

How to find a souvenir that's not a tacky magnet or shot glass

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Experts recommend shopping for souvenirs you'll actually use when you get back to your daily life.

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It's a familiar vacation scenario: you're hunting for a meaningful memento to bring home from a trip you loved, but somehow still end up with yet another tacky fridge magnet, shot glass or "I love [insert city]" t-shirt – something that seemed fun in the moment, but quickly gets donated or abandoned in a drawer.

According to the experts, souvenir shopping doesn't have to go down that way.

"I look for items made by local artisans that I'll actually use," says Joel Balsam, a travel journalist originally from Ottawa, Ont., who is now based in Rio de Janeiro. "Consider what you could use in your house and look for that first."

He suggests placemats, a tablecloth or a painting for your living room. "Art made by artisans that remind you of your trip is always better than something from a department store at home," Balsam adds.

Julia Hayhurst, founder of bespoke trip planning agency Hayven Travel in Toronto, agrees: buy practical items you'll actually use, because even purchases that aren't tacky souvenir-shop items can still wind up forgotten.

"Early in my travel career, I would lean into whatever local item caught my eye. I have photos of me with boxes of mantas – South American blankets – that I purchased with hopes of turning them into ottomans and pillows. Nearly 15 years have passed and the blankets are still in boxes," she says. "I was caught up in the excitement of travel and not thinking about how these items would actually work in my home."



Julia Hayhurst shopping for souvenirs in Atacama, Chile.

JULIA HAYHURST

Instead, she recommends looking for jewellery, holiday ornaments, a small basket or housewares like utensils or salad tongs. “I like items that I can use for years,” she says.

Previously, she bought “tasteful Christmas tree decorations” from each country she visited. (Author’s note: I do this too, although admittedly, some are kitschy. I have 20 or so and they range from a glass orca ball from B.C. to a painted ceramic Highland cow from Scotland.)

“I still love looking at them each year, but my tree is very full,” Hayhurst says. “Now my focus is housewares. Specifically, I love to hunt for items that I can use to set a beautiful table: pottery bowls, silver, tablecloths. My favourite purchase to date is a set of 12 placemats from Morocco.”

Now that you know what to buy, where do you find it? Balsam’s main tip: avoid touristy areas. “I recently travelled to Belo Horizonte, Brazil and found the most amazing leather art in a mall mostly for restaurants,” he says. “It wasn’t at a souvenir shop, but it’s still a souvenir.”



Joel Balsam (middle) and his partner Sara Patriota with Modesto Mero Pachay of Modesto Hats.
JOEL BALSAM

Balsam suggests looking for artist shops – whether that be a painter, dressmaker, ceramicist, silversmith or other artisan. He recently went to Ecuador and bought a Montecristi hat – “what we know as Panama hats originally came from there,” he shares – directly from an artisan making them. “I bought one from him for less than many shops that were selling similar hats made in China. That hat is something I’ll wear and probably put up on a wall when I’m not.” For both Hayhurst and Balsam, there’s another important element in shopping for souvenirs: vibe.

“For me, souvenirs aren’t just the item, they’re also the memory of buying them,” says Balsam. “I love to talk to the artisans or shopkeepers and, if the culture allows, haggle to a price I’m comfortable with.”

He says he used to travel without buying any souvenirs, but now he loves having life experiences and “seeing memories of my trips sprinkled around my apartment.”

Beats a tacky fridge magnet every time.