

CELEBRATING BLACK CULTURE

Contemporary African American performances, art and restaurants
provide insight into the unwritten chapters of American life.

BY DANA GIVENS

Every year, thousands of fans and musicians gather for the International Blues Festival in Beale Street in Memphis. (Photo by Andrea Zucker, courtesy Memphis Tourism)

Travelers to U.S. cities will typically include visits to historic and cultural landmarks. If they're heading to Philadelphia, the Liberty Bell is a must-see; in New York, it's Times Square and perhaps a Broadway show. You visit these places to learn more about the city's place in history, or perhaps to see how a city's energy, culture and art are expressed.

Famous restaurants, live music venues, shops and cultural centers inspire travel planning, and a select few of these attractions have come to define those cities in most travelers' minds. But the list of attractions is often incomplete; it tells only one side of a city's roots and provides a selective narrative of its evolution. Often missing from the narrative is the story of Black America, past and present.

When we do learn about African American history, it's often solely through sites and museums related to the struggle for civil rights. The most-visited sites are those connected to African Americans who took part in the movement: Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Park in Atlanta or the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, for example.

But these sites tell only part of the story. There are many opportunities, unrecognized by most travelers, to explore both Black history and the present-day culture and the long string of contributions from African Americans. The events of 2020 brought to the surface not only an uprising of the younger generations calling for an end to racial injustice but a broader awareness and desire among many Americans to advance social change toward that same end. Cultural understanding is the first critical step to moving forward, bridging the divide and helping heal.

African American culture is an important part of American culture, and this can be seen in the everyday life of neighborhoods from Oakland, Calif., to Detroit to Chicago. Whether you realize it or not, its presence is woven into the energy you feel in those cities as soon as you arrive.

“You can see patterns of our culture sprinkled somewhere and everywhere,” said Martinique Lewis, president of the Black Travel Alliance and author of “The ABC Travel Greenbook” series listing Black-owned businesses and attractions across the U.S. The series pays tribute to the original “Negro Motorist Green Book” travel guides written by Victor Hugo Green to help African Americans travel the country safely during the Jim Crow era. Lewis wants to use her platform to not only share Black history and culture but also to show how they connect to today’s conversations.

“Do [visitors] understand why something is a historical landmark? Do they understand, for instance, that this is the only place where African Americans could go to eat, the only place to shop, the only place to perform — right on a strip of land that [is now threatened]?” she asked. “That’s why it’s so important. It’s learning the stories and understanding why people are so connected to the ground or an area.”

The only way to truly understand Black culture’s fullness is for travel advisors and visitors to incorporate sites reflective of contemporary Black culture when planning trips. You don’t have to stick to museums about history and civil rights monuments; there are cultural experiences beyond history’s most painful moments.

(Note: Covid restrictions have impacted many performance centers, museums and restaurants mentioned in this article, so check their current status before planning a visit.)

Must-sees in the East, Midwest and West Coast

Restaurants are sometimes the cultural epicenter of local Black culture. They’re a place to learn about and experience African American life. Ben’s Chili Bowl is a landmark eatery in the heart of Washington that draws thousands of tourists every year while remaining a cultural site that still connects deeply to the city’s large African American population. Frequent visits by Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson and, more recently, Barack Obama demonstrate how a restaurant can remind a visitor that Black history often exists in plain sight in whatever American city you visit. Ben’s deep imprint, with its literal flavors and metaphorical textures, has become embedded in the cultural foundation of this exciting city.



Ben's Chili Bowl, founded 1958 and still a fixture in Washington, was a frequent gathering place for civil rights leaders. (Photo courtesy Ben's Chili Bowl)

Before and after the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, prominent African Americans in the performing arts have formed their creative visions in places that continue to nurture talent and dreams. Artistic hubs allowed visitors to see stories told by the people who lived those experiences.

Among the most striking spots to experience the expression of African American performance in New York is the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, which continues to have a profound influence on the performing arts world, with its highly acclaimed dance studio.

At the August Wilson African American Cultural Center, named after the renowned playwright, visitors to Pittsburgh can see artwork and performances and learn more about Black culture in several creative media.

Chicago is home to the famed Black Ensemble Theater, which showcases stories that reveal different aspects of the African American experience.

Travelers headed west have options to see how African American artists used settings in that region to display and perform their work and contribute to American society. In San Francisco, visitors can roam the galleries of the Museum of the African Diaspora to learn about diversity within the Black experience and how that shapes the world around us, bridging history with contemporary conversations that push us forward.

Southern meccas of food and art

Further south, many of the cities were literally constructed from the struggles of the Black people who called them home. Although many African Americans migrated north and west, some stayed in the South, despite tense and tumultuous times of intense racial violence and segregation.

“Southern states were built on the backs of Black people,” Lewis said. “Their history is born of slavery, [but also was influenced by Black] music, dance and culture. You see sprinkles of it throughout modern-day society. A lot of people don’t know [where certain cultural references come from], but it’s like, yeah, that was a Black person or, yeah, that was a Black movement or that was something that Black people did that was then adopted in popular culture.”

The newly opened National Museum of African American Music, located in the heart of Nashville, enables visitors, through interactive experiences, to better understand the cultural impact of Black culture through its most prominent musicians.

Music City is also the home of hot chicken, a recipe developed by Thornton Prince that has been part of the city’s African American community since the 1930s. His legacy lives on at Prince’s Hot Chicken Shack, now overseen by his great-niece Andre Prince Jeffries. At Prince’s, you can taste the original recipe while sitting in its original location. The African American community of Nashville has always called the restaurant home, and it’s a wonderful expression of the city’s distinctive culture.

In New Orleans, the influence of Black culture can be heard and seen throughout the city, but perhaps nowhere more reliably than in Congo Square, where jazz musicians and African-style drumming frequently provide the soundtrack. This remarkable area offers an abundance of history and no shortage of local tours to provide insight into the meaning of its cultural landmarks.

One of the city’s most celebrated eateries, Dooky Chase’s Restaurant, is not only important to the culinary history of New Orleans but was the site of many meetings that helped define African American history and culture. Its late chef, Leah Chase, was beloved both for her take on Southern cooking and for hosting prominent civil rights leaders who met at her restaurant. Today, the restaurant is a magnet for famous Black patrons, from Beyonce Knowles to former President Obama.

Restaurants are often pillars of Black neighborhoods and also frequently double as informal museums. The photos on their walls tell stories with an immediacy sometimes lacking in traditional museum display cases. At the Busy Bee Cafe in Atlanta, established 1947, a historical timeline is detailed in black-and-white photos hung in old picture frames. They tell the story of the neighborhood and the people who, though they may have operated in different social spheres, lived nearby or visited the cafe. And it has a distinct advantage over other institutions with a historical perspective: most others don’t serve delicious plates of soul food.

Chicken and waffles at Atlanta’s Busy Bee Cafe, established 1947. (Photo by Lemon Brands)

Many cities with rich African American cultural offerings are inspiring for songwriters, authors and other artists and continue to influence new generations of storytellers. The Beale Street Historic District in Memphis was the focus of the W.C. Handy song “Beale Street Blues.” James Baldwin saw resonance between that song and his novel “If Beale Street Could Talk,” even though the setting for that novel (and subsequent movie) is Harlem. Take a listen to Handy’s song before taking a walk through the street, which today is a center for jazz, blues and other traditional Black musical genres.

The unwritten stories

The stories of the Black experience in the U.S. go beyond its civil rights movement and touch the resilience and joy that came from those who lived this experience. So many of today’s Black neighborhoods are cultural sites in plain sight, places where history is integrated with everyday life. Each is a chapter of a greater story that’s an important part of the history of America. Those chapters of triumphs and struggles have, for too long, been a lost

narrative in a country still struggling to engage in meaningful, honest conversations about race relations.

The real education begins by understanding the role that Black culture, historical and contemporary, has played in the evolution of American cities. And there is no better way to learn about it than by actually engaging with the cultural legacy and modern artistic visions — often sitting side by side — in Black communities throughout America.

Black cultural history, Lewis reminds us, isn't often found in museums in this country because, by conscious choice, it remains unmentioned. She calls it part of "the known unknowns ... the unwritten stories" that can be unlocked by the context of today in the places that show why a place is like it is. "It's important to keep the legacy going," she said. After visiting places important to Black culture, "teach the next person about it so that they know [to] visit that place."

As an African American travel writer, I urge people: When you visit the country's great cities, don't be afraid to explore beyond traditional sites. Book a private tour of our cultural landmarks, visit a performing center to hear our music, make a reservation at one of our flavorful restaurants. Taste, figuratively and literally, our culture's vibrancy, and take the time to read the great unwritten stories of American history.

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