

Researchers: Black travelers want authentic engagement, not check boxes

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After the murder of George Floyd in 2020, when [travel brands](#)

—including Delta Air Lines, Hilton and Enterprise—pronounced their support for diversity and the Black Lives Matter movement, our research group was motivated to conduct a study that collected data of the travel experiences of more than 5,000 Black people and people of color.

Our work, published in [Afar magazine](#) and [Tourism Geographies](#), found that Black travelers expressed dissatisfaction with how the [travel](#) industry promotes itself as inclusive.

Authenticity matters

Black travelers want more genuine and authentic engagement and representation, we found, that showcases an investment in the Black community by partnering with Black-owned travel businesses, guides and experiences.

We conducted in-depth interviews with several of the people who provided data to us. Those we interviewed told us plainly that they are weary of being perceived as a single, uniform entity. They want more attention paid to their intersecting identities. First coined by Law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw back in 1989, intersectionality has come to mean that all oppression is linked to people's complex identities related to their gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability and more.

[Joshlyn Crystal Adams](#), CEO of Urbanista Travel, told us, "It's definitely more than being Black. It's also as a woman, where do I feel safe going ... if you go to this country as a gay person, just be mindful that if you're caught doing this or that, you can be arrested. So it spins far beyond race. It's definitely about gender and sexuality."

We also found that Black travelers notice the small things that add up to an experience of feeling valued and seen—or not.

Some companies support Black-owned businesses by buying their products in limited amounts. For example, [JW Marriott](#) sells [Diamond's Body Care](#) in their spas. But the [people in our study emphasized](#) the need for brands and destinations to make a greater effort.

"[What do you know about my hair?](#) Nothing," travel media personality, pilot and avid adventurer [Kellee Edwards](#) said about hotel shampoo. "Until they go ahead and mix that pot up and sprinkle some salt and pepper in it ... this is what we're going to be dealing with."

Diversity is not a box to check

In the [Jim Crow era](#), Black travelers were regularly denied access to crucial services such as gas, food, restrooms and lodging. Stopping in unfamiliar locations posed the threat of humiliation, threats or worse.

While it's true that race relations and access to travel by Black people have improved in the United States since [the Civil Rights Act of 1964](#), [generational trauma](#) has left a mark on Black travelers, affecting how and why [they choose to travel](#).

Edwards shared that identifying as a Black woman in a [traditionally male-dominated industry](#) is "exhausting."

"Diversity is a lot of things, but ... as women, we are very much underrepresented," Edwards said. "While we need to focus on inclusion when it comes to race, we also must focus on gender."

Travel often reinforces entrenched power dynamics, noted Christopher Carr, one of our study participants and an associate dean at George Mason University.

Carr said that destinations often engage in "[rainbow washing](#)"

"—superficial LGBTQ-friendly gestures meant to elicit positive feelings about a brand in order to sell something—with no real support going to the community, such as promoting pride flags while passing [anti-LGBTQIA corporate policies](#).

That leaves him to wonder if "the attention that I'm receiving is genuine or is it because I'm somebody's box to tick?"

Our [interviewees](#) called for actions beyond symbolic gestures and real effort to engage the community.

"If companies want to understand how to be appealing to our communities, they should go directly to us," study participant and AfroBuenaventura Transformative Travel founder [Ronnell Perry](#) said.

Change the industry from within

Black individuals hold fewer than 1% of top leadership roles—C-suite, director, CEO/president—in the U.S. hospitality industry, according to a [report by Castell Project](#).

Over the past decade, consultancies such as [McKinsey](#) have made it increasingly clear that companies with more diverse workforces perform better financially.

In our recent publication "[Black Travel Is Not Monolithic](#)," we proposed a road map to help guide the travel sector toward authentic inclusion. However, change requires taking power from the hands of dominant white, heterosexual, nondisabled and first-world nation groups.

One of our top suggestions is to [diversify human resource departments](#) so that individuals from diverse identities and backgrounds can actively participate in the hiring process. From there, they can address culturally

sensitive issues on a daily basis. Of course, this is true not just in travel but across industries.

Fostering an inclusive workplace also requires nurturing diverse leaders, inclusive of intersecting marginalized identities.

"Until you get people in who can represent us to say, 'Hey, this is my community and I know something about this and we can represent this,'" Edwards said, "it's not going to change."

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