

# Being Black in travel

Seven Black travel professionals participated in a roundtable discussion that explored their experiences in the industry.

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TW illustration by Jenn Martins

In November, Travel Weekly published research (<https://www.travelweekly.com/Travel-News/Travel-Agent-Issues/Diversity-perception-and-reality>) that demonstrated a wide gap in perception between white travel professionals and Black travel professionals about how diverse and inclusive the industry is: 61% of white respondents felt it was diverse and inclusive, and an equal percentage of Black respondents felt that it was not.

To help understand the dynamics behind this perception gap, Travel Weekly asked seven members of the Northstar Travel Group Black Advisory Board to participate in a roundtable discussion that explored their experiences in the industry and share what it's like to be a Black travel professional.

Those participating in the discussion were Jazzmine Douse, national account manager for AmaWaterways; Margie Jordan, vice president of the TRUE Global Network for CCRA International; Nik Morales, president of the Travel Agency, a division of Ascot Travel Services; Stephen Scott, founder and CEO of Travel Hub 365 and the Odyssey Travel App; David Van Ness, vice president of All Travel; and Cory Wallace, national account manager for Celebrity Cruises.



Northstar Travel Group Black Advisory Board members, left to right from the top row down: Stephen Scott, David Van Ness, Jazzmine Douse, Cory Wallace, Nik Morales, Tyronne Stoudemire and Margie Jordan.

The roundtable was moderated by Tyronne Stoudemire, the global vice president of diversity, equity and inclusion for Hyatt Hotels.

The original transcript has been edited for length, and the chronology has been altered to keep dialogue about specific topics together, though the topic might have recurred at intervals during the course of the conversation.

**Tyronne Stoudemire:** Let's start with: What is diversity, equity and inclusion? What does all this mean?"

**Nik Morales:** To me, it means being able to see somebody that looks like me in a position that I can aspire to. I didn't realize how important it was until 25 years in. You know, the first Black person I saw in a title like vice president was David Van Ness, and I just was completely blown away. I didn't know other Black people existed in this space, let alone on that level. I've been very fortunate to know David. And Pat Walker of Pat Walker Travel. To be able to see these amazing Black, beautiful, smart, articulate faces gave me the gas to keep pumping.

But diversity, equity and inclusion in the workspace didn't really change for me until I opened up my own company, because what we don't realize growing up is that we're taught to expect to have a white person be our boss, but white people aren't necessarily taught to expect to have a Black boss. It's a little disconcerting when you're the one paying all the bills and salaries and then have a white person discount what you're bringing to your own company. So, it doesn't just stop with working for somebody else; you also have to battle when you are the boss. That's completely absurd.

**Tyronne Stoudemire:** Dr. Nancy Adler did research on organizational behavior and found that, on a multicultural team, if a leader ignores or suppresses cultural differences or sees cultural differences as an obstacle, the team won't perform as well as a monocultural team of, say, all white men or all white women. But a multicultural team where a leader acknowledges and supports cultural differences and sees cultural differences as an asset to performance, that team will outperform a homogeneous team.

Do any of you have experiences that relate to these findings?

**Cory Wallace:** The only company that I've worked for in my professional career is Celebrity Cruises and, to be perfectly honest with you, while the level of diversity, specifically for folks of color, is not where it could be or should be, I've always felt that my voice is heard. I've been blessed to have always had managers or supervisors who actually took what I had to say into consideration. And in my current role as the national account manager, there are four of us, two of whom are Black, a third who's Hispanic. So we have a very diverse team. And, as a result, we are very productive. It's because of the variance of ideas that we're able to collectively perform at a high level. But I've really been blessed to always have been in a position where I felt valued. That's huge. And I know that it's something that a great many people in our culture don't feel.

**Tyronne Stoudemire:** Because you're not suppressed and ignored and you have a critical mass of people of color, you're able to get results and feel good about being there. But let's talk about the other side of that.

**Cory Wallace:** On the other side, I will tell you that, with my personality, if I ever felt like I was not being heard, I would stop speaking. And there would be a reduction in production because I wouldn't feel as invested. The more invested you are, the more likely you are to contribute to the best of your abilities because you feel part of it. If people do not feel heard, they cannot excel and give their best.



**'The more invested you are, the more likely you are to contribute to the best of your abilities. ... If people do not feel heard, they cannot excel and give their best.'**

*Cory Wallace, Celebrity Cruises*

**Stephen Scott:** It happens to each of us in different ways, but it also happens collectively. When you get to the workforce, you assume right off the bat, as a young person, that, "Hey, I'm going to come in here. I'm going to work hard, and that's all I need to do to succeed." I think I assumed I was just one of the guys, one of the team members, until I hit that moment when I discovered that, oh, no, I'm being looked at very differently around here, and I am alone in this situation. So, I think the inclusiveness becomes more important when you hit that awareness moment in the workplace. It doesn't mean I didn't hit that moment previously in high school or in college, but you hit that moment and you say, "You know what? It's not simply about me working hard in here. I am being treated differently than others."



**'I hit that moment when I discovered that, oh, no, I'm being looked at very differently around here, and I am alone in this situation.'**

*Stephen Scott, Travel Hub 365 and the Odyssey Travel App*

**Nik Morales:** It's so true. When I work, my work ethic is above par. And I have been the highest-generating agent in a lot of offices. I'm taking on so much work, because we're thoroughbreds. This is what we do. And to have my work ethic doubted, and on every occasion to have my numbers double- and triple-checked...

To piggyback off of Stephen, I thought it was equal, but when I asked for advancement, it was always like, "Nah. We can't really move you into management. We need you, essentially, picking the cotton. Because you pick more cotton."

**Tyronne Stoudemire:** Some say that we have to work twice as hard. David, is it that true? Do we have to work twice as hard as our white counterparts?

**David Van Ness:** I certainly have grown up in that environment. My parents taught me from a very early age that I had to do better and be better than my white friends. So, you know, when I look back, from being a kid up to the present day, I've often been the only Black person in the school or the neighborhood or the workforce. So, yeah, that expectation of outperforming has always been there, and that's been ingrained in me. Fortunately, for the past 30 years, although we're a medium-size agency, management has been two of us: me and the president. So, that's not been the issue, fortunately for me. But I know that for many colleagues in other companies, or on the supplier side or in large corporations, that certainly is very much at play.



**'My parents taught me ... that I had to do better than my white friends. That expectation of outperforming has always been there, and that's been ingrained in me.'**

*David Van Ness, All Travel*

**Tyronne Stoudemire:** There's a saying that we have to prove ourselves competent, and white men have to prove that they're not competent. If a white man is given an opportunity and he is not quite ready for that opportunity, he takes it anyway. When some other color is given an opportunity, we do what? We need more education, we need more skills. That tends to be the case.

I want to talk about stereotypes and archetypes. The stereotype is that we all behave a certain way, that all Black folks eat fried chicken and watermelon, right? Of course, we're all very different in the selection of food that we eat.

And archetype is: We have a tendency. So, as Blacks, we have a tendency sometimes to be very animated. Our voices sometimes elevate when we're passionate.

**Jazzmine Douse:** Sometimes we're very expressive. It's part of our culture that we can be really passionate and excited about things and especially things that we really care about. We can be vocal. And I have been that type of person, and I realize that when you have that type of personality, that may end up being misconstrued or misinterpreted as being emotional versus being passionate about something. So you're mindful of that, because your emotion or your passion is going to be misconstrued as being too emotional, versus someone else who is going to be perceived as just being really passionate about their job and always wanting to be the best at what they do.

**Tyronne Stoudemire:** Margie, what Jazzmine just described — what stereotype or label is put on Black women when they behave that way, passionate and direct?

**Margie Jordan:** Well, she's the "angry Black woman."

**Tyronne Stoudemire:** Tell me more about the angry Black woman, Margie.

**Margie Jordan:** Sometimes you get passionate. You are doing everything that you think you should be doing, or you're defending your position, and that is often viewed as aggressive. Too aggressive. And you get that angry Black woman label.

I had a situation I want to share. I worked for a real estate company for about 12 years. I was their director of creative services, and I had a team underneath me. And there was a meeting that would occur every single year, a big celebratory meeting amongst all of the other directors, the senior vice president and the CEO of the company. And I never knew this meeting was occurring, even though I was a director.

One day an invite came in my inbox. I had never received this invite before, so I asked about it, and they said "Oh, yeah, we want you to come, Margie."

So, I go to this meeting, and it was an evening dinner, and we all brought our spouses or significant others. And I'm mingling with some of the people there, and the spouses of the other executives would walk over to me and say, "So, are you new?" And I'd say, "No. I've been here for over 10 years." And they said, "How come you've never been to this meeting?" I said, "Because I've never been invited."

My supervisor heard me say that, and she followed me around most of the meeting until we sat down for dinner, because she didn't want me to say it to anybody else. But I was asked numerous times. When we sat down to dinner, one of the other executive's husband was sitting next to me. He asked me the same question, "Are you new?" I said, "No. I've been here for 10 years." And he said, "How come you've never



been to this meeting?” And I said just as loud as I could — now, maybe that’s aggressive, but — “I’ve never been invited.” And they just all sort of looked at me. And from that day until the day I left, I was never invited again. Now, was I the angry Black woman? No, I was really making a point: I’ve been at this company contributing for all of these years and you’ve not recognized me at all. You’ve not invited me, you’ve not included me. And that was a point worth making. Now, could it have risked my job? Maybe. It didn’t, but maybe. But, yeah, we get that angry Black woman sort of scenario. I have multiple examples over my lifetime of being overlooked, of being discriminated against, of being marginalized in ridiculous ways. Utterly ridiculous ways — using the N-word in front of me. So, do I get passionate about it? Do I get frustrated by it? Yeah, I do. I do.

**Cory Wallace:** We, as a people, have a natural, intrinsic passion about us, right? At the end of the day, we care. That’s not to imply that other people don’t, but we care. We love hard, we live hard. It’s a double-edged sword because it helps us to excel in life, as well, because you give your all. You give so much because you refuse to fail. Failing is not an option.

Now, the flip side is it can come across to those who are unfamiliar with it as threatening and intimidating. And like, how can you applaud me for something that helps me to be productive, which benefits the organization, but then hold it against me when I’m a little demonstrative? I find it interesting how when a woman, and a woman of color specifically, wants to speak her mind and express herself, then she is angry or overly emotional. Alternatively, though, if a man, specifically a white man, were to do the same, then it’s applauded, because he’s aggressive, he’s bold, he’s firm, he’s strong. You know? I find that double-standard interesting.

**Nik Morales:** Even just standing up for yourself, saying, “No, this is not the behavior I will tolerate,” can be a problem.

At one company I worked at, my boss was irritated by the fact that I changed my hair every week — like, that was a legit problem?

At another company, my boss would come in late every day, but it was cool because they knew that I was a grinder. I still have an amazing Rolodex. They wanted my Rolodex, and I was, like, “If you don’t have 20K, you can’t have my Rolodex.” I still have an amazing Rolodex.

**Tyronne Stoudemire:** Let me stop you for a moment. A lot of millennials may be reading this. What’s a Rolodex?

**Nik Morales:** It is the money bag!

**Tyronne Stoudemire:** The contact list, right?

**Nik Morales:** Yes. I'm an immaculate code-switcher, but when I do let down that guard, take off that mask — they don't want that. They thought they wanted it, but they don't really want that. When, as a Black woman, you step into your boldness and your passion and your strength and your intellect, it's like — I've literally been told, you know, "You're a person that gives 150%. Can you dial it back to 85%?"

**Tyronne Stoudemire:** Nik introduced a new phrase. She said "code-switcher." Cory, have you ever had to code-switch in any of your environments, professionally or personally? And please define what it is.

**Cory Wallace:** Code-switching is basically the art, the skill, of recognizing who your audience is and speaking in a way that is comfortable to them, that they can identify with.

**Tyronne Stoudemire:** Cory, who is "them"?

**Cory Wallace:** To a particular audience. In most cases, code-switching is something we people of color have to do when we're speaking to our Caucasian counterparts. If I'm speaking to Black co-workers, I switch to another way. Or — I'm from New Orleans — when I go home, when I speak to my peeps, it's slightly different, as well. But, I mean, it is something that if you are going to excel in corporate America or just excel in general as a person of color, it is an art and/or skill that it's essential to acquire.

**Tyronne Stoudemire:** We've all experienced that, and we've learned at an early age that in order to be successful, in order to come across with a certain persona, we code-switch to fit in, to get along, to get ahead. But then, we're not being our full authentic self. And when we're not fully authentic, we're not giving our best. We're not as productive.

**Jazzmine Douse:** Speaking of code-switching and what Cory was saying about double standards and stereotypes: You realize that sometimes when other nationalities or ethnic backgrounds are represented, they're allowed to fit their stereotypical perception. And we ask ourselves: Why? Why is it that our unique personality traits are not accepted and that it is almost mandatory to code-switch? Why can I not show up the same way this other nationality shows up and be completely respected and accepted in that same manner?





## **‘Why can I not show up the same way this other nationality shows up and be completely respected and accepted in that same manner?’**

***Jazzmine Douse, AmaWaterways***

**Tyronne Stoudemire:** It’s another form of exclusion. Not equitable or fair. Stephen, you’re a smart individual, you run your own business — surely you never feel left out and don’t have to code-switch?

**Stephen Scott:** I’m code-switching right now! I’m not going to deny that that’s happening. I’m glad you brought it over here, Tyronne. It’s a mixture of what we’re all saying at this moment. And where I’m at, at 40 years old, when I look back, I say the reason we have to code-switch, the reason they have labels of angry Black woman, the reason those things — barriers — are put in our place, is because if we were allowed to really open up and go 100 miles an hour, they’d be out of the job.

**Tyronne Stoudemire:** What do you mean, Stephen, out of the job?

**Stephen Scott:** Hey, if you’re at the top of the food chain and you’re looking down and Nik is going 150 miles an hour — and look at her contact list, look at the growth she’s creating! Someone is going to look at her and say, “She needs to teach everybody else in here how to do this. And if I allow her to continue to progress at this speed, there’s not enough room up here for me.” And so, if that’s the collective thought at the top of an organization — “We need to protect our jobs” — then they’ll make sure systems are in place to keep individuals who might be coming from certain backgrounds that are known to go a 150 miles an hour from replacing them at the top.

**Tyronne Stoudemire:** Wow. And I think Nik said something earlier about picking cotton and the slave master mentality.

**Nik Morales:** I want to go back to something that Margie said about not being invited to certain things. For the first time ever, this year, I was invited to speak on a panel — nothing to do with diversity, hallelujah! I've always wanted to [arrange travel for] stadium tours, arena tours [for musicians], but I couldn't figure out why I wasn't quite making it. I want to do Beyonce! How are these companies getting this caliber of artist? Well, I found out. And, legit, I was the only Black travel agent there. There were no Black tour managers that I saw, though this was a virtual event, and I may have just missed the other Black faces.

But this is how it happens: It's the ability to have a certain connection, the ability to be accepted into certain groups. And as I get higher and higher in this, I'm starting to realize, too, that my white counterparts look out for each other. They literally give their books of business — they pass it on like a legacy. Nobody ever taught us that.

**'As I get higher and higher in this, I'm starting to realize that my white counterparts look out for each other. ... Nobody ever taught us that.'**

*Nik Morales, the Travel Agency, a division of Ascot Travel Services*

Not being invited to some meetings, not having a seat at certain tables, actually takes away opportunity from us. I want to be the type of Black business owner that will take a chance. I'm asking people, "You're here, you want to talk about diversity, but you don't have one Black travel agent in your office. But you get that new white girl and you're all about investing [in her]."

**Tyronne Stoudemire:** I think that what you've just described is called systemic racism. Things that have been in place to eliminate an individual from getting ahead. It goes back to Stephen's comments about systems that stop us from getting up, that keep us down and suppressed. So, we have to figure out a better way to educate people and explain to them that we don't want anything for nothing. We're hard workers. Let's be real — that's why they brought us here. America was built on the backs of Black people. But now that we're in situations where we have opportunities to excel, there is something that's prohibiting us from moving forward. In my opinion, it's fear-based. It's polarization. Them against us. One up and one down.

**Margie Jordan:** I'm going to piggyback off of Nik here a little bit about the lack of opportunities, things that aren't shared with us as Black professionals in the industry, It's incredibly frustrating, because — I've said it forever and a day — there's an amazing amount of Black talent in the travel industry that's not

tapped. And, often, it's overlooked.

I don't know what it's going to take for us to start opening doors. I mean, if we don't know about these opportunities, and we're not having these conversations, we don't know the things that are happening. It's in the conversations we have amongst ourselves that we find opportunities and can open doors for each other.

But are our white counterparts doing that? Are they opening those doors? Are they sharing those opportunities and making sure that we have access to things that we've not known about before? It's just not happening. I wish, for a change, that they — not just us, but they — would stop and look around the room and say, "There's no diversity here. There's no diversity on this board. There's no diversity in the people we've chosen. There's no diversity anywhere." And I wish they would advocate for it for us, because we don't know, we're not there. We need them to advocate for us.

**'I wish, for a change, that our white counterparts — not just us — would stop and look around the room and say, 'There's no diversity here.'**

*Margie Jordan, TRUE Global Network for CCRA International*

**Tyrone Stoudemire:** David, how important is it for us as Blacks to have allies to help advance the equity issues in travel? And what does that look like?

**David Van Ness:** It's very important. It goes back to the conversation of knowing what's happening. I've been on a number of luxury advisory boards, and there aren't other people who look like me. Information is not shared equally. And so, it's sort of an old boy's network, if you will. If you look at the management of the cruise industry, it's a very incestuous group of people who move from one position to the other. There's a handful of 10 to 15 people who operate at the top and go from one cruise line to the other, and there's not a whole lot of opportunity.

But, you know, it's a matter of both having access to the information and being able to share. If you don't have the access, there's nothing to share.

**Tyrone Stoudemire:** Does all of this suggest that Blacks don't travel? I think the last report that I saw, the Black community will spend \$130 billion. It's important to understand that. We do travel, right?

**David Van Ness:** We do. And there's a lot of business out there. And there aren't enough agencies that are out there looking for that traveler and looking to service that traveler, except when it sometimes has the effect of what feels to me like pandering, whether it's pandering to the Black community or the Pride community, which is a huge travel industry segment. You'll find agencies that will try and go after [the Pride] market only because they want the dollars, but they don't know how to interact with that market, the same way people don't necessarily know how to interact with Black travelers and know what their needs are.

Whether it's diversity on Pride or diversity as it deals with race, it's knowing what that consumer wants and to interact with that consumer, knowing how to meet them where they are as opposed to expecting them to meet you where you are. That's a great challenge.

**Tyrone Stoudemire:** Stephen, you worked for an airline, you worked for a cruise line. Now you have your own business. Was part of the reason you started your own business because you couldn't get access, didn't get the recognition? Or you figured you could do better on your own?

**Stephen Scott:** That's actually right on target. When I got promoted to my role as the business development manager for New York City for Royal Caribbean, the territory I was handed was second from the bottom in production in the U.S. and Canada.

When I announced to leadership that I was leaving, it was on a day I was receiving an award as one of 10 top producers. And at that stage, the territory was second from the top.

A part of what I did differently was that I discovered that my predecessors had not gone into the Black neighborhoods to visit Black agencies. Black advisors were not invited on fams. I just found the time to get into those different networks, into meetings, and we grew the business from nothing to something. And that alone changed the territory's outlook.

So, they were asking me how are you doing this? And it was hard for me to actually explain to them that I'm doing what you guys didn't want to do. You didn't want to give the African-American Brooklyn agencies the time of day. That was it! What's so hard about that?

When I left, there was an element of, "You know what? If I am helping these businesses do better and sell better, I can do this myself." And right before the pandemic, we hit \$1 million in sales.

**Tyronne Stoudemire:** That validates everything we're saying. We work hard. And it says that if we're getting something that's broken, there's no way but up.

**Margie Jordan:** I think we've all had this moment of our accomplishments not being recognized or valued and, after a while, it gets exhausting trying to be noticed, trying to get somebody to pay attention to what you're doing and how significant it is. They know, but will they recognize it? No. That doesn't happen.

I can't even express to you my level of frustration with this across my career as a whole, of just being ignored. In some instances, there's a level where they feel threatened by it, and they feel threatened by your success, and I've seen multiple instances where people have caused me problems because of those threats. And it's made my career difficult over time.

But we've got to get past this. We've got to get past them not paying attention to us, just overlooking Black people as a whole. This has been going on for far too long — it just is insane that we're still talking about this. It's insane that this is still a hot topic and we have to have these conversations. We know it. But how do we get everybody else to know it? And understand it?

I get it: It doesn't affect [white people's] day-to-day. But if they look around and there's no diversity and they see their counterparts who are Black doing very well but not being recognized, we need them to advocate. We need them to become our allies. Because we didn't start this.

**Jazzmine Douse:** It's disheartening at times, especially when you come to the table with a genuine heart and really just want to work hard and contribute. And sometimes I think that's where I struggle with it, because I do feel like, at times, I'm heard. You know, I do feel like I'm recognized for my efforts. I do feel like I've been able to work my way, specifically through AmaWaterways, through hard work, perseverance. And they've been able to recognize that.

**Nik Morales:** When George Floyd was killed, my white friends didn't understand why I was so upset. Because, to them, they were like, "You live in Marina del Rey."

You've got to know: I have a fabulous life. I fly first class. I stay in five-, six-star hotels. I have fancy stuff. I'm a fancy lady. You understand what I'm saying?

But for them to not understand why my heart was breaking, why my heart had been broken, why I was in a space of mourning. And for them to think that I had gotten to such a level that Black issues were no longer relatable to me? Because [victims] look like my brother. Or remind me of my cousin. I still go home. No matter how far up in the world I get, I still go home to Inglewood. I still have family members who are, like, “No, ma’am. I don’t care what’s going on, you will always be Kiki to me.” It doesn’t matter how much money I have in my bank accounts. My success doesn’t separate me from the Black experience.

**Tyronne Stoudemire:** Exactly. Many of us today have privilege. I’m afforded a certain amount of privilege because of the role and responsibility I have in a major organization. But, at the end of the day, when I leave the four walls of that organization, I am still a Black man and everything that comes with it.

I am still liable to be pulled over by police and asked, “Whose car are you driving? What are you doing in this neighborhood?” And I have to respond. And be very submissive. I know that the other side of that coin is that I could be murdered. I could be killed right there in my own car. And that is not conceivable for many of our white counterparts.

I had a conversation with my parents about driving while Black when I was 5. How many of our white counterparts have had to have those types of conversations with their children?

So we’re living in a world that’s Black and white, and white is right and Black is wrong. We have to open people’s minds. [White people] have to have that “aha” moment. They should self-correct and influence others, and influence systems. We have to get feedback. We have a huge responsibility and, working in travel, probably the most successful thing to do is to show the world to people of different backgrounds, and different cultures, and have a journey into those cultures and go into those communities and see how people thrive and strive.

We could be the vehicles for other corporations who join us on this journey of diversity, equity and inclusion by showing them the world, very diverse and different.

**‘When the tide rises, all boats rise. We’re not leaving anybody behind, we’re not pushing anybody forward. We’re coming together at this. We’ll solve this together.’**

*Tyronne Stoudemire, Hyatt Hotels*



Each of us is given 24 hours to do what we will. We can do something good or do nothing at all. You've been empowered. You've been inspired to do something different. I charge you to do something different for the Black community in your next 24 hours, to make a difference in the lives of all. We solve for one, but we all benefit. When the tide rises, all boats rise up high. We're not leaving anybody behind, we're not pushing anybody forward. We're coming together at this. We'll solve this together.

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