

Black travellers often bring home an unwanted souvenir: racist abuse

Because of my experiences as a black traveller, I can't help wonder whether the killing of a black American, Bakari Henderson, in Greece was linked to race



'In Buenos Aires, a group of men called out to me and began to grunt like monkeys.'

Tamara J Walker
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Last week, 22-year old American college graduate Bakari Henderson was beaten to death by a group of men while vacationing in Greece. Police say the confrontation erupted over his taking a selfie with a female bartender, but his friends say the young man was “minding his own business” before the group attacked him. It was heartbreaking to read how a young man apparently went from enjoying a drink with friends in a bar to having been senselessly killed.

As a black woman and avid traveler who has frequently faced discrimination abroad, the fact that Henderson was black made his story hit close to home. I began to wonder if the attack was racially motivated.

When I was a college student the late 1990s, I spent a semester in Buenos Aires. One night, while walking to a local internet café to call my family back home in Colorado, a group of doormen standing outside a luxury high-rise building called out to me and began to grunt like monkeys. When I looked in their direction, they also began a stereotypical mime of arm-flailing and rib-scratching.

The experience shook me so much that my grandfather could hear the strain in my voice as we chatted about the new foods I was trying and the classes I was taking. I didn't want to worry him, but when he asked what was wrong I told him what had just happened. He then shared his own experiences of being stationed in Austria with the US army in the 1950s and being asked by locals if black people – including him and his family – had tails.

I was sad but not surprised to hear this, and even felt comforted by his story. I thought, if he could go through such a dehumanizing experience and still have such fond memories of his time abroad, I could too.

And sure enough, even as I faced more upsetting encounters during my time in Argentina (including being mistaken for a prostitute simply because of how many people there had internalized sexualized assumptions about black womanhood) the experience had enough upsides that I have continued to fill up one passport after another in the years since.

Still, I was frequently taken aback by the degree of ignorance and hostility I encountered along the way. Whether it was walking down the street and having a perfect stranger ask to take my picture for no other reason than to memorialize seeing a black person for the first time, being ignored by servers who preferred to defer to my white companions, or getting turned away from a high-end nightclub as others were waved in, I would find my experience of another country's beauty and intrigue pockmarked by discriminatory treatment.

Of course, all travelers face a certain degree of scrutiny no matter who they are or where they go. But in my experience of traveling alone and in groups, there is a difference between encountering genuine curiosity and being singled out as unwelcome, suspicious, or undeserving of basic human kindness. From Latin America to Europe and other places in between, these latter examples became the norm for me.

Unfortunately, other black travelers I know have had similar experiences. Last week, on a family trip to Germany and Austria, my male cousin was turned away from our hotel. Despite being told to expect him and give him a room key (he had missed his flight and was arriving after the rest of our group), the receptionist took one look at his dark skin and waist-length dreadlocks and told him there was no one with our family name at the hotel.

The internet is filled with these kinds of stories. Most recently, a black South African woman named Sibahle Nkumbi described being pushed down the stairs by her Airbnb host in Amsterdam, simply for failing to check out by the appointed time. The host can be seen in the video Nkumbi posted shouting "this is not Africa," which laid bare the degree to which race played a role in the altercation.

The episode highlights Airbnb's failure to curb the discrimination that has notoriously been part of its community. Despite the company's new efforts to limit hosts' refusals to rent to black (and Asian and Latino) users, the company has a long way to go before all users can expect equal treatment.

Until then, there are companies like Noirbnb, whose tagline “Stay at Home When You Travel,” signals the community-based spirit it seeks to nurture among its customers. After one of its founders had his own experience of being rejected by Airbnb hosts when traveling to Austin, Texas for SXSW, Noirbnb became an opportunity to offer something different to black travelers.

The company has hosts in the US, France, Mexico and even Australia, where they are bound by “good community” protocols to limit discrimination. Whether these protocols are inherently more effective than Airbnb’s is unclear, but the self-selection process seems to ensure that only hosts willing to have black guests sign up.

But what about black travelers who want to go to other places, like Amsterdam (where Sibehle Nukumbi was pushed down the stairs) and Greece (where Bakari Henderson was beaten to death)? What are the options there?

I might have enough of a reserve of positive experiences (and, some might say, enough of a sense of recklessness) to be willing to take the leap. But I worry about other black travelers, especially those Henderson’s age.

When those young people read his story, or Nkumbi’s, will they opt to stay at home, where they are at least familiar with the kind of racism they’ll encounter? Or will they decide to limit their international excursions to those places (such as parts of the Caribbean and Africa) where they won’t face racism?

There is nothing wrong with this strategy; in fact, it is perfectly understandable and enriching. But there are consequences. If black people continue to be unfamiliar sights in foreign locales, and if the citizens of those places (or other visitors to them) continue to operate with only stereotypical or outright hostile attitudes towards black people, they will never get to know the full scope of our humanity.

So where do we go from here? Do we need a modern, international update on the Negro Motorist Green Book, which alerted black travelers to safe harbors and places to avoid when driving through the Jim Crow south? I would like to think such a resource belongs firmly in the past, and that black travelers do not need to carry the burden of limiting our routes because other people and places cannot deal with their racism. Nor should we have to live in fear that taking pictures or checking out late will bring us bodily harm.

Racist attitudes can only be erased with education, exposure, self-reflection and time. In the meanwhile, I have decided that the planet will be worse off if I only set foot on small parts of it.

- *Tamara J Walker is the founder of The Wandering Scholar*