

I'm A Black American. Here Is How I Used Solo Travel To Escape My Racist Country.

"My first solo experience out of America allowed me to experience a new form of liberation."

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The author in 2017 overlooking Athens, Greece, during the three weeks I traveled carrying only my blue backpack.

In bell hooks' 1995 biography "Killing Rage: Ending Racism," she makes an indisputable claim, stating that all Black people in America — regardless of class, status or politics — live with the possibility of being terrorized by whites.

As a child, the terrors of racism plagued me, from insults to slurs. Nothing could shield me from racism. When I reached adulthood, I was exhausted.

Being Black in America impacted my stress level. The pressures under which I had to live were inhumane:

Hands out of your pocket. Don't wear a hoodie. No jogging during the day. No jogging at night. Don't walk into a store as a group, they'll perceive you as a threat. Hold on to your receipt. Make eye contact. Smile, always be polite. Know the law. Don't stay out late. Come home, alive.

Although navigating racism was the norm throughout my life in America, I never imagined that surviving racism at work would lead me to planning my desperate escape.

In 2016, I worked as an employee for the City of Virginia Beach. During my tenure, behind closed doors, I experienced and witnessed embedded institutionalized racism.

Day after day, my colleagues and myself endured relentless racial harassment—from being denied promotions (confined to menial jobs), to racially charged attacks of verbal abuse, to being made fun of because of our ethnic hairstyles. Exhausted by the injustice of it all, I demanded an internal investigation regarding the racist structure of the workplace. Meanwhile, the toxic work environment and ongoing racial abuse forced me to “get out.”

In May 2017, using my remaining PTO, I booked a one-way ticket to Europe. I needed a respite from reality, if only for a moment — and anywhere was better than America. Upon boarding my flight, fear blossomed in my chest.

Why am I traveling solo?

What if I get kidnapped?

I began weeping copiously, clinging to the hope that my experiences abroad would be different, easier. Wiping away the residue of my tears, I found repose in prayer. Hand in hand with fear, I journeyed into the great unknown.

My first stop was Dublin, Ireland, cradling my two backpacks — one slung on my back, the other in front of me. I stood in awe and admiration of my new world. Breathing, walking and simply “being” was easy. The feelings of living a life where I was constantly on high alert and caution dissipated.

Lost in the belly of the city, I freely roamed the streets of Dublin. I made friends with locals; I partied at night with other foreigners. When my budget allowed me, I lived off gelato for breakfast and fish and chips for dinner.

After Ireland, I ventured to the Middle East: Istanbul, Turkey. There, I immersed myself into the culture, sharing stories and breaking bread with the Islamic community and human rights leaders. From Turkey, I traveled to Athens and Santorini, Greece, where I spent my days exploring the Acropolis, sailing along the Aegean sea, horseback riding, indulging in Mediterranean cuisine and sleeping in a cave — a converted hostel in Santorini.



The author at Coromandel in North Island, New Zealand, in 2020.

Although racism certainly exists in these countries, all I experienced were a few curious stares and people wanting to take pictures with me. In contrast to my experience abroad, America's brand of racism is relentless; I always felt the fear of violence, anger toward the white supremacy woven into its very history and structure, and the weariness of trying to be both hopeful and resilient. My first solo experience out of America allowed me to experience a new form of liberation.

When I returned to work, everything was the same, but it was me who had changed.

Although I continued to endure racial harassment at work, solo traveling awarded me with a different level of courage, a newfound confidence and strength. I no longer allowed myself to be a victim, and instead I invested my energy mapping out my travel plans, my new hopes and dreams. In doing so, I reclaimed agency over my narrative.

In July 2017, the internal investigation was complete and I retrieved written documentation — which I have in my possession — that my allegation of racial harassment in the workplace was substantiated. Based on the founded evidence, I quit and fled from my racist work environment.

The results spun me into a downward depression, confined to my own self-isolation. For seven months, I hid in my room, silently battling depressive episodes, anxiety, panic attacks and suppressed trauma.

In moments of despair, I knew I needed to discover a deeper sense of spiritual and mental healing, but I couldn't heal in the same place that hurt me.

So, I committed to four years of solo traveling. I spent the first two years traveling America, from living in wild Alaska, to Arizona, to Colorado and other states. I bounced around, working seasonal jobs. From my travels, I learned about the New Zealand Working Holiday Visa, and instantly knew that was my ticket out.

In October 2019, I bid farewell to my parents and said good riddance to my racist country. Prior to heading to New Zealand, I traveled for a month through various parts of Asia, enjoying my own version of Elizabeth Gilbert's "Eat Pray Love."

I ventured to Vietnam's paradise of Ha Long Bay and spent weeks living in the villages of Sapa overlooking the rice fields and waterfalls with the Black Hmong Tribe, the indigenous people of Vietnam. Upon arriving in Indonesia, I bathed in Bali's sacred pool of purification, Tirta Empul, to cleanse myself of America's injustice.

Although Asia has a history of anti-Black racism, I only had one notable racist encounter. One morning, I went shopping on my own in the bustling city of Hanoi. I went inside a clothing department full of Vietnamese and white customers. The owner took one look at me, opened her mouth in shock, and shooed me out the door.

I just laughed and continued on my way.

From my personal experience as a Black, female solo traveler, nowhere, it seems, is immune to racism. However — and I acknowledge this is not the case for everyone — the nature of racism I experienced overseas was subtle in nature compared to the overt racism I lived through and witnessed in America. In most of the countries I visited, the people were kind, accepting and hospitable.

Perhaps more important, the autonomy and freedom of solo travel itself allowed me to decolonize my mind, divorce myself from America's white supremacist beliefs and experience a fulfilled, nourished life.



The author in 2020 at Coromandel in North Island, New Zealand.

I finally moved to Auckland, New Zealand, where I still am today, one year later. I escaped, rediscovering my identity, my sole purpose.

Once I got settled into my new environment, I quickly immersed myself in Black Creatives Aotearoa, a growing community for Black creatives, to connect, create and collaborate. Today, I harness the pain from my past to empower and encourage the local Black diaspora and the global Black consciousness.

Solo traveling helped me to escape the scene of my traumatization and discover new worlds. It granted me breathing room to heal and raise myself up, abstaining from being marked by victimization. Navigating foreign environments alone further stripped my familiarity away, allowing me to immerse and integrate into different cultures. I achieved self-actualization when I moved to New Zealand and connected with the Black diaspora. Through the union of art and community, they enabled me to overcome my racist trauma.



DIANA SIMUMPANDE The author in Auckland, New Zealand, in 2020.

Diane Wesh is a Haitian-American Writer from Virginia Beach, Virginia, and graduate of Regent University School of Law with an MA in Human Rights. She is a current New Zealand expat and the founder of Got Blacklisted, a digital directory that features Black-owned businesses, globally. She is also the Creative Host for The Black Out Series, a Black Creatives Aotearoa project where she interviews Black Kiwi artists about art, COVID-19 and the global Black Lives Matter Movement.