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Beyond the Bucket List: Experiential, Community-based Cultural Tourism Is on the Rise

By Diane Merlino | Apr 04, 2022



Historic Royal Street in the French Quarter of New Orleans

As the world emerges from the shadow of the Covid pandemic and many travelers seek a different and deeper way to experience destinations, cultural tourism is quietly gaining momentum in the travel industry.

While there is no standardized definition of cultural tourism, travel advisors, destinations and tour operators actively involved in this growing market segment describe it as beyond-the-bucket-list travel that is simultaneously immersive, experiential, community based, sustainable, and focused on connection, discovery and learning.

“Cultural tourism has so many different perspectives and aspects, but overarching it’s the connection of people, cultures, community and the ability for interaction on a very personal level,” says Richard Peterson, president & CEO of the U.S. Cultural & Heritage Marketing

Council (USCHMC).

Cultural tourism advocate and travel planner Christie Holmes, co-founder at Global CommUnity agency, says one of the key characteristics of cultural tourism is its community-based focus. "It's about having experiences where you are engaging with locals in their environment, in their everyday activities and lives, and exploring cultural history and traditions passed down from generation to generation."

Who is the cultural traveler?

Just as there is no all-encompassing definition of cultural tourism, there is no single profile of the cultural traveler. While they share certain characteristics, they have different travel interests, and cover a wide variety of demographics in terms of age, education, income level and prior travel experience.

In general, Peterson says, research shows that cultural travelers tend to be more affluent and travel individually, as couples or as a family, plugging into local experiences in a destination. Most want a curated versus a pre-packaged experience. Age range runs the gamut, he says, and is fairly evenly split across generations from Gen X through active Boomers.

While Holmes' clients are typically families in a higher economic bracket, income level is not a defining characteristic of cultural travelers. Rather, she says, "They are people who prioritize travel in their budget, no matter what their budget is."

Cultural travel options and opportunities

Cultural tourism covers a wide sweep of interests, options and opportunities.

Adventure travel, ecotourism, voluntourism, wellness travel and culinary tourism can all fall under the broader umbrella of cultural travel, depending on how a trip is sourced and conducted. Culinary tourism, including both food and wine, is more inclusive and accessible than other types of cultural tourism and has a much bigger base of interest.

"Culinary tourism has really expanded a lot in recent years, and there is a lot more interest and travel content around food," says Stephen Oddo, CEO and co-founder of Walks. "Learning more about what is culturally relevant to people with relation to food is a great example of cultural tourism, and that's on the rise."

Travel based on local events, activities and the arts, including festivals, music, art exhibitions, artisan fairs, and more, also offers cultural tourism opportunities.

"When you visit a place based on a particular attribute or event in a local culture, you are really becoming part of that destination, and that's what cultural tourism is all about," says Debra Brown, president and founder at SmartBird World Travel.

Suppliers develop products to focus on local culture

Tour operators, from very small local operators with a single offering to larger global organizations with multiple itineraries, are increasingly developing products and practices that focus on local cultures.

“We believe that travel is a force for good, and that there is a power in travel that can change lives for the traveler, the local people and the community,” says Steve Lima, managing director, U.S., for G Adventures. “For us, it’s about making sure passengers have a meaningful relationship and connection with the local communities that directly benefits the people and places that they visit.”

That ethos, and a heightened consciousness around sustainable and inclusive practices across different industries and countries, are driving forces behind the growing consumer interest in cultural tourism.

According to Peterson, in the U.S. in particular, the recent emphasis on diversity and belonging, fueled by multiple socio-cultural movements including Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate, are also changing why and how people travel.

“There’s a new sense of looking under every rock, because the way people are engaging with culture has completely shifted,” Peterson says. “We as a country have learned to hold each other culturally aware and culturally connected in a way that has never been done before in our lifetime. That is why there has been a shift to wanting to go deeper, to learn the untold stories, the real stories about the people and the place, versus what has been told for years.”

Destinations focus on cultural tourism

Domestic and international destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and destination management companies (DMCs) are playing a growing and vital role in the development of cultural travel opportunities.

Notes Peterson, “Whether they are a small township of 8,000 to 9,000 people or a larger urban or rural community, they are all learning that cultural experiences, cultural content, and cultural conversations that spotlight artists, artisans, food makers, and the creative economy and small businesses in their communities, is more important than ever.”

That recognition is prompting some DMCs to reach out directly to travel advisors for help in promoting their area’s cultural tourism opportunities and experiences.

“The floodgates have opened,” says Brown. “Smaller tourism boards are appealing directly to the travel advisor community. They are starting to work with travel advisors and consortia so they can reach a larger audience outside of their local areas. Except for those destinations that specialize in this type of travel, this is the first time they have really had our ear.”

The future of cultural tourism

Travel advisors and tour operators say their bookings for culturally based travel are increasing, and continued growth prospects for cultural tourism are strong. While tour companies, suppliers and destinations will continue to play key roles in the evolution of cultural travel and tourism, changing consumer values around travel are the primary driving force that will shape the future of the market segment.

According to a recent global research study across more than 200 countries conducted by Euromonitor International, more than 75 percent of survey respondents said they value real life experiences, and 62 percent believe it's important to experience cultures other than their own.

"People want more of a human connection," Brown says. "That's one of the things that came out of stepping back during Covid. We aren't looking to travel in the same way anymore. We want to do more, see more, be more. People are traveling, not so much to say they went somewhere, but to say that they did something when they were there, they learned something, discovered something, and they were changed by something."

The role of travel advisors in promoting and selling cultural tourism is evolving alongside the segment itself, and, according to Peterson, has yet to be realized.

"Depending on what we see with consumer sentiment for cultural consumption this year, I think 2023 and beyond will be a very exciting time for travel advisors, especially those focusing on niche markets," he says. "There is definitely a market for cultural travel, and people love specialists."

New Orleans Undertakes Ambitious Program to Rebrand as 'The Cultural Capital of the South'



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As more travelers seek authentic and immersive cultural tourism opportunities in domestic destinations and overseas, New Orleans has undertaken an ambitious multi-year plan to rebrand the city as the cultural capital of the South.

“Cultural tourism is going to comprise 75 percent of what we focus on, because that’s what we believe is the essence of the New Orleans experience,” says Stephen Perry, president and CEO of the New Orleans & Company destination marketing organization. “In New Orleans, culture erupts every day in a different way than in other places. The combination of African and Caribbean and Spanish and French influences has organically created a unique culture over a long period of time.”

The city will focus on four pillars in the rebranding process including music and the arts, food, museums and attractions, and sporting events and outdoor activities. “History is not a separate pillar, because history is infused in every one of the four pillars,” Perry explains. “The one underlying theme of everything here is history.”

Beyond Bourbon Street

Perry notes that the city has evolved as a tourist destination, including the type of travelers it attracts and the activities they are interested in.

“It’s no longer just about the folks who just want to walk on Bourbon Street and drink a lot,” he notes. “Do people still do that? Of course, they do, and they have a lot of fun. But the most fun people have here is going out to eat, going to the clubs, going to see the shows and the exhibits and exploring the city.”

New Orleans now attracts what he describes as “a fascinating mixture” of travelers. “New Orleans has always been thought of as more of an adult destination but in reality, it isn’t,” Perry adds. “The clientele who come to New Orleans cover the broadest range you can imagine, including families.”

Travel advisors can become certified New Orleans professionals by completing one of seven courses offered on the travel advisor page on the DMO's website.

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