

Youth travel market sees numbers rise
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Although he's not even out of high school, 11th-grader Thomas Jones has traveled more than many adults. "I'd like to go back to Italy, and to Paris, and back to Florida," he says. "The traveling has really impacted me."

At 16, the bassoon player has spent a month with a band-orchestra playing in Europe. He has also played in school-related concerts and competitions in Orlando, Fla.; Washington, D.C. and Chicago. Now he's scheduled to visit New York City next spring with his Grosse Pointe Woods, Mich. high school band and orchestra.

Thomas doesn't know it, but he's a statistic and a symbol of a trend.

Children who start traveling when they are young become lifelong travelers. They are more likely to travel in high school. They're more likely to study abroad in college. And they're more likely to carry their love of travel into adulthood.

"There's also a connection between trips and academic achievement," says Michael Palmer, executive director of the Student and Youth Travel Association in Clarkston, Mich. "And it makes them better global citizens."

The student and youth travel market is a huge 20 percent segment of all the travelers in the world. Among the fastest-growing segments, it includes not only college students age 25 and under, but increasing numbers of middle- and high-schoolers and even elementary children on group day or overnight school trips for band, choir, church, sports or science, civics and language classes.

Nearly 206,000 American college students studied abroad last year, up 8 percent from 2004.

The average age for younger students' first school trip these days is 10. Nearly 61 percent of all children ages 12 to 18 report taking a group trip in the past year, according to research done at Michigan State University for SYTA.

Destinations worldwide are catering to young travelers "because they know if they get a teen to visit, they will come back," Palmer says. "Before, group travel focused on senior citizens. Now, it's student travel."

New York, Washington, D.C., Chicago, California and Orlando, Fla., tend to be the most popular domestic destinations for student travel, but some trips spirit students abroad to Toronto, Ottawa or all the way to Europe or Australia.

These days, "kids expect to travel," Palmer says. "They're not fearful."

"Under age 18, they tend to go to more conservative destinations. But over 18, they're pioneering destinations outside the typical. A lot of college students are experienced travelers. The younger they started traveling, the more they want to travel now."