. For this analysis we used data from the most recent National Household Travel Survey (NHTS), which includes detailed purposes (more than 25 categories) of trips made by more than 300,000 respondents.

The type of travel analyzed in this Fact Sheet belonged to a single category: "rest and relaxation/vacation," which is termed leisure travel. The term "vacation" is reserved for a subset of leisure trips to places 75 miles or more from the respondent's home.

The 2009 NHTS was collected from April 2008 through May 2009. This period included the beginning of the recession, as well as a spike in gas prices for a few months in 2008—both of which may affect the incidence and type of leisure travel.

