

Travel Smart

All Sides of the Story

As historic sites expand their narratives, travelers benefit

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At the Old Slave Mart Museum in Charleston, South Carolina, a set of metal shackles has small rings that once confined the ankles of enslaved Africans and their descendants. At the former Nazi concentration camp in Dachau, Germany, large, red-brick ovens once incinerated the bodies of Jewish people.

No history book or documentary film can convey the abomination of slavery or the horror of the Holocaust as powerfully as being in the locations where those evils took place. Travel educates us. We learn to appreciate cultures, languages, and traditions different from our own. Today, as many cry out for social justice, travel can also play a role in correcting misconceptions and building understanding. Increasingly, sites that once gave short shrift to parts of their heritage that related to indigenous or enslaved people are expanding the narrative.

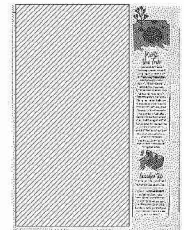
“We’ve been shifting some of our thinking and language to telling complete stories,” says Cordell Reaves, a project manager with the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation. Schuyler Mansion State Historic Site, for example, the former home of Revolutionary War General and U.S. Senator Philip J. Schuyler, has expanded its exhibits to include stories of enslaved Blacks who lived and labored there. “We’re

not taking the great general out of the story,” says Reaves, “but we’re now talking about all the people who were present.”

Telling such stories isn’t confined to the distant past. In Birmingham, Alabama, you can talk with men and women who were part of the 1963 Children’s Crusade, says Vickie S. Ashford-Thompson, travel media director with the Greater Birmingham Convention and Visitors Bureau. In May of that year, more than 1,000 students marched in Birmingham in support of civil rights and faced police force. “Public relations people can talk all day, but there is nothing like speaking with the people who were actually involved,” Ashford-Thompson says.

Sites throughout the world chronicle the human rights struggles and triumphs of people of all races. The International Coalition for Sites of Conscience (sitesofconscience.org) is a good resource.

If you visit some of them—and you really should—“be emotionally prepared,” says Ashford-Thompson. “These sites often move people to tears.” In our own travels, standing before the Dachau crematorium pummeled our hearts with a visceral recognition of the cruelty that built it—and created in us a lifelong commitment to compassion. Maybe the ultimate value of visiting these sites is to inspire us all to be our best selves.



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