



Interest in Heritage Travel Is Growing

More people are discovering and visiting where their families originally came from

Not so long ago, people who wanted to know more about their family history had few options: talk with older relatives, look through old photo albums and scrapbooks, or dig through often inadequate public records.

The quest for answers is much easier today, thanks to online services such as Ancestry and 23andMe, which have helped millions of people connect with relatives and find pieces of their family puzzle through historical-record searches and DNA testing.

And once they know where they're from, many people yearn to go and see the places for themselves. The most common places for Americans to visit on heritage trips include Ireland, the U.K., Germany, Italy, Eastern Europe, Scandinavia and West Africa.

Visiting the region where a relative once lived can be a much more powerful experience than reading about it, says Jackie Hogan, sociology professor at Bradley University in Illinois and author of *Roots Quest: Inside America's Genealogy Boom*, a new book on the subject. "Walking where their ancestors walked and touching a stone wall their ancestor might have leaned against — those sorts of physical experiences offer a profound connection to those who came before them," Hogan says. "There's something authentic and even spiritual in being there."

This was true for John Hernandez, 26, of West Palm Beach, Florida, who made a heritage trip to Spain with his wife, parents and two sisters in April 2018. His mother, Maritza, now 53, had emigrated to the United States from Cuba with her parents and brother at the age of 5. "This was during the revolution, and they could only bring the clothes on their back," Hernandez says. "Their family history died in Cuba."

Research through Ancestry.com connected him to family members who lived in Spain — including a cousin named Chusi, whose great-uncle, Segundo, left Spain on a boat to Cuba at age 15 and was never heard from again.

He recalls the day he arrived in Gijón, where Segundo had lived, and the physical connection he felt to his great-grandfather. “One of the most impressionable moments was touching the original stone of Segundo's home,” Hernandez says. “And the door was the same original wooden door.”

When his mother met Chusi, they embraced and started crying, Hernandez says, “and I realized then that this was 100 years of history.”

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Louis Childers, 78, of Stockbridge, Georgia, decided to visit Ghana earlier this year after taking DNA tests through Ancestry.com and learning he had Ghanaian roots. He immediately felt like he belonged, he says, when he saw the family members who had come to greet him at the airport after he cleared customs. “They had tears in their eyes.”

Childers saw the small village where his ancestors hailed from, and went to the Gold Coast, the notorious departure point for millions of Africans — including, he'd learned, his great-great grandmother — who were sold into slavery and taken on ships to the Americas. It was emotional, Childers says, but the experience has given him a sense of completion. “I don't have to guess anymore about where I came from,” he says. “I don't have to guess who my people were.”