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Destinations

## The Top-Down Diversity Push That U.S. Tourism Desperately Needs Is Here

Lebawit Lily Girma, Skift - Feb 03, 2021 2:00 pm

### SKIFT TAKE

**T**he first full-time, diversity-focused organization for U.S. travel launched this week as destination marketers, trade groups and publicists are also collaborating on solutions to equity, diversity and inclusion barriers in tourism. It's long and shamefully overdue — but promising, since change begins from the C-suites down.

— Lebawit Lily Girma

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The conversation around diversity, race and inclusion in the U.S. travel industry and the lack thereof, has been a recurring one for years – or as Skift described it back in 2013, “stuck in neutral.”

But even as scrutiny intensified during last year’s global pause, skepticism remained as to whether travel brands and destination marketing organizations would commit to real change beyond mission statements, Zoom panels and social media posts.

Months later, however, collective goals and actions are finally emerging from some of the industry’s most influential segments. Unprecedented in the influence of those backing it and in its sheer scope, the effort promises to turn the heightened conversation around diversity in travel into real demonstrable actions.

From a new round-the-clock organization dedicated to equity, diversity and inclusion in tourism to destination marketing organization CEO training and newly formed collaborations among travel media and publicists, efforts are doubling in crafting concrete solutions and building avenues for the industry to do better – and it’s coming mostly from the top.

## **TOURISM DIVERSITY MATTERS: A ONE STOP DIVERSITY ORGANIZATION FOR THE INDUSTRY**

Black History Month kicked off this week with the launch of Tourism Diversity Matters, founded by Mike Gamble, CEO of SearchWide Global, and chaired by Elliott Ferguson, CEO of Destination DC.

The organization’s mission is to serve as “a diversity resource that will educate, advocate, engage and empower the tourism and events industry,” as well as inspire inclusive leadership.

“This has been important to our business, SearchWide Global, for a long time, to me personally,” Gamble said. “But I often thought, wouldn’t it be amazing to have an

organization in our industry that’s focused on diversity, equity



Elliott Ferguson, President and CEO, Destination DC

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Founding partners include the Philadelphia Convention & Visitors Bureau and ConferenceDirect Foundation, while the Board of Directors comprises an illustrious and diverse list of tourism and trade group executives as well as non-tourism thought leaders, including from the U.S. Travel Association, Destinations International, Latino Hotel Association, Kimpton Hotels and Restaurants, and San Diego State University faculty.

“We started talking about this in earnest probably at the beginning of my time as chair [of the U.S. Travel Association] and then 2020 hit,” Ferguson said, referring to prior years’ efforts that had ebbed and flowed until last year’s senseless murders and the countrywide Black Lives Matters Movement protests took place. “That was an opportunity for me and others to say we need to do more, do better and be purposeful and make sure that this remains a priority for everyone.”

One of the group’s most promising pillars is its apprenticeship program, which is already up and running through Search Wide Global, and aims to impact the workforce by engaging youth in three different tracks: destination hospitality, sports, and meetings and events.

“[T]his is giving young people an opportunity to do a 600-hour apprenticeship, and then guarantee them a job at the end,” Gamble said. “So let’s take the destination one, as an example: they would work at a destination marketing organization, probably work at a large hotel and then probably at a convention facility, and at the end be guaranteed a job in that community and if not, SearchWide Global will find them work.”

Ferguson noted that there’s no lack of diversity problem in the industry at the bottom levels. “There’s tons of that; who wants to stick around 30 years to move up and see those opportunities?”

## **A DIVERSITY STRATEGY ROADMAP FOR DESTINATION MARKETING ORGANIZATIONS**

In January, Destinations International launched its equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) strategy roadmap for more than 6,000 destination marketing organizations and partner members.

This best practices EDI framework, the first of its kind for this sector, prioritizes four key areas: self-awareness and personal investment, education and awareness; community engagement, workforce development, and branding and promotion.



Destinations International's initial focus is CEO engagement under the "self awareness" pillar. Almost 200 CEOs of marketing organization members have signed the CEO Pledge, but the trade association is also offering EDI training to executive leadership as a first step in long-term change, from CEOs to board members.

"That's why we're starting with the masterclass that's going to start this week," Melissa Cherry, Destinations International's chief operations officer, said, adding that CEOs and board members are the ones that implement change in destinations and "the ones that need to have the emotional intelligence to have conversations around micro-aggressions or bias, and know how to deal with that from a board management perspective and governance."

The executive EDI masterclass consists of six sessions taking place every other month for 90 minutes and running through December. Two course sections are offered thus far.

"[T]hose maxed out at 50 attendees per and we're sold out, like I'm squeezing people in," Cherry said. "So that's an early metric right, like OK, this is a viable, there's interest."

Cherry, who also sits on the board of the new Tourism Diversity Matters, pointed to the importance of this new body as a means of creating future succession paths.

"How do we support programs that create talent, because you'll see in a lot of our work, talent and acquiring talent and keeping talent in the industry is very difficult. Tourism is very misunderstood, [] we have to focus on the workforce development piece of it," Cherry said.

Last week, the total number of Black destination tourism marketing leaders rounded to 10 out of 700 tourism and convention bureau offices in the U.S., when 32-year tourism industry veteran Cleo Battle became Louisville's first Black CEO.

## **A TRAVEL MEDIA-PUBLICIST COALITION**

"The Collective' was started because many of us were not included in the industry calls or conferences that were formed around the times of the Covid travel bans," co-founders Naledi Khabo, Africa Tourism Association CEO, and Paula Franklin, a public relations specialist, said. "We did start getting more invites after May."

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The group of Black travel media and publicists published The Black List this week – a free compilation of established Black travel experts and tour companies offering services and experiences worldwide.

The impetus for creating this list was the group's disappointment in the "still shockingly and overwhelmingly white" travel advisor lists coming out of mainstream media publications despite recent promises to do better.

"We think this is important because inclusion on this list has a direct economic benefit to these businesses," Khabo and Franklin said.

CrushGlobal, among over 60 travel companies on The Black List, provides curated international trips but quickly pivoted post-Covid.

"[T]o be a Black woman in an industry that has not always been inclusive presented a particular set of problems in addition to the pandemic," owner Kristin Braswell said in a statement. "I resolved to lead by example, creating the CrushGlobal Road Trips, which highlight various routes around the U.S. with an emphasis on supporting Black owned businesses on the road."

## **A DEEP-DIVE STUDY ON THE BLACK TRAVELER**

These recent industry efforts come on the heels of a comprehensive study, The Black Traveler: Insights, Opportunities and Priorities, spearheaded by marketing and communications firm MMGY Global and conducted in partnership with the Black Travel Alliance and the National Coalition of Black Meeting Professionals, with data gathered from the U.S., Canada, France, Germany, the U.K. and Ireland.

"In these six countries, if you total up the [Black traveler] spending power, it's close to \$160 billion; a lot of that is for the U.S. market," Ursula Petula Barzey, research committee chair for the Black Travel Alliance, said. "It's an opportunity that should not be overlooked by destinations and travel brands[.]"

Among Black leisure travelers in the U.S., up to 46 percent traveled solo – a trend that extended across international destinations – and 44 percent stayed in hotels for a total of 458.2 million stays in 2019, which accounts for 13.1 percent of the U.S. leisure travel market.

"So it's really important for destinations to address safety as it relates to crime, but also general cultural sensitivity, especially in hotels where staff don't seem to treat Black travelers the same," Barzey said.

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A whopping 54 percent said they were more likely to visit a see Black representation in travel advertising.

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“There is a clear economic argument that if you invest in hiring more Black people on your staff, marketing to Black people and making sure that once they get to the destination their experience is a positive one, it can be a win win all around,” Barzey said, adding that destination marketing organizations and travel brands should customize their messaging for boomers, Gen X, as Black travelers have varied interests.

As more data and collaborative commitments strengthen among the industry’s leading trade groups and across multiple sectors, there’s hope that the clamors for change and a diverse, equitable and inclusive travel industry are no longer just lip service.

It’s a long road ahead, but these worthy efforts point to the start of a long-term transformation that’s starting at the top.

*Editor’s Note: Global tourism reporter Girma is a member of The Collective.*

Tags: coronavirus recovery, diversity and inclusion, dmos

Photo Credit: Discussions on the lack of diversity in U.S. travel are finally getting unstuck with major actions from the industry’s destination leaders and trade groups, including a new tourism diversity-focused organization. Monkey Business / Adobe

