

The Travel Industry's Reckoning With Race and Inclusion

Tourists, particularly Black travelers, are paying close attention to how destinations and travel service providers approach diversity and equity after a year of social justice protests.



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Between the Covid-19 pandemic, which brought tourism to a near-complete halt for months on end, and last summer's protests for social justice, the past year has been one of reckoning for the travel industry on issues of race and inclusivity.

In the wake of George Floyd's killing, everybody from hotel operators to luggage makers declared themselves allies of the protesters. At a time when few people were traveling, Instagram posts and pledges to diversify were easy to make. But now, as travel once again picks up, the question of how much travel has really changed has taken on new urgency.

"From the very emergence of the Covid pandemic and especially in the wake of uprisings last summer, there's a question about place," said Paul Farber, the director of Monument Lab, a Pennsylvania-based public art and history studio that works with cities and states that want to examine, remove or add historic monuments. "What is the relationship of people and places? Where are sites of belonging? Where are sites where historic injustices may be physically or socially marked?"

Monument Lab is one of several organizations, groups and individuals trying to change the way travelers of all colors understand America's racially fraught history. Urging people to engage with history beyond museums and presentations from preservation societies is one approach.

In turn, many travelers are paying close attention to whether companies are following through with their promises from last year. Black travelers, in particular, are doubling down on supporting Black-owned businesses. A survey released earlier this year by the consulting firm MMGY Global found that Black travelers, particularly those in the United States, Canada, Britain and Ireland, are keenly interested in how destinations and travel service providers approach diversity and have indicated that it has an influence on their travel decision-making.

At Monument Lab, questions about belonging, inclusion and how history memorializes different people were coming up frequently over the past year, Mr. Farber said, particularly from travelers looking to learn about Confederate and other monuments while road tripping.

In response, Monument Lab, which examines the meaning of monuments, created an activity guide called Field Trip, which allows people to pause on their trips to learn about specific monuments. On a worksheet, participants are prompted to question who created the monuments, why they were made and what they represent.

The statue of Nathan Bedford Forrest, a slave trader, Confederate general and Ku Klux Klan leader, was removed from Health Sciences Park in Memphis, Tenn. in 2017. Like many other monuments in the United States, it had become a polarizing presence. Yalonda M. James/The Commercial Appeal, via Associated Press

In creating Field Trip, it became clear to Mr. Farber that there is a strong interest from travelers to learn about Black history. This sentiment is echoed by tour operators who offer Civil Rights and other social-justice-oriented tours like those focusing on the contributions of Black Americans, women and figures in the L.G.B.T.Q. community.

“There are a lot of white people who for the first time have had a conversation about racial justice and maybe even heard the words ‘systemic racism’ for the first time,” said Rebecca Fisher, founder of Beyond the Bell Tours, a Philadelphia-based operator of social-justice-oriented tours that highlight marginalized communities, people and histories. “People heard the new words and now they want to learn. That doesn’t mean that it is backed up with results, but I am seeing a trend in interest.”

On a tour with Beyond the Bell guests might, for example, participants hear about Philadelphia’s President’s House, but they’ll also hear about Ona Judge, an enslaved woman who escaped from George Washington’s home, and about the former president’s efforts to recapture her. One of the company’s most popular tours focuses on gay history in the city.

Seeking Black-owned travel businesses

Black travelers, in particular, are increasingly looking for ways to show their support for Black-owned travel businesses.

Even as the family road trip has made a comeback in the wake of the coronavirus, that sort of trip hasn’t been a source of unfettered freedom for generations of Black motorists because of Jim Crow laws enforcing racial segregation in America. And now, after a year in which protests of the police killings of Black people amplified the perils of skin color, Black travelers are seeking out Black travel agents, Black hoteliers and Black-owned short-term rentals in addition to organizing in groups dedicated to Black travelers.

In fact, according to the international survey of nearly 4,000 Black leisure travelers by MMGY Global, 54 percent of American respondents said they were more likely to visit a destination if they saw Black representation in travel advertising. In Britain and Ireland, 42 percent echoed that sentiment, and in Canada that number was 40 percent.

“Another highly influential factor in the decision-making process is whether the destination is perceived as safe for Black travelers,” the survey noted. “Seventy-one percent of U.S. and Canadian respondents felt safety was extremely or very influential to their decision.”

In Facebook groups, Clubhouse chat rooms and across other social media platforms, Black travelers regularly ask one another for recommendations about where to travel, particularly about where others have been where they felt safe and welcome. While these questions are often about foreign destinations, in a year when Americans could largely only travel within the United States, inquiries increasingly arose about where travelers felt safe within the country.

“I was just curious on some good and safe locations for a first time solo traveler here in the States,” one woman posted in a group specifically for Black women travelers in June.

“Where’s a good ‘safe’ place to travel in the States?” asked another woman who was planning a 35th birthday trip with her sister.

This type of community gathering, though now online, isn’t new. For decades, African American travelers have looked to one another for guidance on where to travel. The most referenced form was Victor Hugo Green’s Green Book, a guide for Black travelers that was published annually from 1936 to 1966.

Last summer, facing an onslaught of messaging from travel companies saying that they supported the Black Lives Matter movement and would be committing to diversifying their ranks and finding other ways to be more inclusive, Kristin Braswell, the owner of CrushGlobal, a company that works with locals around the world to plan trips, decided to make the inclusion of Black businesses central to her work.

As a Black woman with a passion for travel, she started making travel guides that focused on supporting Black businesses. Each guide, whether it be to national parks, beach towns or wine country, provides information on businesses owned by Black people as well as guidance about diversity in the area and more.

“These road trips and initiatives that speak to people of color in general are important because we’ve been left out of travel narratives,” Ms. Braswell said. “If you’re going to be creating experiences where people are going out into the world, all people should be included in those experiences.”

Ms. Braswell added that the bulk of her business comes from Black travelers. These travelers, she said, are looking for Black travel advisers who have the knowledge of places where they are welcomed and can help them plan their trips. Over the past year travelers across racial backgrounds have been increasingly asking for tours and experiences that include Black-owned businesses, she said.

Across the country, as people protested against police brutality, travelers demanded to see more travelers who looked like them in advertising; they spoke out against tourism boards that hadn’t been inclusive in the past and formed organizations like the Black Travel Alliance, calling for more Black travel influencers, writers and photographers to be employed.

The Alliance and others have been pushing for more Black travelers to be visible and included in the industry and in spaces of leisure travel.

Going beyond museums

At the same time, tour providers like Free Egunfemi Bangura, the founder of Untold RVA, a Richmond-based organization, are offering tours that center on the contributions of Black people. In a city such as Richmond, which was once a capital of the Confederacy, she said that means seeing the

value of working outside the established system of preservation societies and museums that are typically run by white leadership.

To Ms. Bangura and other activists, artists and tour operators, museums and traditional preservation societies are part of the culture of exclusion that has historically left Black people out and continues to present versions of history that focus on white narratives. Ms. Bangura's tours take place on the streets of the city as a better way to understand the local history.

At a time when state legislatures are pushing for and passing laws that limit what and how much students learn about the contributions of Black and other marginalized people to the country, Ms. Bangura and others said, tours that show their contributions are even more important.

“There is a way to take these experiences out of the hands of the traditional preservation community, so you don't have to go into the walls of a museum,” Ms. Bangura said, adding that another reason institutions like museums aren't optimal is because some people aren't keen to visit them. “But think of how often it is that after you come outside of a Black-owned coffee shop, you're actually able to hear about some of the Black people in that neighborhood or people that fought for Black freedom.”

Kalela Williams, the founder of Black History Maven, leads a tour in Philadelphia's Seventh Ward. Whitney Ingram

Additionally, although the tourism industry took a hit last year, outdoor activities continued to draw visitors, making outdoor tours like Ms. Bangura's and Ms. Fisher's of Beyond the Bell popular. Ms. Bangura said the style of her offerings makes them accessible for all travelers, especially those

without access to smartphones for scanning QR codes or those unable to take part in headphone-aided tours.

Among the several kinds of tours and experiences Ms. Bangura has created is Black Monument Avenue, a three-block interactive experience in Richmond's majority-Black Highland Park neighborhood. Visitors can drive through and call a designated phone line with unique access codes to hear songs, poems and messages about each installation. Every August, she runs Gabriel Week, honoring Gabriel Prosser, an enslaved man who led a rebellion in the Richmond area in 1800.

"I call him brother General Gabriel," Ms. Bangura said, adding that in her work, she encourages "people to decolonize their history by making sure that history is being told from the language of the oppressed, not the language of the oppressor."

Walking tours, for those who go on them, also provide a visceral sense of history that differs from the experience of a museum. Even as the National Museum of African American History and Culture has attracted record numbers of visitors to Washington, D.C., tours like Ms. Bangura's can provide a more local perspective and show visitors exactly where something significant happened.

"We can find community in walking together, we can find community in exploring a neighborhood together, and we can find a sense of where we are, we can find a sense of where folks have been and we can find common ground," said Kalela Williams, the founder of Black History Maven, a Philadelphia company that primarily offers walking tours of the city that focus on Black history.

"It's important to see where things were, how things were working in relation to one another," she said. "You can see the proximity of folks' houses and schools and churches. You can imagine how folks would have walked around and navigated and visited each other in a way that you might not in a museum."

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