

The Intelligent Traveler

TIPS AND TRICKS TO HELP YOU TRAVEL SMARTER

Edited by SARAH BRUNING

Heritage Travel, with an Assist from a Pro

Spurred by the rise in DNA kits, more and more travelers are trying to discover their roots. We asked four members of the A-List, T+L's group of top travel advisors, to reflect on the trend—and offer their suggestions for maximizing the emotional rewards you can draw from these trips. **BY MADELINE BILIS**

Organized heritage trips have expanded beyond Europe to Asia and Africa.





African Americans are taking trips to rediscover their roots in places like Senegal.

IS THERE ANYTHING MORE uniquely American than going off to discover your homeland? “It’s absolutely on an upswing,” says **Andrea Grisdale** (andrea@icbellagio.com; 39-031-952-059), an Italy specialist who says the southern part of the country is particularly in demand right now. In the developed world, access to thorough historical records and a robust pool of ancestry-kit participants can make it fairly easy to find hereditary links. Still, Grisdale and her team often employ unconventional methods to uncover missing connections and add context to family history. “We’ll go to homes for the elderly, explain what we’re doing, and speak with people who would be around our clients’ grandparents’ ages,” she explains. This often results in new leads they can pursue for clients.

In many parts of the world, it’s all about the unconventional methods. Documents like birth and death certificates and marriage licenses may be incomplete or nonexistent. DNA results from at-home kits may be less precise because there’s not as much data from which to draw conclusions.

So travel advisors have to find ways to put the pieces together. Wild China founder **Mei Zhang** (mei.zhang@wildchina.com; 888-902-8808), born and raised in Yunnan province, says figuring

out the exact town a client’s ancestors are from can “take a bit of triangulating” because of changes to the country’s romanization systems. (Nanjing, for instance, was once written as Nankin.) Recently, Zhang’s team tapped a local historian to help a Shanghai-born American visit the site of his grandfather’s former silk stocking factory. The client, who hadn’t been to China since he was three years old, supplied some details, including the road where the factory might have been. “The historian read this person’s documents and clearly knew where these roads were and where there was possibly a stocking factory,” Zhang says.

For one mother and child, a homecoming wasn’t so simple. Vermont resident Pamela McCann wanted to introduce her adopted Indian son, then-15-year-old Uttham, to his ancestral culture, so she provided Micato Safaris’ India expert **Marion Miller** (mmiller@micato.com; 212-545-7111) with the name of the orphanage in Bangalore

that she had used. Miller’s team tracked down the orphanage, which had since relocated within the city, and included it in a heritage trip McCann and her son took at the end of 2017. “Being able to bring him back to where he was born was almost as miraculous as meeting him,” McCann says. She adds that though Uttham was apprehensive about not being able to speak the language, he felt at ease with the kids he met.

Heritage travel for members of the African diaspora presents unique challenges and complexities. While some genetic details can be gleaned from AfricanAncestry.com, “because the records are so poor from the slave trade, it’s harder to make connections to where you’re from,” says Mark Dawson. The Atlanta resident first visited South Africa and Ethiopia to understand the broad strokes of African heritage with the help of Explore Inc. founder **Cherri Briggs** (cherri@explore-africa.net; 888-596-6377), who has spent 20 years traveling throughout Africa and works with operators there who have deep familiarity with specific tribes across the continent. Dawson says his experiences have been enriching. On his visit to Cape Town’s Langa township, he sat down for a meal at a small restaurant called Mzansi, where the cooking reminded him of soul food in the American South. “The way it was served, the way it was cooked, the way it tasted and everything,” Dawson says. “It felt like being at home.”

Inspired by his initial experiences, Dawson recently took another DNA test and plans to use the results to plot out a trip focused on his own roots. Based on what he’s pieced together so far, it will likely include Zimbabwe and countries in West Africa. “I’ve been to the Eiffel Tower—it’s beautiful,” he says. “But the things that were done by people in your past are just as magnificent. Maybe they’re not as known, but they are just as beautiful and important.”

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Percentage of polled A-List advisors who have booked trips involving heritage travel in the past year.