



# Zest for the Quest

Modern-day pilgrims  
seek personal connection  
through journeys.

BY KARIN LEPERI

**I TRAVELED TO NORMANDY**, France, last year to pay tribute to the thousands of heroic American soldiers and sailors who gave their lives during World War II. As a retired military officer, my intent was to connect with a generation of fallen brethren to honor their sacrifices. I laid to rest a yellow rose on the grave of a soldier unknown to me — one who symbolized all those buried here in Normandy.

Essentially, I became a pilgrim seeking connection with what I perceived as a greater hallowed purpose, one loftier than my normal exploratory excursions. In seeking travel personally sacred and significant to me, I became a pilgrim with a mission, on a path searching for travel on a deeper level. And while my secular journey was based on remembrance rather than religion, it still was one of traveling with the heart and connecting with the soul.

Many travelers are propelled by remembrances — it is their root motivator. This can translate into pilgrimages based on military moments; spiritual travel; ancestry and genealogy research; out-of-this-world encounters; and special interests including music legends, literary greats and aviation. Whatever the focus, all share the features of a

**HALLOWED GROUND:**  
*White crosses of the World War II  
Normandy American Cemetery  
and Memorial*

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*'We're not on our  
journey to save the world  
but to save ourselves.  
But in doing that you  
save the world. The  
influence of a vital  
person vitalizes.'  
Joseph Campbell*



quest common to pilgrims — a search for personal connection through journey and destination travel. And, perhaps, spiritual bliss.

Nowadays, there has been a marked increase in spiritual travel, also known as secular pilgrimage. This is the direct result of a decline in allegiance to religious doctrine, according to Catherine Jane Rogers, a Ph.D. candidate at Australia’s Central Queensland University. It manifests in “movement toward development of the self and interconnectedness with the Earth.” Secular tourists essentially travel to areas and sites they deem sacred or meaningful to their lives and which generally reflect their belief system. They expect the journey and destination to be spiritual, sacred, meaningful or experiential in nature. The intent is to elevate the self to a state of awe and enhanced appreciation of contemporary life.

Faith-based tourism does not have a monopoly on pilgrimage, as secular pilgrims can experience an inner and outer journey that both inspires and leaves the self in awe. “No matter why you do it, if you claim to take a journey to a place that’s important to you, you are still a pilgrim. You

get out of [it] what you put in. Sometimes putting forth the effort is legitimacy enough,” says author Justine Digance.

TRAVELING TO MILITARY monuments and memorials is, for many, a way to make peace with the past while honoring those who paid the ultimate sacrifice with their lives. From Normandy, France, to Pearl Harbor, these places offer monuments, statues and memorials to reflect on those dark days.

Of all the wars in recent history, it was World War II that threatened the foundations of democracy worldwide. The war also chalked up the greatest carnage the world has ever known in terms of total casualties. About 3 percent of the 1940 population — more than 60 million people — were killed during the war.

REMEMBRANCE:  
USS Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor (top), monument (bottom left), and shrine room, where the names of those killed on the Arizona are engraved on the marble wall (bottom right)

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ROCK SOLID:  
Ancient moai on Easter  
Island (top), and Shiprock,  
the great volcanic rock  
mountain in the desert  
plain of New Mexico  
(bottom)

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More than 1 million visitors come annually to pay respect to those Americans who gave their lives during World War II's Normandy invasion and European operations. Located on a bluff overlooking Omaha Beach, the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial was dedicated in 1956, with 9,387 burials honored on the manicured grounds. White marble crosses line up perfectly, punctuated with 149 star of David headstones marking Jewish graves. In the center of the memorial stands a prominent, 22-foot bronze statue titled *Spirit of American Youth Rising from the Waves*.

In a similar vein, the Honor Flight Network, a nonprofit organization, was created with the single purpose of honoring America's veterans for their sacrifices in defense of our nation. Its mission is simple: "To transport America's veterans to Washington, D.C., to visit those memorials dedicated

to honor the service and sacrifices of themselves and their friends." Because time is running out for many, top priority is given to senior veterans such as World War II survivors. Those who are terminally ill are also given priority.

SPIRITUAL TRAVEL HAS come to embrace any meaningful activity, including the search for sacred connection and space. It may also refer to personal growth, blissful experience or an encounter with one's own "inner dimension."

This can involve natural landmarks and places, cultural tourism, environmental tourism, sacred art and even the development of self and interconnectedness with the Earth through symbolic ritual. "Your sacred space is where you can find yourself again and again," according to American mythologist Joseph Campbell.

Natural places that evoke a sense of peace and power include sacred sites such as Uluru in Australia's Northern Territory, Shiprock in New Mexico and even Ireland's Blarney Stone. Manmade sacred sites might include the Nazca Lines and Machu Picchu in Peru, or the giant moai heads of Easter Island. Often described as Earth's chakras, energy vortices might include Sedona, Stonehenge, Mount Shasta and Uluru.

ON A MISSION to discover your ancestral roots? It has never been easier. Today, a DNA test can help you discover your past by identifying your ancestral homelands.

As a result, many travelers are going back in time to seek connection with their family roots. According to the market research firm Global Industry Analysts, genealogical enthusiasts are spending \$1,000–18,000 a year to discover where their ancestors came from, with the global market for products and services rising to \$4.3 billion by 2018.

In particular, Skift sees DNA testing as a heritage tourism hook for black travelers. While Alex Haley's best seller and television series *Roots* inspired many connections initially, it is DNA testing that makes it possible to more precisely trace black American lineage to specific African countries. The result? Many are traveling to Africa to walk in the footsteps of their forefathers.

Outfits such as 23andMe.com, Ancestry.com and MyHeritage.com offer affordable DNA testing from as little as \$99. It should come as no surprise that genealogy tourism is largely centered in developed countries that experienced a mass exodus of their population. Such emigrations include the African trans-Atlantic slave trade, the Irish potato famine of 1845–1852 and the 1870 surge of Italian emigrants to America. The largest ancestry group as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau is not the English but rather German-Americans. About 46 million were reported in 2014, accounting for almost one-third of the ethnic German population worldwide.

**SOME PILGRIMS SEEK THE TRUTH** by connecting to a larger universe through travel to UFO hot spots. We have heard and seen references to these places with movies like *Independence Day* and television shows like *The X-Files*.

UFO sightings in the United States date back to as early as 1897 and continue through the present. (The U.S. Air Force came up with the term back in 1953 to label any unknown object flying in the sky.) Many believers make annual pilgrimages to UFO sites such as Roswell, ET Highway, Area 51, Devil's Tower and the Marfa Lights, hoping for a close encounter of the third kind.

**WITHOUT PASSION**, life ceases to have zest, and we lose our vitality. For we are most alive and connected with a true purpose when we pursue something that spells the essence of who we are. As Nelson Mandela said, "There is no passion to be found playing small — in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living."

Pilgrims seek passion in the same way teachers seek students. The quest is designed to align energy with the heart so that all who hear the music may inspirationally transform the ordinary. Music can provide that connection. Perhaps that is why upwards of 75,000 people attend the annual candlelight vigil at Graceland every August to honor rock 'n' roll's great legend, Elvis Presley.

Others seek a literary connection by traversing the Mis-

issippi Delta for literary greats from Faulkner and Welty to Grisham and Wright. Hemingway's home in Key West offers an inspiration for writers seeking to find their muse.

For those who cherish the freedom of flight, there is no greater path than the one that leads to aviation. Many a retired airman vigilantly treks to the Pima Air & Space Museum and Davis-Monthan Air Force Base for the aircraft bone yard. Its mission is to reconnect with the glory days of flight, when flying was associated with adrenalin and adventure. While admittedly motivated more by memories than enlightenment, nevertheless the connection is akin to a pilgrim seeking to reconnect with the heart.



**FLYING OBJECTS:**  
Area 51 Alien Center near Las Vegas, Nev. (top), and the aviation bone yard at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson, Ariz. (bottom)

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