

PUBLICATION

Becoming a Better Ally Through Travel

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With pandemic-related international travel restrictions beginning to lift for U.S. citizens, and the year-end holiday season fast approaching, you may be planning your next well-deserved getaway. Before you book that all-inclusive beach resort, consider the benefits of a more authentic local travel experience. Leisure travel is known to provide many benefits, not the least of which are relaxation and an escape from the everyday stressors we experience. But travelling to new destinations and experiencing life as a local can also broaden your world view and make you a better ally. By stepping outside of your comfort zone in a new location, you gain an appreciation for different cultures, languages, religions and lifestyles.

Getting to know people who live differently, even in a brief interaction, will not just give you and your travel companions a deeper understanding of another culture, it will allow you to have impactful discussions with friends and family about your experience. Enthusiastic storytelling about the kind woman you met at the local market selling homemade tamales, or the tour guide who led you through Paris pointing out her favorite patisserie with the most amazing *éclairs au chocolat*, creates a ripple effect throughout your social circle, thus broadening the perspective of others and encouraging them to seek out new experiences. This aspect of allyship is so simple that it is often overlooked, but understanding and respecting others is an essential part of the tapestry that is diversity, equity and inclusion, and travel can facilitate that understanding in a fun and meaningful way.

So how do you make the most of your trip and connect with the local culture? With so many pre-packaged tour options available, it is tempting to book a group experience tailored to North Americans traveling abroad, but although you'll still see the sights and meet new people, you likely won't have the opportunity to meet many locals and experience their way of life. Instead, book a tour with a local guide when you arrive at your destination. That way your fellow travelers on the tour will be from around the world and you'll get a local's perspective from your guide. Walking tours of European cities are very popular and easy to book in person at a local tourism office, with your hotel's concierge or online. Most big cities have themed tours such as a walking tour of local breweries or pubs, historic tours that focus on a particular moment in the city's history or architecture tours showing off the city's artistic flare.

Another great option is to attend a major festival or event that will immerse you in the local culture. Of course, many of these events will draw huge crowds so you will want to check if the event is still being held and research any health protocols that are in place. Traveling to Munich for Oktoberfest or Carnival in Rio de Janeiro would be unforgettable experiences highlighting the wilder side of your destination. For the more laid-back traveler, consider traveling during seasonal events like cherry blossom season in Japan or traveling to see the many Christmas markets all over Europe in December, and maybe hit the slopes while you're there!

If you prefer to avoid the crowds of festivals but still want to experience a new culture or way of life, you can always try to blend in and live like a local. Renting a home or apartment or renting a room in a home share/B&B rather than staying in a hotel can be a rewarding experience that gives you a glimpse into someone else's day-to-day life. While hotels are usually located near big attractions, a home share could be located in a residential area with its own charms.

I like to save one day of my vacation to have no plans at all and experience the city as a local would. That might mean a trip to a farmer's market in the morning or breakfast in a café followed by a walk to a park, museum or shopping mall. For lunch and dinner, I always try to find restaurants that are frequented by locals, not designed for tourists. Use online reviews to help you find a good spot or ask the waiter in your local café while you're having breakfast for their recommendation. My travel buddy and I still reminisce about the amazing meal we had ten years ago in Castellane, France that the owner of our campsite recommended to us.

If you will be traveling with kids, you can still have a great family vacation while enjoying cultural activities. One of my favorite childhood travel memories is visiting the Tower of London on a tour guided by a Beefeater who told us the history of King Henry VIII and his many wives. I remember being fascinated by stories and the beauty of the crown jewels and telling my friends how much fun I had in London. Giving your children the gift of travel is an amazing thing. It will help your family build lasting memories, and experiencing new perspectives firsthand will help your children promote diversity and inclusion within their own friend group, shaping the next generation of global citizens.

And don't forget that travel can happen in our own backyards. There may be neighborhoods that you've never visited just a few miles away that are home to diverse cultural or ethnic groups with restaurants highlighting cuisines you haven't tried or shops where you can purchase goods from another part of the world. Getting to know the communities that surround you will not only help you appreciate the talents of others, but it will also provide insight into the issues those communities may be facing and help you become a better neighbor and ally for them in the future.

The world is vast and filled with beautiful and exciting people, communities and cultures. I believe that if you seek to become an ally, seek first to understand others. Traveling can be one of the most rewarding ways to grow in understanding, and spread that understanding to those close to you. Happy travels!