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## The Other Tourists: Surveying The African American Visitors to New Orleans – A Study of the Essence Music Festival

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### Introduction

The African American middle class is increasingly affluent, educated, and professional. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that African Americans showed gains up to 470% between 1972 and 1991 in professional career industries such as accounting, engineering, computer programming, law, medicine, journalism and management. More than 15 percent of households headed by African-Americans have incomes of \$50,000 or more (Census 2000).

African Americans represent more than \$400 billion in purchasing power while comprising 12.9% of the U.S. population (Whigham-Desir, 1996). With an increase in disposable income, better paying jobs, educational opportunities, and leisure time, African Americans are consuming a diverse range of products and services. In 1996, African Americans spent \$1.8 billion dollars on entertainment and leisure and \$4.2 billion in travel and lodging (Whigham-Desir, 1996). Although more African Americans are being targeted by the U. S. travel industry, a review of the literature will suggest that the tourism attitudes, preferences or choices, and behavior of this very large group of Americans (Blacks) have not been given much attention (Phillipp, 1994). Because the probability of participating in certain types of outdoor recreation activities such as festivals is affected by a person's race and ethnicity (Gramann & Bonifield, 1995), it is important to review the current major socioeconomic trends of African Americans.

The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, to determine the general characteristics of African American tourists visiting the Essence Festival in New Orleans and second to investigate the leisure preferences of the African American tourists during the Essence Festival. Ultimately, this study aims to profile the Essence Festival traveler.

### Background of the Study

Festival tourism is a growing form of tourism recreation. Festivals aid in place marketing, extend the tourist season and generally have a positive impact on the local community by generating income, supporting existing businesses and encouraging new small and medium enterprise development (Thomas, 2004). O'Sullivan and Jackson (2002) contend that the benefits of festival tourism in the urban community are not confined to the economic impact alone. Social impacts are often at stake. Festival tourism can contribute to the increased organizational activity in a locality bringing improved leadership, positive impacts on local accountability, stimulation of better private-public co-operation, and leading to the investment of profits back into the community.

The city of New Orleans has become a major tourist destination for African Americans. According to the TIA (2002), Louisiana received the largest share of African American visitors among all fifty states. The Essence Music Festival held each July in New Orleans is one of the main gatherings for African Americans in the State of Louisiana. The Essence Music Festival attracts many African Americans from around the country. Attendance reached 195,000 in 2000 and 223,000 people in 2001 during the three-day event. According to Essence Festival organizers the festival generates more than \$100 million in revenues for the New Orleans economy.

### Methodology

A visitor intercept study was conducted during the 2004 Essence Music Festival. The Essence Festival attendees were intercepted at the Morial Convention Center in New Orleans, one of the locations for the Festival. The questionnaire used for the study was developed from the New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau, Inc (NOMCVB) 2002 Visitor Profile Survey. This survey was modified only in adding African American specific attractions to the general list of attractions presented. Visitors were screened with two questions to assure that they were not residents of the New Orleans area (50 mile radius) and that they were leaving within 24 hours (to capture an accurate expenditures picture, for example, lodging expenses). A frequency analysis was conducted on the data and the results presented accordingly.

### Results and Findings

344 individuals were surveyed. 100% of the respondents were African American. 87.5% were females and 12.5% were males. The largest income category among respondents was \$25,000-49,999 with 39%, followed by \$50,000-\$74,999 with 29.9%, and \$100,000 or more with 11.9%. 45.9% held bachelor degrees and 16.9% had a masters or doctorate degree. The largest age group was 35-49 with 50.6% followed by 25-34 (23%). Marital status and household income were analyzed. 39% of single households had incomes of \$25,000 - \$49,999 followed by 25.20% with \$50,000 - \$74,999. On the other hand, 30.71% of married households had incomes of \$50,000-\$74,999 and 25.98% had incomes of \$100,000 or more.

The main leisure activities that African Americans engaged in during their stay in New Orleans included general sightseeing (78.8%), shopping (74.7%), and attending festivals/events (83.4%). Leisure activities that were less likely to be engaged in were hiking/walking/jogging (89%), visiting historical areas (65.7%), gambling (64.2%), visiting museums (85.5%), and looking at/buying art (73.0%).

Attractions most frequented by African Americans during their stay included Bourbon Street (84.0%), the French Market (59.0%), the Riverwalk Mall (68.0%), the French Quarter (72.4%), and Harrah's Casino (53.5%). The Tremé community - the oldest African American neighborhood in the United States and the New Orleans African American Museum, two notable attractions specific to the African American culture, were not visited by 98.8% and 93.3% of the respondents respectively.

93.3% of the respondents stayed in hotels and motels, as opposed to staying with family or friends. The average amount spent on lodging during the total stay was \$428.29 and the average number of nights each traveler stayed in New Orleans was 3.59 nights. This equated to an average daily room rate of \$119.30. The average amount spent on restaurants/food during the total stay was \$180.50. Expenditures on gifts/apparel/other shopping were \$147.43 and recreation/entertainment was \$109.67. These were the next largest average expenses after

lodging and restaurants. Other expenditures included bars/nightclubs, gaming, and local transportation.

African Americans were asked to rate entertainment, friendly people, African American values (attractions relative to African American culture), cleanliness, safety, service, and value for the City of New Orleans on a scale from 1 (the lowest) to 5 (the highest). The highest rating was for entertainment (4.53) followed by African American values (4.33) and friendly people (4.29). Cleanliness received the lowest average rating of 3.24.

In summarizing the results, a profile of the Essence Festival Traveler began to emerge. This traveler is an educated person with 62.8% holding a bachelors degree or higher. This person has an above average income with 64.2% of the single households making \$25,000-\$57,000 annually, while 56.69% of the married households earned \$50,000 or more annually. The Essence traveler is also a young person with 73.6% between the ages of 25-50.

This traveler is less likely to participate in outdoor activities such as hiking/jogging or arts types activities such as museums or looking/purchasing art. However, this traveler is more likely to participate in retail activities such as sightseeing, shopping and entertainment activities such as Bourbon Street, the French Quarter and French Market and gaming activities. A noteworthy finding is that a large percentage of the Essence travelers did not visit African American specific cultural attractions, yet felt that New Orleans was an important place for African American values. When profiling expenditures, the average Essence traveler spent more than \$865 on their trip. This expenditure included lodging, food, and entertainment. When adding in transportation and other expenses, the average Essence traveler spent over \$1000 for their total trip.

#### Application of Results and Conclusions

The results of the study can be used by festival organizers, hospitality venues and merchants in the City of New Orleans. The results are applicable for marketing New Orleans as a tourism product to a lucrative traveler. When developing agendas, tours, and entertainment for the Essence Festival, organizers have the opportunity to plan a more productive and economically effective event by promoting activities and events that the typical traveler is more likely to participate. Merchants and hospitality venues have an opportunity to advertise in collateral materials and address the specific needs of this traveler. Future research includes comparing this traveler to the profile of the typical New Orleans visitor and determining whether there are other differences controlling for race.

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