

VOLUME 35, NO. 3

# GROUP TOUR

## DINNER AND A SHOW

DINNER THEATERS ADD SPARKLE  
AND FUN TO GROUP ITINERARIES

**PLUS**

BALTIMORE TOUR FAVORITES  
NORTHERN ONTARIO OUTDOOR FUN  
VIRGINIA BEACH VIP EXPERIENCES  
SCENIC COLORADO STOPS  
SPECIAL SECTION: FOOD + DRINK

# Making Connections

## Champion Services Travel offers authentic cultural experiences

By Cindy Fish

Being a parent adds multiple facets to our lives, and for Bernadette Champion, it was her children who inspired her career in group travel planning. Champion, founder of Champion Services Travel based in Fort Washington, Maryland, credits her children and her love of history with launching her business 25 years ago.

“When my children were school-aged, I wanted to teach them that the world was a big, diverse place and show how discovering it could be a wonderful adventure,” Champion said. “It worked. As they grew up, they looked forward to learning about new people and places, and they embraced cultures that were different from their own. Their excitement was one of the reasons I enrolled in travel school and formally entered the travel industry.”

**Q. When you began Champion Services Travel, were you looking to fulfill a niche that was not being met?**

**A.** Yes, as an African American, I saw a void in group travel that needed to be filled. In the mid-1990s, few group agents were targeting Black travelers or offering authentic tours that allowed them to feel connected to the people, history and cultures in each destination, especially across the

African diaspora. Once I began to include a focus on the African diaspora, our itineraries became personal, and our groups began to grow! We tapped into the kind of authentic experiences that allowed travelers to discover new things while learning about their own history and culture in the process. Today, the gap has closed tremendously thanks largely to a new and growing community of young Black group-travel curators and entrepreneurs.

**Q. What makes you proud of Champion Services Travel?**

**A.** I am proud of our agency’s solid and growing reputation for the travel products we offer and the highly personalized service that we deliver. I am grateful for the contingent of loyal and spirited travelers who have journeyed with us for 25 years. We call them the #championtravelers. I am also humbled that my adult son and daughter are a part of the business — after all, it began with them. They were my spark.

**Q. What group-tour planning trends have you seen emerge over the years?**

**A.** I have seen the emergence of mostly niche and/or themed travel packages.

**Q. How have you modified your offerings to meet these trends?**

**A.** In some ways, I see them as catching up to what we have been doing for nearly three decades, especially when it comes to our focus on tours across the African diaspora. What’s important for me is staying in tune with what my clients want in their travel experiences. On every tour, our travelers have people-to-people experiences, in addition to their sightseeing itinerary. Also, leading up to their departure, I host briefings on everything from what to pack and fun cultural facts to destination information and more. It’s my way of keeping them informed, connected and excited.

**Q. What is your favorite travel app?**

**A.** I use several, per each travel destination, but my go-to app is Duolingo, a language translator.

**Q. Share three words that describe why we should travel.**

**A.** My motto is, “Traveling is learning.” The three words I choose are: fulfillment, growth and living. ■

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Bernadette Champion