

A practical guide to tapping into roots tourism



As the African tourism industry looks to expand beyond its traditional offerings, roots tourism is emerging as a dynamic and high-value market. But capturing this opportunity requires deliberate planning and cultural sensitivity. Here's your step-by-step guide to successfully breaking into this game-changing niche.

1. Start by understanding the market

Roots tourism isn't about quick holidays or checklist tours. It's about personal connection, ancestral discovery, and immersive experiences.

Key takeaway:

The largest market segment currently stems from African Americans interested in tracing their heritage. Many are mid-to-older professionals or multi-generational families who value both culture and comfort.

Ask yourself:

- How does your destination or business provide meaningful heritage connections?
- What unique story or experience can you offer that links directly to diasporic history or modern culture?

2. Build deeper community partnerships

Roots travellers want authentic experiences that allow them to connect with locals—not in a “poverty tourism” way, but through empowering interactions.

For example:

- Partner with a local handbag designer, jewellery maker, or artist to host workshops where travellers can learn about their craft.
- Collaborate with musicians or chefs to create enriched experiences in food, art, or nightlife.
- Include community-led storytelling in heritage-focused tours, tying the past to the present.

“ Partner with passionate locals. It's about making these tours feel personal and giving back to the community—whether it's a lodge owner or a gallery curator, these are stories travellers want to hear. ”
- Cynika Drake

3. Shift the narrative in your marketing

Many African tourism campaigns fall back on dated stereotypes: village life, children in need, or sprawling savannah landscapes. While well-meaning, these narratives no longer resonate with a diaspora audience

Here's how to upgrade:

- Show that Africa is modern, thriving, and diverse. Promote winemakers, high-end cuisine, cutting-edge fashion, and urban landscapes.
- Use social media influencers—especially from the Black population in America, the UK, or other target markets—to narrate their personal experiences.

Remember:

People trust people. Use your satisfied diaspora travellers as ambassadors to attract new ones.

4. Customise the experience

Roots travellers don't want a one-size-fits-all package. Offering bespoke, tailor-made options will make all the difference when trying to stand out.

Here are some ideas:

- Design DNA ancestry travel experiences: Partner with genealogy services to create trips tied to specific regions where travellers can trace their roots.
- Offer curated, category-exclusive partnerships: For example, highlight a single luxury lodge in Tanzania or a boutique guest house in Cape Town—ensuring their stories are told impactfully.
- Include culturally significant rituals: From Ghanaian naming ceremonies to Benin's voodoo heritage, offer emotional journeys that blend history with self-discovery.

“ The idea is depth over breadth. Focus on creating meaningful moments that they'll never forget. ”
- Cynika Drake

5. Prioritise comfort and access

Even though roots tourism is anchored in cultural connections, travellers still expect modern comforts and accessibility.

What to address:

- Ensure seamless logistics: Reliable transportation, clean and comfortable lodging, and assistance with visas or citizenship processes.
- Offer packages that combine luxury with local immersion—for example, beginning trips in major cities with five-star dining before transitioning into rural or cultural settings.

“Africa has the infrastructure to rival any destination,” says Cynika. “The trick is in showing how unique—and well-supported—those experiences really are.”

6. Avoid exploitative tourism

Finally, one simple rule: Don't exploit poverty or hardship. Cynika is clear about her stance on township or slum tourism: it only reinforces outdated stereotypes that harm Africa and its communities. Instead, focus on creating connections and human dignity. Showcase Africa's triumphs. Ensure your storytelling promotes empowerment, honour, and collaboration.

Tapping into roots tourism is as much about reimagining the travel experience as it is about reshaping Africa's global story. Tourism operators and destinations that embrace this niche—thoughtfully and intentionally—stand to not only benefit economically but also reshape how Africa is celebrated worldwide.

“Diaspora travel isn't just about revenue,” Cynika shares. “It's about healing, pride, and reclaiming identity.”

This is a legacy worth investing in. The time is now—let's get started.

