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## HOW AUTHENTIC WAS YOUR LAST HOLIDAY?

In a world dominated by capitalism and social media, how authentic are our trips abroad? Not very, says Julie Olum

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### AUTHENTIC TRAVEL

**D**URING OUR SCHOOL holidays spent on the white sands at the coast of Kenya, as a child I didn't immediately question the number of Maasai men on the beach selling beaded jewellery, boat tours and other holiday spoils to the gathered European and US tourists.

That is until one morning, on a beach walk, my dad greeted a man cloaked in red with the most basic Maa greeting, "sova", and got a response in Kiswahili, the national language and dominant lingua franca of the coastal region. Dad tried again to no avail and turned

with "that rich, exotic culture to immerse yourself in on a visit to Kenya and Tanzania" along with your wildlife safari. With tourists happy to pay for native-looking crafts, a dance or jumping show and even a photograph, why wouldn't one try their hand at playing a part in this economy?

**Years later, working at the front desk of a South African hostel, two peppy German backpackers approached to ask where in Cape Town they could try some African food. Dissatisfied with my recommendations of shisa nyama**



### "WITH TOURISTS HAPPY TO PAY, WHY WOULDN'T ONE TRY PLAYING A PART IN THIS ECONOMY?"

to me with a smirk saying, "See? They're not even really Maasai". Come to think of it he didn't have the stretched earlobes that many adult Maasai men do. And, although they're semi-nomadic people, generally those who choose to live a more traditional pastoralist life will be found moving between the central highlands down into Northern Tanzania. This far East, not so much.

**The iconic existence** of these tall, dark, lean people, who have so well preserved their traditional dress and way of life is by now synonymous

[South African barbecue] and Cape Malay [an ethnic group in South Africa] cuisine, they specified that they wanted to try "buffalo meat and crazy stuff like that".

A concept restaurant along these lines has existed since the 1980s in my hometown, Nairobi, where patrons could—up until it was banned in 2004—try meats from the various animals they may have just spotted on a game drive: ostrich, crocodile, impala, giraffe, the works. You'd be hard pressed to find any Kenyan of the last five or six generations (if ever) to have served





any of that, even as a joke, in their home. Who decided game meat was what "African food" consisted of? The short answer is European colonialists and settlers who pushed out indigenous food and other cultural customs from many regions while simultaneously painting the people in the lands they invaded as savage, unintelligent and quirky characters in the backgrounds of their safaris and various expeditions. But that's an even longer story for another day.

**Things are taken a step further** in the souvenir business. Many of the diverse and colourful wax print

place—may have been overtaken by the commodification of cultures in the name of tourism. That often includes many packaged offerings of "authentic" travel experiences.

But that doesn't mean they can't be enjoyed or at least chuckled at. After all, anyone who has spent time around the Colosseum in Rome knows that it isn't actually a gladiator or the Pope posing for pictures. And maybe you're just hearing about this, but pad Thai isn't quite traditional cuisine—it was pushed as the Thai national dish in the late 1930s in efforts to encourage national unity and cultural cohesion following the

### "PAD THAI WAS PUSHED AS THE THAI NATIONAL DISH IN EFFORTS TO ENCOURAGE NATIONAL UNITY"

fabrics that light up market stalls in Ghana and other West and Central African nations actually owe their origins to a Dutch textile company, and are increasingly competing with versions made in China. Most of those breezy *dashiki* shirts? Also China. Even other Africans don't always catch that one. But they're so fun, and now you can have your own custom "African-print" dresses, trousers, even bum bags made.

It might be time for the traveller-not-tourist brigade to relax their shoulders and accept that sometimes a place—or ideas of that

move from absolute monarchy to democracy. A well-made bowl is still hearty and delicious; no need to stop ordering it in Thailand or elsewhere.

**Many, myself included,** have been guilty of rolling our eyes at today's visual-centred social media obsession which seems dead set on homogenising life as a whole and travel experiences in particular. A beautiful image of meticulously arranged flowers in a spa bath in Bali has often led to a booking for that suite and a photograph/hop in that bath with the flowers. In Bali.

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#### AUTHENTIC TRAVEL

But how different is that really from posing with a lei of leaves and flowers presented by a Hawaiian "hula girl", like you've seen in the postcards and ads for decades?

In her essay, *Corporate Tourism and the Prostitution of Hawaiian Culture*, Haunani Kay-Trask writes, "Hula dancers wear clown-like makeup, don costumes from a mix of Polynesian cultures... In hotel versions of the hula, the sacredness of the dance has completely evaporated while the athleticism and sexual expression have been packaged like ornaments." But where there's a seller, there's a willing and often insatiable market of travellers, who have more likely than not come for the image they have of the place, and not necessarily to experience the culture as it is today.

Once again social media, while seemingly spiralling out of control, reveals itself to be a mirror for society. People have been doing this for *decades*—consuming designed media and marketing about a destination, its people and their culture and not questioning much, even while on the ground, experiencing the place themselves.

**The difference perhaps lies** in the increased accessibility of travel and with it, the growing number of destinations open to receiving tourists. Now not only can more people hop on a plane than ever before, but they can all be photographers and travel writers at the touch of a button too. And many of them grab at the chance to instantly share their new discoveries for the rest of us to scroll through and judge.

The way that capitalism is set up, it was bound to happen. The "authentic travel" business is just that. A business ripe to be branded and sold to consumers.

Personally, I'm team support-local-enterprises. Tourism has drastically improved the lives of people around the world in ways they wouldn't have dreamed plausible in simpler times.

Now travel presents fewer true opportunities for bragging about all the culture you've soaked up when you know how much of it is for show, perhaps the lessons you learned in sales from that persistent hat vendor in Hanoi would make for a more solid story at your next party. ■

#### He's Lovin' It

In the ten days when he competed at the Beijing Olympics in 2008, Usain Bolt ate over 100 Chicken McNuggets per day and nothing else.

Source: <https://olympics.nbcsports.com/2020/04/21/usain-bolt-beijing-olympics-2008-chicken-mcnugget/>

