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# CRAVING THE CAVE

## Ancestry tourism takes root

Steve Gillick

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18 JUN 2018: Amidst the festivities in the main town square in Sagua La Grande in Villa Clara, Cuba, Luis Cartelle sat quietly mending orange fishing nets, behind a sign that labelled him “Artesano”. The occasion was a visit by the Minister of Tourism to announce that this beautiful colonial town, with its famous bridge, the

Puente El Triunfo spanning the Sagua La Grande River, was to be formally recognized as an ‘important tourist destination’. It seemed that most of the 13,000 town residents were out celebrating the promise of the future.



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Large crowds gathered around singers, dancers and musicians in the town square and on the side streets. Others checked out displays of local handicrafts, while families and friends sauntered around town or stood on street corners to catch a glimpse of the VIP entourage and breathe in the air of celebration. A nearby banner captured the spirit by proclaiming “Cuba la vives, la amas”: “Cuba, live it, love it”.

And still, Luis sat quietly mending his nets. Despite the fact that I’m somewhat challenged when it comes to conversing in Spanish, I greeted Luis and we had one of those classic ‘traveller’ talks where body language, intonation and eye contact direct the conversation. In Spanish, he asked questions and in English, I responded. I asked how long he’d been a fisherman and with a

warm smile he held up 5 fingers, indicating 50 years. After a few more words and a long eye-to-eye handshake, I left to continue exploring the town. But it's funny how that one brief time of interacting with a stranger stayed in my mind.

Well perhaps not that strange.

I recently received the results of my [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) DNA Test. Unlike tests offered through National Geographic and 23 and Me, [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) provided only basic generalized information. I already knew that my grandparents came from Russia and Romania and this was 'generally' confirmed by the test, but there were a few surprises. I am 7% Middle Eastern, 3% Southern European, 2% of me is based in the Caucasus, and a small percentage from the Iberian Peninsula. I'm sure that explains how I have a basic understanding of written and verbal Spanish but I can't speak it in a conversation. The other DNA companies include statistics on your Neanderthal heritage, but my test made no mention of my post-simian ancestry.

I only mention this because some analysts have picked up on the Neanderthal link (usually 1-2% of our DNA) as the source of the need/longing/compulsion/addiction to travel. It's the basis for the statement "I've got travel in my genes", with the belief that when Homo Neanderthalensis left Africa and travelled north to Europe, the travel genes were let loose in all the descendants. The negative accusation that "You're such a Neanderthal", should actually be a compliment to any inveterate traveller!

The story progresses that Homo Sapiens (most of us in the travel industry) lived alongside the Neanderthals until about 40,000 years ago, when

the Neanderthals mysteriously disappeared off the face of the earth. But what a legacy they left.

Now let's jump ahead to 2018, where it's definitely 'On Trend' to gear at least some of your itineraries toward Ancestry Tourism (also known as DNA Tourism, Roots Tourism, Diaspora Tourism and Geneological Tourism). But the big question remains, 'Can travel be in your genes'?

The need to migrate to greener pastures, new opportunities, and fresh beginnings was one of the driving factors in the mass movement of people from Europe to North American in the 19th century. It may have started with our Neanderthal cousins but continued to our grandparents, parents and that acute 21st century need to explore the world that many of us have in common.

Travel genes are not just 'migratory' in their make-up. They include a whole host of associated traits: Curiosity to see what's over the hill or the horizon; Fear of the unknown which also serves as a safety precaution for travellers to be aware of their surroundings, exercise due diligence and try to fit or blend in as best they can.

Social networks are part of our Neanderthal heritage, where family groupings look after each other. The need to be with people, understand who they are and establish a feeling of comfort and ease; this is all part of the travel equation. Visiting a destination without engaging the locals in conversation is similar to ordering an ice cream, eating the cone and leaving the 'good stuff' behind. And therefore it's not so strange that I honed in on Luis Cartelle in Sagua La Grande and shared an impressionable few moments with him.

A curiosity to experiment with food and drink is part of our ancestral background. When we indulge in local dishes in new destinations we are fitting in, adapting to the culture, empathizing with the taste buds of the region and psychologically nesting in the destination to quicken our comfort level and enjoyment of the area.

The appreciation of art and handicrafts, coupled with the sheer ingenuity of discovery and the happenstance of serendipity, can be said to accrue to our Neanderthal roots. The theory is that cave paintings were not only decorative, not only recordings of everyday life, but a way to project or wish that the animals and crops painted on the cave walls would remain abundant in the area.

In a broad perspective, our Neanderthal roots are responsible for the fact that more and more people are looking to experience their heritage—not as far back as the Neanderthals but over the last 100-200-300 years. Tourism Scotland estimates that 50 million North Americans have some Scottish DNA in their blood and that eventually up to 1/5 of those people may consider travel to Scotland to satisfy their curiosity. (There is even a ‘Gillick’ family history in Scotland, however it’s totally unrelated to the Gillicks from Europe and Russia).

Getting on board the Ancestry Tourism train makes good business sense. It can be creative and fun (and monetarily rewarding) for travel advisors while at the same time, offering a service that many clients will embrace. You can start by checking out Steve Crowhurst’s ‘The Travel Agent’s Guide to Selling Ancestry Tours’ ([sellingtravel.net](http://sellingtravel.net)).

You can team up with one of the DNA Kit companies and include (as EF Educational Tours has done) a package consisting of the DNA test and then when the results arrive, a customized tour to explore your heritage. In the spirit of Shirley MacLean, you can offer Past Lives tours where you don't get so DNA specific but you offer itineraries based on that 6th sense of where you think (or dream) you came from. You can focus on pilgrimage tours, Jewish Heritage tours and similar. Or you can get creative and put together 'Craving the Cave: Neanderthal Exploration tours' that explore cave art and then art galleries and architecture in France, Spain, and many other destinations.

Special interest travel is a smart way to enhance and solidify the client/Travel Advisor relationship. With so many travellers (and potential travellers) thinking of their family history, it may be time to root out this opportunity.

