

## Going to West Africa? It's a Trip Like No Other

African Americans have lately gravitated toward ancestral homelands like Benin, Ghana, and Togo. Special planning helps these heritage travelers have a positive experience.

BY TRAVIS LEVIUS

WEST AFRICAN must-sees like Ghana's Elmina Castle and Senegal's Maison des Esclaves, relics of the transatlantic slave trade, are some of the most important historical sites on the continent. They have an even deeper meaning for travelers like Rondel Holder. A Black New Yorker with family from Grenada and Jamaica, he's one of a growing number of people of the African diaspora returning to West Africa to explore his roots.

"I still get chills thinking about the dungeons and cellars of Elmina Castle," Holder says, recalling his visit in 2019. "For a lot of Black people, there's a longing to connect and a longing to learn about where we're from."

A number of developments are driving a surge of interest in heritage trips to West Africa. Advancements in DNA testing—led by Africa-focused

companies such as **AfroRoots DNA** ([afrorootsdna.com](http://afrorootsdna.com)) and **African Ancestry** ([africanancestry.com](http://africanancestry.com))—are making it easier for Black Americans to research their genetic backgrounds. Airlines, including Delta, have expanded service to West Africa. Tourism campaigns such as Ghana's 2019 Year of Return, timed to coincide with the 400 years since the first enslaved Africans arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, also attracted the diaspora. And a growing number of tour operators are stepping in to handle the logistics of these trips.

"We've never really had the chance to grow from the past," says

Atlanta-based Eric Martin, cofounder of **Black & Abroad** ([weareblackandabroad.com](http://weareblackandabroad.com)), which operates group tours to Ghana and Senegal. "By making a pilgrimage to these West African countries, seeing the sights, hearing the personal accounts of our African ancestors directly from their surviving descendants, we have a cathartic connection."

Black travelers say the experience can be life-changing.

"I feel more in touch with myself and my culture than ever before," says Brian Oliver, a Baltimore-based nonprofit director who visited the five African countries that matched his DNA: Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria, and Togo. Nicole Brewer, a teacher and blogger living in Oman whose DNA results showed a link to Ghana, added the country to her short list of places for retirement, after visiting during the Year of Return. Others, like Kristin Tellis Quayle of St. Petersburg, Florida, have turned heritage travel into a new career. A practicing lawyer, she also now runs **Certified Africa** ([certifiedafrica.com](http://certifiedafrica.com)), a firm that organizes trips to West Africa.

While these soul-stirring journeys are a powerful means for Black

A naming ceremony organized by Black & Abroad in Yamoransa, Ghana, in 2019.



Rondel Holder, right, and the Togolese fashion designer Koko, exploring Lomé, Togo.

Americans to trace their lineage, they also require careful planning.

"The reality is, Africa has its own complexities and perspectives that don't always match the idealized view of the continent those in the diaspora have," says Kwesi Ewoodzie, a Ghanaian-American sociologist and founding director of **Culture Beyond Borders** ([cbbexperience.com](http://cbbexperience.com)), an Atlanta tour operator. The right guide can help navigate language barriers

and facilitate meaningful cultural interactions. Facebook groups such as Black Travel Movement and Travel Africa Movement are excellent resources, filled with advice from locals. And media outlets like *Essence* and *Travel Noire* offer sound advice, often with Black Americans specifically in mind.

Another challenge: DNA testing can trace only Black Americans' racial backgrounds and geographic origins,

not the names or lineages of their families. Despite all of this, Holder says, his visit to Ghana was "deeply spiritual."

"You're standing where tens of thousands of Black people were enslaved, learning about everything they went through before they were shoved onto boats to cross the Atlantic," he recalls. "So, to be back in Africa willingly and happily, in the place where all of that happened, it's like my ancestors' wildest dreams."

## Can Black Travelers Find Themselves in India, Too?

A photographer discovered, on a trip to Rajasthan, that the answer is a resounding yes.

BY NANCY LOVA

As a Black traveler, I've had my share of difficulties. I've been ignored and belittled by waiters and hotel staff. Locals have grabbed my arms and taken my photo. I've been told I look "too exotic" to be from London, my hometown. Women have touched my hair without my permission. Men have catcalled, shouting the names of celebrities who look nothing like me—except for the fact that they, too, are Black.

These disrespectful gestures are almost enough to discourage me from traveling at all.

So when I set out for India in April 2019, I braced myself for plenty of negative attention and racial comments. Instead, I discovered a place that felt like home and that rekindled my love of exploring the world.

Which isn't to say it was easy. To make the most of my trip, I relied on a few tactics that helped me better navigate the destination. My first step was to book a room at a world-class hotel, the **Leela Palace Udaipur** ([theleela.com](http://theleela.com)) on Lake Pichola, which *Travel + Leisure* readers ranked as the best in the world in 2019.

It may seem obvious that a luxury hotel would provide top-notch service, but the benefits of my stay there went beyond the on-property pampering. The Leela's concierges handpicked kind and knowledgeable guides who they knew I would feel safe with. These guides took me to places of worship like Jagdish Temple, where I got a crash course in Hindu beliefs, and markets where I tried *kachori*, a deep-fried chickpea-flour snack, and *jalebi*, a traditional sweet. The photo-taking opportunities were nearly limitless.



Another key was seeking out local women in markets whenever I had a question, whether it was about directions, shops, or where to eat. Despite a language barrier, they often welcomed me through gestures like placing a vermilion bindi on my forehead or setting a garland of marigolds around my neck. In these moments, I felt protected and embraced.

Lastly, I reminded myself to keep an open mind. I brought my preconceptions to India, no doubt, but nobody there seemed surprised to learn I was from London. I'd gone to Rajasthan expecting one thing and left having learned that, while some trips may disappoint us, others can be life-affirming revelations.

The author captured the view of the pool at the Leela Palace Udaipur.



FROM TOP: COURTESY OF RONDEL HOLDER; COURTESY OF BLACK & ABROAD

NANCY LOVA