

November 2022

The Nation Reviewed

Race around the world

[By Santilla Chingaibe](#)



The dangers of DFAT's travel advice ignoring racial, cultural or religious diversity

It's late August, and my skin feels sticky from the humidity. As I wind down the window in the taxi, I notice American flags lining almost every house we drive past in upstate New York. I mention this to a friend sitting next to me, who sighs and responds, "That's America."

Prior to arriving, I googled where I'd be spending five weeks at a writers' residency. Austerlitz, New York, has a population of just over 1600 with the racial diversity broken down as follows: 96 per cent white, 2 per cent Hispanic and 1 per cent Asian. I also learnt that, in May at a supermarket in the New York city of Buffalo, a white gunman allegedly murdered 10 Black people in a racially motivated mass shooting. I started to feel anxious about my impending trip. I've read countless stories about Black people being murdered either by police or armed civilians in the United States. And while I'm Australian, I'm also a Black person with black skin – Black in America. And that's what the world reacts to. Days before arriving in Austerlitz, as I navigated the subway in Manhattan, a Black woman walked up to me and complimented my outfit: "Nice dress, sis". Sis. The universal acknowledgment of Black sisterhood. She knew nothing about me, but what she saw – a dark-skinned woman of African descent – made her feel comfortable speaking to me like we were family.

To allay my fears, I visited the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Smartraveller website for its travel advice to the US. I was instructed to "exercise normal safety precautions", which involves using "common sense" and looking out for "suspicious

behaviour”, as I would in Australia. I kept scrolling for advice that might address my concerns. While the website does offer specialised advice for LGBTI+, elderly and women travellers, there isn’t any advice that acknowledges racial, cultural or religious diversity.

Professor Fethi Mansouri is the director of the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation at Deakin University. He says the travel advice provided by DFAT is insufficient for Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Mansouri says it doesn’t delineate enough the specific circumstances of Australian citizens originally from elsewhere, who might need to return to, say, the Middle East, Africa or South America. “Usually the advice that is given to Australian [permanent residents] or citizens in general tends to be very generic, and that could raise a lot of questions in terms of mobility patterns, restrictions, safety, capacity to receive certain consular services if things go wrong,” he says.

“There might have been some advice then in relation to areas where there is a conflict, but in general terms, the advice ... is not issued in a specific manner to either highlight the political challenges, the security challenges or even [in regard to the US] some of the local nuances in relation to race relations. And you can see that same problem persisting across a number of jurisdictions internationally.”

When I take my concerns to DFAT, a spokesperson tells me: “Smartraveller provides up-to-date travel advice and general information for all Australian travellers to help prepare for overseas travel and to keep safe while travelling overseas ... Each travel advisory provides destination-specific information about safety, health, local laws, travel and local contacts.”

Back at the writers’ residency, I’m preparing to go for a run. In Melbourne, I feel generally safe going for a jog around my neighbourhood. But I’m not in Melbourne, and I don’t feel the same, despite the travel advice telling me to take the same safety precautions I would in Australia. I ask a fellow resident, Josh, a thirty-something composer, if it’s safe for me to go for a run as a Black woman here in the Berkshires. Josh, who grew up in the area, tells me that he’s “not confident that it’ll be safe for you”. He goes on to say: “As a white guy with a beard, I would have no problem taking that walk, but I don’t feel comfortable telling you as a friend that it would be okay because I haven’t lived that experience as a non-white person walking around. And also of being a woman walking around.”

I decide against going for a run.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the number of Australians from culturally diverse backgrounds continues to increase. In 2021, just over 7 million people in Australia were born overseas, representing 27.6 per cent of the population – an increase from 26.3 per cent in 2016. Mansouri believes the travel advice could better reflect Australia’s multiculturalism. “DFAT do have a lot of intelligence, a lot of analysis, a lot of area-specific knowledge that they could apply to generate much better calibrated advice to Australians who are planning to travel overseas. But in most cases they tend to be a lot more cautious in how they articulate some of those travel advices, for obvious political and diplomatic reasons.”

The DFAT spokesperson says “it is Australian travellers’ responsibility to remain informed about the destinations to which they are travelling ... This includes understanding risks and planning for their safety ... We keep all travel advisories under close review. If there are

significant changes to the risks Australians may face overseas, [DFAT] changes the travel advice on the Smartraveller website.”

I still feel insufficiently equipped to deal with the complexity of race relations in the US. Mansouri says another factor is the close relationship Australia shares with America, which means the travel advice provided can't be too critical of race relations: “Because it's the US, a strategic alliance partner if you like, or if it's Europe or the UK, they tend to downplay those issues internally.”

One weekend, I decide to book an Uber to visit a friend in a town about 20 minutes away. My driver, a Black woman, greets me with a sigh of relief when I enter the car. “I was so happy to see that you were Black,” she says. “Driving up this remote area made me question if it was safe for me to be here.” We laugh awkwardly about this shared fear.

At the end of my residency, after navigating five weeks of complex cultural nuances in a foreign country, I feel a sense of relief that, despite the limited advice from my government, I could find a way to safely move around this community. Even so, I recall a day when, in the middle of a debate with the other artists about the limitations of language, one of them used the “n” word in my presence. Shocked by this, I had stormed off. There are some violent circumstances that even my passport can't shield me from.

[Santilla Chingaipe](#)

November 2022