

An Ode to Souvenirs: Sentimental Journey



Souvenirs can be collectibles, trophies, and kitsch at its kitschiest. But mostly they're reminders of good times.

Mention the word souvenir and a thousand images spring to mind: the personalized mug from Niagara Falls (Jack! Jake! Jane! Janet!), the jackalope postcard from New Mexico, the Seattle Space Needle replica made of genuine Mount St. Helens ashes, the gold dancing Elvis telephone from Memphis. They're kitschy, they're colorful, and they're as much a part of American culture as the open road.

What's more, we're addicted to buying them, to the tune of more than \$1.5 billion a year. No trip feels complete until we've purchased a trinket to remind us of where we've been. Or, for that matter, until we've shopped at all. According to the Travel Industry Association in Washington, D.C., shopping is the No. 1 activity of people vacationing in the United States. Still, what compels a person to plunk down hundreds, often thousands, of dollars on planes, hotels, and restaurants, but to commemorate the trip with only a \$20 T-shirt?

The word souvenir may hold the key: A French word, souvenir means "to remember." For many people, it's not so much the souvenir that's of value, but what it evokes – a memory and a good story to tell.

"Travel is still this special, unique period of one's life," says Robert Thompson, a professor of media and pop culture at Syracuse University, "and there's a very natural human tendency to bring back a trophy from someplace you've been, to commemorate the event."

There is also a tendency to boast about where you've been, and souvenirs provide the cheapest way to advertise where your travel dollars have gone – and that you have travel dollars. Walk around in a T-shirt you picked up in Tahiti and all your friends know you're pulling down the kind of money that a Tahitian vacation requires.

"Souvenirs are status symbols," Thompson says, "though they're the kitschiest status symbols I can think of."



But they're status symbols with staying power. Ever since humans have traveled, they've picked up souvenirs. As early as 700 BC, Homer, in his epic poem *The Odyssey*, wrote of his hero's gift gathering in far-off lands. (The author may, however, have been euphemistically referring to pillaging and plundering.)

By the 12th century, when medieval Christians began making pilgrimages to various shrines, they purchased metal badges – complete with an image of the shrine's saint – and affixed them to their hats and clothing. Like the T-shirt from Tahiti advertising our devotion to mammon, these badges did a terrific job of broadcasting the pilgrim's devotion to God. The badges, which may have been the first mass-produced souvenirs, were such a hit that in 1466, the Swiss monastery of Santa Maria managed to sell 130,000 in two weeks, according to Godfrey Evans, co-curator of an exhibit on souvenirs at the Royal Museum in Edinburgh, Scotland.

In the 1600s, the British brought the secular souvenir into vogue with their "grand tours," the trips undertaken by wealthy young men to finish their education by steeping themselves in the Continent's greatest art collections, architecture, and classical monuments.

Americans were not far behind, although it took some time to arrive at the tacky, made-in-China souvenir of which we're so fond today.

"There was a period," says David Shayt, a specialist at the Smithsonian Institution's Division of Cultural History, "when the souvenir had to literally be from the site." As an example of this, he points to the Smithsonian's own Star-Spangled Banner, from which many strips were cut and given to the families of War of 1812 veterans as souvenirs. After the Liberty Bell stopped ringing in 1846, city fathers in Philadelphia took a hammer to it, chipping off pieces to present to visiting dignitaries.

Not until the inception of the world's fair – that veritable celebration of modern industrialism and mass production – did the souvenir as we know it come to be. At the first world's fair, the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition in London, trinkets abounded, everything from handbills to small cards, paperweights to women's compacts, all emblazoned with the image of the Crystal Palace. But it was at the expositions in Philadelphia in 1876 and Chicago in 1893 that "the biggest explosion of souvenirs occurred," according to Shayt. Why?



"All of a sudden," he says, "we had the ability to mass-produce widgets of all kinds." Newly urbanized Americans came home from the world's fairs, such as the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, with souvenir china, pillows, handkerchiefs, even bedspreads. Trinkets became important evidence that you had been there.

In the 1890s, the picture postcard appeared. It has probably become the most popular souvenir of all time, which is ironic because it's the one specifically intended to be given to someone else. Of course, that may also be why it's so popular: It has the unique ability to torture the recipient, stuck at home. With the rise of car travel in the 1920s and '30s and then the great Baby Boomer Family Road Trip of the '50s and '60s, the postcard became as important as the family slide show.

Today's tourist suffers from an overdose of practicality, indicative of the overall trend among travelers to want the most bang for their vacation buck. "We're in the information age," says Steve Lynam, a former vice president of retail for Xanterra, the concessionaire for Yellowstone and Grand Canyon national parks and Mount Rushmore National Monument. "Our guests want a product that not only evokes memories and advertises a trip, but can offer an educational component in addition. When a tourist buys a T-shirt, for example, with a graphic of the Grand Canyon on it, there's a hangtag attached with information about the South Rim."

Most likely, a T-shirt is exactly what the average tourist will buy. "T-shirts are still our top sellers," Lynam explains, "and the coffee mug business has improved, too." If there's one thing that today's souvenirs have in common, it's that they're functional, a buzzword you hear again and again in the souvenir industry.

This assumes, however, that the traveler is uncool enough to purchase a souvenir – or to purchase it with a straight face. As cynicism becomes the norm, says Professor Thompson, a hierarchy of hip has arisen around souvenir buying. On the bottom rung are people who haven't even visited a certain place. The next rung belongs to people who have been to the place and, Thompson says, "have the T-shirt to prove it." The top rung, he says, is reserved "for people who have been there but are too cool to wear the T-shirt."

It's enough to make a traveler yearn for the days when you only picked up a Golden Gate Bridge snow globe because, well, you had been there and because your memento seemed like something truly special.

Legions of collectors have decided that early souvenirs were indeed special. They're collecting everything from china (early-20th-century German imports with "views" are hot) to snow globes to postcards. Ashtrays – which straddle that fine line between souvenirs and looted goods, depending on how much you paid for your hotel room or your meal – have become so popular that an entire book has been written on casino ashtrays.

Almost anything can qualify as a souvenir collectible. "As collectibles go," says Harry Rinker, president of Rinker Enterprises in Vera Cruz, Pa., and an authority on antiques and collectibles, "souvenirs are very cheap." Why focus on souvenirs? "For one simple reason," says Rinker, who has his own formidable accumulation. "There's a collecting gene in our DNA. In some people, it's just more developed than it is in others." It's a way, he says, of expressing individuality in an increasingly conformist world.



It's also a way of constantly remembering a happy past. In Rinker's bedroom, for example, is a shelf full of souvenirs—some are antiques, some just ordinary souvenirs – devoted to a trip to Australia. "Every time I look at it, I think of Australia," he says. "Every item on that shelf means something to me." Rinker is unusual in that he collects souvenirs from a variety of places. People generally collect objects from just one location, according to Jim Griffith, a spokesman for eBay. "They're celebrating one particular place," he says.

The places they're most likely to celebrate include Niagara Falls ("ground zero for kitsch," Griffith says); Coney Island in its heyday; the borscht belt hotels in the Catskills; and, as another generation of souvenir hounds comes of age, Disneyland and Disney World.

That avid collectors are now scooping up location-specific souvenirs gets to the heart of why we buy them at all, why we fill our suitcases and backpacks with trinkets that aren't even made in the place where we bought them. We do it to remember. "To be honest, most collectors are just trying to buy back their memories," Rinker says. Memories of riding the roller coaster at Coney Island, of spending lazy days in the Catskills, of seeing Mickey and Minnie for the first time, when we were young enough to be missing teeth.

"Most of our best vacations were taken when we were children," Rinker says. "Who wouldn't want to buy those vacations back?"

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