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LEISURE LIFESTYLE

GLOBAL TRAVELER'S GUIDE TO THE
LUXURIOUS WORLD OF LEISURE TRAVEL



Paths to the Past

For legions of travelers, looking backward is the new way to move forward. BY DESRA BOKUR

ACCESS TO MULTIDIMENSIONAL machinery aside, time travel is all the rage, from pilgrimages to ancient megaliths to personal quests to locate the garden café tucked into a winding brick alley in Prague where your great-grandfather proposed to your great-grandmother.

While the exact definition may vary from one traveler to the next, the interest in journeys with a historical component — sometimes termed heritage tourism — holds steady. Travelers are searching for and embarking upon expeditions that tangibly connect them to some version of the past, hoping to discover a

gateway to a specific period, cultural event or significant family moment.

"We see historical or heritage tourism as very broad," offers Heather Reekie, head of marketing, Scotland-based Rabbie's Tours. "It covers everything on the tourism map from built heritage (such as Edinburgh Castle), cultural heritage (think Shakespeare), landscapes (pre-historical sites such as Skara Brae), places of historical interest (like Culloden) or places linked to historical characters (such as the Jacobites or Mary Queen of Scots). It is, ultimately, connecting travelers to people, places



SCOTTISH ROOTS: Skara Brae Stone Age village in Scotland (top), and clan graves on Culloden Moor battlefield in Scotland

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and experiences of the past."

In a world increasingly viewed through the lens of technology and social media, these links to another time in human history may grow in importance. Companies specializing in organized tours understand this and find ways to engage a travel market segment in pursuit of these connections.

Brian DeToy, Ph.D, and his wife, Sheryl Rankin Shafer, founded their Denver-based company, Essential History Expeditions, with the goal of fulfilling the travel dreams of those seeking an experiential, immersive history-culture experience. According to DeToy, who spent 14 years as a university professor (including teaching history and strategic studies at West Point) and 28 years as a U.S. Army officer with combat experience, historical travelers are looking for answers to some basic questions.

"They want to know where we come from; what factors, events, challenges and opportunities shaped us," he says. "Not only are they curious about the personalities that drove change, but, perhaps most importantly, why did our present day turn out the way it did when numerous paths could have led to other outcomes. It's that sense of contingency that intrigues us, along with a very human story that is relatable across decades and centuries."

Within the arena of historical travel, multiple sub-categories evolved. During 23 years of leading more than 150 tours, DeToy identified popular categories that include military history (battles, clashes and sites), cultural investigation (engaging with people from other cultures to identify the effect of time and events on their development), topical history (such as a Civil Rights journey across the American South), literature and film-based history (tours of England's Yorkshire district prompted by the BBC *Downton Abbey* series), and corporate leadership-team building expeditions with a historical element (executive teams traveling to battlefields such as Gettysburg or Normandy



to explore the development of leadership and character and examine how past leaders dealt with great challenges).

Jacqui Lewis, president and managing director, Audley Travel North America, says her company defines historical tourism as "travel that connects individuals with any location that provides context for the world we currently live in" — whether through visiting ancient ruins, partaking in traditional ceremonies or simply joining a private city tour with the aim of understanding the development of our modern cities.

"We have seen a big push towards connecting with cultures that still hold on to traditions despite our rapidly changing world," says Lewis. "For example, while people on a trip to Vietnam still want to visit Hanoi, there seems to be an increase in people wanting to add time in Sapa, trekking through the

IN THE HILLS: Terraced rice fields near Sapa (top), and a Red Dao child riding her buffalo along the road near Sapa, Vietnam (bottom)

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FACE OF HISTORY:
Easter Island

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area and sharing a meal with a local hill tribe community.”

These experiences become powerful links to places that seem steeped in the past but are rapidly vanishing amid modernization. While Lewis notes many travelers choose places with which they have some familial connection in order to explore their ancestry, there is also a trend to connect with nature and the greater world in a desire to see a less complicated version of life — like viewing the night sky from places such as Ayers Rock in Australia, where the unobstructed view is how others thousands of years ago would have seen the stars.

Moving at a slower pace appears to be part of this trend. DeToy’s tours regularly visit battlefields where participants have the opportunity to walk through the landscape, providing context and insight to why and how long-ago commanders may have made specific decisions. For Lewis, trekking to view ancient ruins is a frequent request.

“There is something very powerful,” explains Lewis, “about

seeing a historical structure that you have just arrived at much the same way one would have when the site hosted a flourishing civilization.”

The interest in historical-heritage tourism extends to pre-history: Travel that embraces some kind of archaeological factor brings increasing numbers of inquisitive visitors to explore crumbling ruins and enigmatic structures such as Stonehenge, Easter Island, the Erbil Citadel and the Lascaux Caves. Companies specializing in these experiences include U.K.-based Andante Travel, offering a multitude of tours such as a new expedition to Malta and Gozo headed up by Cambridge archaeologist Jeremy Bennett. Andante’s leadership in archaeological tours spans a three-decade-long track record of pairing travelers with historians, archaeologists and other experts who help interpret surroundings and provide perspective and framework for what travelers see along the way.

“People often travel to just see or experience different places and cultures, but no one can see or experience something different without wondering how and why it is the way it is,” adds Andrew Lear, founder and president, Oscar Wilde Tours and Shady Ladies Tours. Lear acknowledges while some of the answers lie in geology, biology, economics or other factors, what truly determines the story of a place or a culture is indelibly bound within its history.

“On the whole,” says Lear, “history — including art history — is taught and told in a remarkably prudish way, as if the messy, amusing, and sexy sides of life were best forgotten. Our tours tell people the fun side of history that most of the fields of history and art history suppress.”

He points to the labels in art museums as an example. At New York’s Metropolitan Museum, a canvas by the 19th-century French painter Rosa Bonheur called *The Horse Fair* is on view. Bonheur, who was both a lesbian and a cross-dresser, centered herself in the painting, dressed in men’s clothing.

“Yet,” says Lear, “the Met’s label does not mention it, as if this were not interesting, while in fact it is the most interesting thing about the painting, the thing which would bring the painting and the artist to life for a viewer.

By telling people about this suppressed side of history, we help people feel a real sense of connection to people in earlier periods.”

This connection becomes even more vital and poignant in our technology-obsessed culture. Perhaps a counter drive has sprung up, one Reekie suggests is a natural urge to rebel against change and to seek authentic experiences with places deeply rooted in our collective consciousness that allow us to disconnect and immerse ourselves in the stories that led us to this point in time.

To keep your eyes open and look where you’re going as you move through the world is, of course, a fine bit of advice, but historical tourism reminds us this isn’t the only view: To never look behind means to miss out on a bigger, more complete picture.

“Historical tourism,” says DeToy, “means examining in depth the people, events and cultures that created or impacted the stream of history in such ways that we are still touched by it today. It is the human story.”