

# Austin American-Statesman

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## 'Places to Love' host on 25 years in travel, new season

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Travel expert Samantha Brown's career has been its own journey. After going to college for musical theater, Brown moved to New York City to pursue acting. "And so that means I waited on tables for a good eight years and went to auditions," she told USA TODAY. One of those was for the Travel Channel show "Great Vacation Homes," which she booked in 1999.

Brown is marking 25 years as a travel TV host with the return of her Emmywinning series, "Samantha Brown's Places to Love." The show's eighth season, which begins airing Friday on PBS, takes her from German cities like Berlin and Leipzig to Traverse City, Michigan, and North Carolina's Crystal Coast, to name a few. USA TODAY caught up with Brown ahead of the premiere. Here are her answers to our questions, edited for length and

clarity:

**Question:** Over the course of 25 years, how do you feel like the travel industry has changed?

**Answer:** It's like night and day. I think, when I started 25 years ago, we, of course, had the internet, but it wasn't so (much) a part of our travel lives. I didn't even travel with a laptop. I traveled with a thesaurus because I was the writer of the show. So, I just needed other words to inspire me, so I wouldn't say "quintessential" all the time or "quaint" all the time.

But, I think with the internet, that really democratized travel in so many ways, even more than just making flights more available. That sort of created where, now people had access to flights, not just travel agents. And it felt like maybe the

travel agency world did have a lock on a lot of opportunities where the internet just opened that up to everybody. (That) doesn't mean it's any easier planning travel. I think that's where travel agents are really great at their job, and you can see how much time they do spend because you fall into a rabbit hole now of information. But anyone can travel. Before, when I started traveling, I thought it was really for the privileged — people privileged with money, time and then confidence.

I know it's so hard to choose favorite destinations, but I was curious if

Samantha Brown explores Route 66 on her show's latest season. PROVIDED BY PBS

You have any most memorable trips?

I still, to this day, love China ... I went there, I think, in 2007 before the big 2008 Olympics. I mean, with the Great Wall, and the Forbidden Palace, and the Summer Palace, it just knocked my socks off. And I really enjoyed the people, too. I loved getting to know them and our differences.

A lot of us know Europe. We're brought up with European history. It's such a part of American history. ... And so I found a lot about being in Europe was having to flex what I knew, or if I didn't know it, then I felt like an ignorant American. But China just opened me up. I felt like I could be like a 5-year-old kid and just enjoy it, and no one was gonna go, "Why don't you know that?" So, I loved that feeling. And then I would say in the United States, to bring it home really close, Santa Fe, New Mexico. It's my absolute favor-

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ite city here in the United States . ... It's such a confluence of Native American (and) Spanish influence and cultures.

So much of 'Places to Love' focuses on the people that make up a place. What have you learned about people and communities and their role in travel through the show?

I just learned that it's everything about that personal connection. That's, to me, travel. I started to care less and less about the monuments and the castles, the cathedrals because they always keep you in the past. But when you're meeting with people, you are more in

The moment – and possibly in the future – because you get to interact with what's happening now. And when I first started doing (the Travel Channel show) "Passport to Europe," it was more like the check-off-the-list, you know, the monuments that you go to, the museums and the artwork that you see. And that left me actually kind of lonely as a traveler, personally. I didn't feel like I had the travel bug when that was the focus. But then, now, with my own show and me calling the shots, it's all people-driven because they completely change how a place affects you.

You've said that you like to focus on places that aren't necessarily the big, marquee travel destinations. What makes a good location for an episode of 'Places to Love'?

Definitely, things going on. We don't do remote places where there's nothing happening. So we do, like, small cities. They have something else going on that maybe people don't know about on the

surface. So maybe there's a history, like in Huntsville, Alabama, it's NASA and this incredible base of science and rocket and space exploration. And yet, it's an affordable place to live, and so artists are there as well.

In these 25 years, I imagine that you have amassed some wisdom in your own travels. If you have any top travel tips, what would they be?

I think people feel most in need of tips when it comes to the airport because that's still a phenomenally intimidating experience for a lot of people. One, to alleviate 90% of the stress, get there in plenty of time.

Another great tip I have for people that they don't think about at the airport is when they arrive at the airport and you get off your flight, the first thing everyone does is look for the baggage claim and the exit signs. Slow down and take a look around – kind of plan your return. Airports are pretty cool places these days. So, is there a cool local restaurant that you see, like, "Oh, I'd like to eat there," or is there a place to get just a quick massage? ... For traveling with children – I have twins, they're 11 now, but we traveled extensively since they were 2-months-old. It was a game changer for my husband and I: We never used the preboard to board our kids. So, we waited at the gate and parent number one or caregiver number one used the preboard to load in all of the gear . ... They load everything in, and then I would wait with the kids until the very last person of the very last zone is called. We would walk on, get the kids settled and we would hopefully depart in 10 minutes.

Is there anything you're particularly excited for people to see in the new season of 'Places to Love'?

Like all of our seasons, we really do a wide scope of travel options. We did Costa Rica, but we went in July, and that's the rainy season . ... And it's actually a phenomenal time. ... Prices are lower, and it rains, but so what? It's 85 degrees out. It doesn't bother you at all. It actually feels really refreshing.

The one I'm really excited about is that we're completing Route 66 and we're in the middle of it now. Route 66 turns 100 in 2026, and so we started in Illinois last year, and we realized,

So, this year, we completed from St Louis, the (Gateway Arch), all the way to Santa Fe. And then this year – we haven't shot it yet – we'll pick up in Albuquerque, New Mexico and make it all the way to California. So we're in the middle. And what I love about the middle is it's Oklahoma and Kansas and the panhandle of Texas. These are places that few people travel to, and the history there and the people are fascinating . ... And you really come away with thinking, Man, what an amazing country we live in.

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