

INTRODUCTION

Some of my fondest childhood memories are of the summer vacations I spent in Greece. At a young age, I learned how to live with locals, experiencing them through familiarity, and learning to travel into the great outdoors. I did not grow up rich, but I was taught to appreciate the fact that I was able to travel, as well as to respect nature and people. I slept on couches, ate home cooked meals with relatives, or even individuals who were complete strangers to me, hitched rides to the beach, took road trips with cousins, and found all sorts of new ways and places to explore. I learned that where my parents went, I was meant to tag along. Which meant always meeting local people.

Over the past few years, there has been a shift in travel values. Now, more than ever, travellers have greater options to blend in with local society. Through apps, web sites, and travel affiliation groups, travellers are seeking out original experiences that will allow them to become immersed in a culture by living as the local inhabitants do. Traveling to a new destination is exhilarating, but staying with someone who knows the landscape (physical and cultural) opens many more doors. Taking the road less travelled, living off the beaten path, visiting more than just the typical tourist sites of your new turf should be everyone's goal on any journey.

We should all want to “go local”, learning about the culture from the people who actually live in the region, and to be chameleon-like while blending in. To be travelers seeking that one of a kind moment, with unique and authentic experiences wherever they may roam.

Experiential travel, immersion travel, and peer-to-peer travel are the new buzz words. But is this style of travel really new? It's as old as civilization itself. In modern day society, new sites and apps have made it easier than ever to eat, sleep, ride, and play, and to find local guides in your new surroundings. After all, life's wealth is measured by one's encounters and experiences with others.

If a picture is worth 1,000 words, what is an experience worth? Like the long-lasting memories that come from them, the experiences on a journey are what make travel unique and priceless. Travel opens us up to so much of our world, connecting us with nature, culture, and people.

More than that special selfie in front of the Golden Gate Bridge, Eiffel Tower or the Taj Mahal, today's traveller seeks out wisdom by connecting with the people who live in a region day-to-day; those who know it best. More than the amenities and comforts of home, more than the attractions, canned tourist traps and fake entertainment, more than the must-see commonality of sites and photo opportunities, it's the human interaction and experiences with locals which compel people to travel.

Sometimes the simplest, fleeting moments in life—a smile or compliment, or asking a local for directions in your new surroundings—can turn into friendships, memories and experiences

that last a lifetime. To blend into the sights, sounds, smells, and to learn a new culture brings intrinsic values we all share. Connecting on the road makes us all greater world citizens. Engaging with local people truly expands your own culture and theirs. We should all travel like we are ambassadors from our countries. Open exchanges transform the world. The smallest conversations can immerse you into your new destination, and might change you forever. Travel breeds tolerance, acceptance, wisdom, and long lasting memories to bring home.

Never before has it been so easy to seek out what it feels like to live like a resident in your new community with the advent of peer to peer travel websites and apps catering to in-country experiences. The possibilities to “go local” are seemingly endless while learning to eat, sleep and play in your new destination. One can stay in a local’s home, apartment, backyard, or even exchange homes.

As P2P (peer to peer) travel continues to lay its mark on traditional travel, visitors may choose from a wide variety of places to rest. Accommodations can vary from the aforementioned stay in a home or apartment, on a sofa or in a spare room, or to more exotic locales such as lighthouses, universities, wineries, monasteries, boats, treehouses, or above an English pub. You may live with indigenous people, sleep in a castle, a converted airplane, or even on a small island.

As stated earlier, some of my fondest childhood memories were spending summer vacations in Greece. I was taught at a young age how to live with locals and experience familiarity wherever I traveled, taking part in the daily lives of residents, such as learning to bake bread in Greece.

Two years ago, I had one of my most enjoyable accommodations and experiences ever. I stayed above a pub called the George & Dragon, in the working class neighborhood of Acton. Not only did I sleep in a room above the pub, but I was able to mingle with the local bar patrons. My hosts, Dave and Jen, were among the most open and giving people that I have ever met. I’ll never forget the experience of coming home from a long day of networking, only to pour my own pint of Guinness.

As travellers, we can choose to blend into the peer-to-peer landscape. For my maiden voyage into P2P travel immersion, again it would be in London where I would have one of those life-changing travel moments. My first AirBnB experience using someone’s home for my accommodation was in London’s Mayfair neighborhood where I probed into the sharing community.

The London borough of Westminster, near Hyde Park, is one of my favorite areas of the capital, and also one of the city’s priciest areas. Clearly, hotels in posh Mayfair would not be possible. Not only was I able to stay in an amazing and affordable apartment, but my host, Julie, just happened to be connected to discount theater tickets, and even got me into a sold-out show of *Book of Mormon*.

Later in my stay, I chatted up Julie’s neighbor, Carl, on where to find a more authentic London for a historical walk. Soon, I was invited to Carl’s for tea. I felt like I had just walked into a flat prepped for Architectural Digest. We conversed over British history and the nuances between America and England for two hours. Later, Carl and I were meandering down Piccadilly

Road on an extended walk while he enlightened me on fun facts about the surrounding places. This truly enhanced my stay, and these are the enriching encounters that change our lives and make travel special.

Perhaps the ultimate ‘local’ travel experience exists over sharing a meal, and the traveler’s quest to sample local cuisine while meeting food-centric folk. Foodies are singing the praises of food technology sites, and their influence on the peer to peer travel scene is growing. If travel is about encounters and experiences, surely one of life’s simple pleasures is time spent over a home cooked meal. More than eating at fancy restaurants, today’s travelers are increasingly opting for meals in private homes. You can eat a home cooked meal in a local’s home, eat with a resident chef, or learn to cook a restaurant meal you just experienced in Provence or Tuscany.

At London’s World Travel Market, the world’s second largest travel trade gathering, peer to peer travel has more than entered the conversation of posing a threat to traditional travel methods.

At the World Travel Market and Arabian Travel Market, senior exhibition director, Simon Press sees the changing travel landscape leading towards a sharing economy. Mr. Press said, “When traveling and on holiday, we all like to think that our experience is authentic to the destination. How much more real can you get than by living with locals or eating local food cooked by a local in their own home, or being taken to a restaurant which isn’t featured in the guidebooks?”

You can get a local guide to show you neighborhoods that you would have missed on your own. If you stay in someone’s home, the chances are very likely that your new friend will want to show off the local neighborhood to you, so you will encounter many unique experiences. Who better to guide you than someone who resides each and every day in your new cultural environment? Sure, one wants to see the Eiffel Tower, but it’s that little coffee shop or bar in St. Michel, that you might have never found that molds your perspective about a new destination.

Tours by locals change perceptions. Having an expert in the region to guide you around opens your mind to a new way of thinking that you most likely would not have experienced on your own. I visit Venice once a year, because it’s magical. Meandering through lost, hidden, streets and finding my way out is priceless. Nowhere else has such epic grandeur of opulence than this place where marble palaces are in water. The real reason I come is also because I have a local Venetian friend, Umberto, to guide me around. This makes every move I make in the “city of water” that much more memorable. I’m in awe of Umberto’s local knowledge of all things centric to Venice. He is a walking guidebook of his home’s history, food, drink, and culture.



Travelers want these same local experiences, sharing an apartment or finding an out of the way eatery, far from the center of town. There is something local out there for everyone. There are historical societies who plan unique stays, travel groups solely catering to female travelers. The list goes on. If you have an affinity for volleyball, surfing, hiking, cooking, wine, or yoga, you can find a group. There is a meet up for almost any interest while on the road, as well as ways to meet through various travel apps and to find familiarity on the road. The closer contact that you have with people will change both your life and theirs. Making new friends at your destination will last a lifetime. You can't get a more local feeling than sharing one's living quarters in your new stomping ground.

Another way to experience local culture is through volunteer tourism. The desire to give back to a community is something that is engrained in all of us. You can work in a village in Africa, teach English in Myanmar, grow organic food in Guatemala, pick tea leaves in Sri Lanka, help to build houses in a Peruvian village, build schools in Bangladesh, or take a marine conservation holiday in Thailand. Whether you're helping people or assisting with the environment or the protection of animals, nothing beats volunteering.

There are also many responsible, worthwhile, supporting organizations that can assist you in reaching your goal to help others on your travels. You can learn how to live sustainably all over the world.

Supporting a cause is a transcendent way to learn about a local community. Many tour operators and volunteer groups allow you to make a difference on your trip to not only “go local”, but to even pitch in for the betterment of our geographical sphere.

Recently, many environmentally conscious travelers have taken up a variety of causes. One such endeavor is to save sea turtles from poaching and to replenish the number of these beautiful reptiles. In Costa Rica’s Tortuguero National Park, Leatherback Turtles are making a comeback. Through such activism, poaching on Costa Rica’s Parismina Beach has decreased from 98% to 38%. Perhaps there is no greater satisfaction than protecting the flora and fauna of our planet.

Helping others is not only a rewarding way to travel, but the memories you will bring home will last a lifetime. Life is about experiences, and what better travel experience is there than knowing you might have helped change lives on your trip? What greater satisfaction is there than knowing that your tourism dollars went directly to benefit a local community? Giving something back to the world can be a highly rewarding and life changing experience.

So, on your next journey, ditch the idea of staying in an all-inclusive or high-rise hotel in a nondescript area. Make a positive carbon footprint on our planet and become a better traveler. Hit the road with your goal being to find authentic, original experiences. Learn from a local society, and open your mind to your new surroundings. Let travel change your outlook.

Go “Local” and you’re sure to return home with a better understanding of the world, and with a greater tolerance and knowledge that can only be learned from interaction with a local society.

“The world is a book and those who do not travel read only one page.” – St. Augustine

Thanks for reading this introduction / sample of my book Going Local.

Please read the whole book buy purchasing it on Amazon.

-Nicholas Kontis

Author and Globe Trotter