



**Give the holiday gift of a fun vacation**  
**BY TOM UHLENBROCK / St. Louis Post-Dispatch**

Cruising the Rhine, visiting China's terra-cotta warriors and hanging out with great white sharks are a few of the travel gift ideas on this year's Christmas wish list. We've also made sure you've got the right stuff to take along.

Here are five great trips for the person who likes a little adventure in his or her stocking:

**\* Swim with the sharks**

What: A shark-diving experience on a five-day boat expedition.

How: You and 15 others will travel by chartered bus to Mexico and then take a luxury yacht to explore Isla de Guadalupe, which has one of the largest populations of great white sharks on the planet. It's also a perfect spot for sport fishing. You'll be invited to don diving gear, enter a cage and descend up to 100 feet into the 70-degree water for an up-close visit with the sharks. Night dives also are available.

When: The 2006 expeditions are scheduled for July 23 and 29, and Aug. 3, 8 and 13.

How much: \$12,200 for groups of four.

Who: The trip is available through WallBounce.com, which bills itself as the premier provider of "discerning learning" experiences. The site connects clients with operators of trips that create "an indelible memory, many of which are not readily available to the public."

Gear to take: An underwater camera will come in handy, because your friends won't believe where you went. Scuba.com has a Suprema Super Sport 35-millimeter waterproof camera that has an underwater viewfinder and is said to be good to 125 feet deep. You get free batteries, film and lanyard, so you don't drop the camera when a great white sneaks up on you. \$49.95

**\* Fine time cruising the Rhine**

What: A nine-night, leisurely cruise along the legendary Rhine River through the Netherlands, Germany, France and Switzerland.

How: From Amsterdam, you will board the 78-passenger Rembrandt luxury riverboat, which has all outside cabins. The boat will stop to allow for visits to Gothic cathedrals in Germany and drives through Bavaria's Black Forest and along the Route du Vin.



When: May 13, 22, 31; June 9, 18, 27, 2006.

How much: \$2,595 per person for a main cabin, based on double occupancy. An upper suite, with a balcony, is \$4,295.

Who: The trip is available through Intrav, a luxury tour operator based in St. Louis. Onboard experts will lead sightseeing and shore excursions, and offer lectures. Call (314) 655-6700 or visit [www.intrav.com](http://www.intrav.com).

Gear to take: You'll need a warm, comfortable pullover, so we consulted the experts at rei.com. For men, they suggested the Columbia Sportswear Hart Mountain half-zip pullover with a sueded fleece finish and a single sleeve pocket for \$39.50. For women, their pick was the Kuhl Moxie half-zip fleece top with a contrasting fleece inside collar for \$46.

### **\* China, capital by capital**

What: A 14-day escorted tour of the cultural capitals of China.

How: Beginning in Shanghai, China's largest city, you'll visit gardens, museums and a silk factory before flying to Xian to see the incredible Terra Cotta Museum and its resurrected legions of warriors. The trip continues on to Beijing, where you'll tour Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City and the Great Wall.

When: Departures Jan. 17-March 15 and April 4-June 20, 2006.

Cost: \$1,495, including airfare from Los Angeles.

Who: The trip is offered by Grand Circle Travel, the nation's No. 1 provider of international vacations for Americans 50 and over.

Gear to take: Sturdy luggage will come in handy and the folks at Passport Luggage in Frontenac Plaza recommend the Nautica 22-inch roll-on, which is navy blue with bright yellow inside. It comes with a matching carry-on bag that slips over the telescoped handle for easy handling. The roll-on bag is \$249.99 and the matching carry-on is \$99.

### **\* A Southwest trip, your way**

What: A plan-it-yourself vacation in the American Southwest with an outfitter providing the expert guides to help you explore hidden red-rock canyons or show you where to catch cutthroat trout.

How: National Geographic Adventure says "concierge service" experiences are the latest in adventure travel, and recommends Santa Fe Mountain Adventures in the



Southwest. You tell the outfitter what you want to do — say raft down the Rio Grande in the morning and visit ancient Indian sites in the afternoon — and the vacation is planned in detail.

When: Year-round, you set the agenda.

How much: \$1,200 for five days.

Who: Santa Fe Mountain Adventures started offering concierge tours of the Southwest in May. Director Janine Sieja may even show you her favorite hike to Ravens Ridge in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains around Santa Fe.

Gear to take: You'll need some good hiking shoes. Adidas.com boasts that its Mali men's shoe looks good, has the comfort of leather and soles that grip on wet surfaces and moss-covered rocks. \$85

**\* See the Eagles, live**

What: A winter drive up Highway 79 from St. Louis, through Clarksville and Louisiana, with stops along the way to view bald eagles and an overnight stay at Garth Woodside Mansion in Hannibal.

How: When ice covers the Mississippi River, the eagles gather in the trees over the open water below the locks and dams in Winfield and Clarksville to hunt for fish. The Army Corps of Engineers has provided viewing platforms, and the visitors center at Clarksville is a cozy bird-watching spot.

When: The eagles begin arriving in December and usually stay until March.

Cost: Gasoline, lunch at Clarksville or Louisiana, and room rates in Hannibal, ranging from \$99 to \$395.

Who: Garth Woodside Mansion has been rated the top B&B in Missouri, and one of the best in the country. There are eight guest rooms in the historic mansion and three cottages. Visit [www.getoutofthecity.com](http://www.getoutofthecity.com).

Gear to take: You'll need binoculars, and Pentax offers several models with exceptional image quality and sharpness. The DCF SP 8X32 model will zoom in enough to let you see the eagles' yellow eyes. \$499