

# Creative Tourists' Experience of Authenticity

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## Abstract

*Creative tourism can be understood as a form of special interest tourism which centers on the tourist's wish to actively engage with locals and their cultural heritage to learn/create something new and to gain authentic experiences. This study attempts to understand how authenticity is articulated and experienced by creative tourists. To achieve this objective, 73 tourist stories from the website "Vacation with an artist" (<https://vawaa.com/>) were analyzed following a qualitative methodological approach, employing thematic analysis. The findings suggest that creative tourists experience authenticity through places of origin, through their teachers as heritage bearers, through entering non-touristic spaces and through multi-sensory and embodied experiences.*

**Key Words** *creative tourism, authenticity, place authenticity, domestic sphere, multi-sensory experiences*

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## Introduction

Creative tourism can be understood as a form of special interest tourism (Novelli, 2005), which centers on the tourist's wish to actively engage with locals and their cultural heritage to learn something new and to gain authentic experiences (Duxbury & Richards, 2019). Therefore, creative tourism can be defined as a sub-set of cultural tourism where tourists mostly seek to engage with intangible cultural aspects, such as cultural identity, local life or traditions rather than tangible cultural attractions, like visiting museums (Richards 2009). For example, tourists travel to Tokyo to learn Japanese calligraphy from local experts. De Bruin and Jelinčić (2016) argue that creative tourism can be defined as participatory tourism because tourists wish to actively engage with culture through creating or learning something new.

Creative tourism is often presented as a more socially sustainable form of tourism because visitor-host encounters seem to be more egalitarian than other forms of cultural tourism. Studies imply that the relationship between hosts and visitors rely on mutual cultural interest, meaningful interactions, co-creation of cultural heritage and knowledge sharing (Couret, 2020; Duxbury et al., 2021; Scherf, 2021). Duxbury and Richards (2019) argue that creative tourism stands for intercultural learning, understanding different worldviews, sharing experiences and connecting on a human level, which will be vital qualities in a global tourism future. Authentic tourist experiences enhance cultural understanding and, therefore, contribute to social sustainability. While most studies focus on the connection between cultural tourism, creativity and the value of creative tourism for tourism destinations (Gato et al., 2022), empirical investigation on the nature of creative tourist's experiences

have only received little scholarly interest (Matteucci & Smith, 2024).

Studies on creative tourist experiences mainly focus on motivation, the elements that characterize creative tourists (Douglas et al., 2025; Remoaldo et al., 2020), and the outcome of creative tourism experiences such as transformation, personal benefits, well-being and place attachment (e.g. Matteucci & Filep, 2017; Suhartanto et al., 2020; Min et al., 2023). In general, studies on the characteristics of creative tourists have shown that their travel motivation lies in intrinsic motives where tourists wish for personal growth, gaining knowledge, cultural understanding, personalized and authentic experiences, well-being and bonding with meaningful others (Courret, 2016; Matteucci & Smith, 2024; Scherf, 2021). Specifically, authors have emphasized the desire that tourists have for real, non-staged, authentic experiences (Matteucci & Smith, 2024; Zhao, 2023). Creative tourists usually avoid chartered tourists, search for hidden spots, try to get to know the culture through the local gaze and, therefore, create unique and memorable experiences for themselves (Courret, 2016). Satisfied creative tourists tend to develop a sense of attachment to the visited place/region (Wei et al., 2023), to people and culture and to enhance their self-esteem through psychological benefits such as fostering self-confidence and well-being (Matteucci, 2018).

Within tourism research, authenticity has received some academic attention; however, this paper aims to understand how creative tourists articulate authenticity as part of their experiences. Since authenticity is a multi-layered and complex concept, researchers have called for further investigation on authenticity in tourism experiences (Heitmann, 2011; Skandalis, 2024). This study, therefore, seeks to answer the following research question: “How do creative tourists experience authenticity?”.

### ***Authenticity in tourism experiences***

Research on authenticity in tourism experiences has been documented as a flexible, changing, multi-layered and complex concept, which deals with the authenticity of tourists, destinations, communities and the industry itself (Heitmann, 2011). However, the three main dimensions of authenticity (objective, constructive and existential) as articulated by Wang (1999), have largely influenced research on authenticity in tourism experiences. Objective authenticity is object-related and refers to the authenticity of original artifacts, traditions or sites. Constructive authenticity focuses on the symbolic authentic meaning of objects, which is constructed by tourists' expectations, marketing and history. Third, existential authenticity is not necessarily related to objects but to activities, which provoke genuine and real feelings (Wang, 1999). For example, the act of dancing Flamenco as a touristic activity can help to reconnect with the true, authentic self (Matteucci, 2018). Through opening to true emotions, personal experiences of authenticity lead to meaningful connections and intimate bonds with (new) friends and local communities (inter-personal authenticity) (Moore, 2021; Wang, 1999). Current research based on Wang's theorization shows that tourists who desire to experience the authentic as in original objects, sites, artifacts, culture and people, increase their knowledge about them and genuinely enjoy the process of learning and cultural understanding (Moore, 2021; Zhao, 2023).

Furthermore, Gibson and Connell (2004) argue that authenticity lies in the location of cultural origin. Within their work on music tourism they established that tourists travel to destinations that are considered to be the birthplace of a music genre such as the Mozarthaus in Salzburg, Austria. Another example of place authenticity is found in Bizas' (2014) work where tourists tend to choose local teachers to learn Sabar dance rhythms in Senegal. Therefore, place authenticity links the destination of origin to locals, their skills and their traditions (Pasquinelli, 2021). In addition, tourists seek to experience their holiday destination through a local lens. By entering domestic spaces such as locals' homes or their studios, tourists feel like cultural insiders (Matteucci & Smith, 2024). Skandalis (2024) also argues that joining locals in their everyday life activities is another dimension of spatial authenticity. Further, experiences, which activate the tourists' senses tend to increase the perception of authenticity. Multi-sensory experiences stimulate positive emotions through bodily movements and therefore enhance authentic cultural experiences, which leads to high emotional involvement and long-lasting destination memories (Imamovi, 2021).

## **Methodology**

In order to analyze creative tourist experiences, I opted for a qualitative research approach. I gathered multiple short stories from creative tourists posted on the website “Vacation with an artist” (hereafter VAWAA - see <https://vawaa.com/>) and analyzed them based on their content.

VAWAA is a website, which links creative tourists with artists all over the world. Artists can showcase their art and destination, and tourists can directly book their creative vacations with an artist such as brass bell crafting in Japan, tango dance in Argentina or historic Greek cuisine in Greece.

In April 2024, a colleague and I collected 73 short stories (with an average length of 210 words), which resulted in a total of 15.441 words. The stories have been posted by international travelers from 16 different nations; however, most accounts are from American travelers. We selected stories based on two criteria: The artist must pass on an indigenous cultural endowment originated from the destination itself and stories had to be substantial in terms of their content (including emotions, background information, personal reflection and sufficient details on their travel experience).

To analyze the textual data collected, thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2012) was employed. After an initial familiarization with the data, first codes such as “learning experience, mentors, family, embodiment, transformation, authenticity etc.” were established. It became evident that authenticity emerged as a dominant theme throughout most of the short stories. Consequently, the dataset was read multiple times to generate codes, which reflect authentic experiences. Based on similar topics these codes were inductively categorized, reviewed, condensed and organized into key and sub-themes on authentic tourist experiences. Additionally, ten to twenty potential quotes (excerpts from the short stories) were selected to represent each theme and to be potentially included in the report. The quotes were reviewed by two researchers. To ensure data protection, the names of tourists and artists were anonymized or left out in the presentation of the results (Braun & Clark, 2012).

## **Findings**

In creative tourist experiences, authenticity is a dominant theme, which pervades most of the VAWAA stories. Authenticity is articulated in terms of three main dimensions: Place authenticity (1) including place of origin and artists as indigenous cultural bearers, living like a local (2) by experiencing spatial authenticity through entering the locals' domestic sphere, and multi-sensory experiences (3), which lead to experience genuine personal authenticity and cultural understanding through immersive and embodied experiences.

### ***Place authenticity***

Based on the stories, many creative tourists choose VAWAA because they are eager to experience an artistic activity from the country where this art form originated. For example, creative tourist Hannah has been learning to paint over the past five years but through a Japanese calligraphy workshop, she hoped to improve her “brushwork skills”. In addition, she “wanted an immersive cultural experience in Japan and learn a bit more of the history and language”. Heidi explains her experience in India as “a very authentic dive into block printing and natural textile dyeing, but also in a dazzling, hard-working neighborhood in Mumbai”.

Besides experiencing a deeply culturally embedded art form, a prominent theme in the tourists' accounts is the description of local artists as heritage bearers. Similar to Bizas' work (2014), tourists experience authenticity through their indigenous teachers. For instance, Holly articulates her creative holidays as follows: “This experience was not just about creating art; it was about connecting with rich cultural heritage and learning from a master artisan”. In many stories tourists emphasize the extensive knowledge, expertise and passion of their teachers, which seem to be “passed on traditions [...] through hundreds of years of history” (Joe). In addition, artists often act as a guides and lead tourists to historic places related to their craft such as national museums, local markets within culinary workshops or fields where women harvest fresh indigo to produce natural ink from scratch. In the context of Ebru painting in Turkey, Grace encapsulates her instructor's authenticity and authority when she says: “[the artist] is an expert in the art, architecture and culture of Istanbul, and we were really lucky to have experienced the city through her lens”. Another account about experiences of

place and artist authenticity comes from Joe about his experience of brass bell crafting:

This refreshing, off-the-beaten path was perfect for those wanting a true experience of the very best Japan has to offer, away from the hustle of the Tokyo Ginza subway and Kyoto Nishiki market. The people, the food, the rural river-based beauty (Cherry blossoms and all) and the hospitality of this part of Japan are unforgettable and excellent complement to this one-of-kind experience with a recognized Japanese treasure artisan. We love embedding off the beaten path with local people living local culture.

In short, place authenticity can be experienced through the lens of a local host, who sometimes can be perceived as a mentor. Furthermore, authenticity manifests itself in terms of becoming acquainted with place-specific cultural objects and intangible heritage. Many of the creative tourists expressed the wish to explore places off-beaten path, which reveals that living like a local also belongs to experiences of place authenticity.

### ***Living like a local***

A distinct feature of VAWAA is the dual role of artists, who not only offer creative workshops/holidays, but also act as hosts, providing accommodation within or near their homes or studios. As a result, tourists gain access to heterogeneous (non-touristic) spaces (Edensor, 2006; Matteucci & Smith, 2024) through entering as well as observing their domestic environment, interacting with their friends and families and participating in their everyday routines. Clara articulates her authentic experience on entering the domestic sphere as follows:

In addition to pottery, you'll be immersed in a rich cultural experience that [the artist] graciously shares. To me, this was the most beautiful part of my time with her. From eating dinners with her family, to joining them at the local market, she invites you along her daily tasks with enthusiasm.

In Clara's story, she mentions that she "got a chance to experience a different rhythm of life [...] and see how other people lived". Here, Clara's quote exemplifies how engaging with mundane features may lead to experiencing an intimate form of spatial authenticity (Skandalis, 2024). Similarly, in Sophie's story it becomes evident that being included in the artist's life and observing their domestic environment, tourists feel like "cultural insiders".

Some of the special highlights (surprise surprise) were actually off-studio. From our daily lunches where we met some of [the artist's] friends, to exploring Kyoto together [...] it truly was an immersive experience. A special treat on our final day was to watch her mom and nephew practicing in the studio. This was a true bonus! Just being around her and her family, both in and outside of the studio has opened us up to so many new aspects of Japanese culture.

By emphasizing on words like "highlights" or "true bonus" it seems that tourists appreciate non-staged environments. Creative tourists acknowledge this experience as exceptional. Alice, who participated in an Ebru painting workshop, reported that a memorable experience was when she was "being invited to a birthday party where [she] got to experience the warmth and hospitality of Turkish people firsthand". Equally, after an invitation to meeting the artist's friends, Daisy felt "a tiny bit closer to the complex heart of San Miguel de Allende". By meeting friends and colleagues of Mary's artists in Vietnam, she articulates her experience as "one of those surreal moments you're lucky to experience when travelling where you feel like you're in a completely different world, but you feel very much at home". Even though creative tourists generally wish for non-staged authenticity, off-beaten path experiences are described as exceptional. Further, phrases such as "feeling at home", "being included in family life" or "seeing the world of Tango from inside" show how intimate experiences can be associated with authenticity.

Authenticity is also expressed in terms of experiences of "living like a local", where tourists are invited into domestic spaces and local routines of their hosts. Experiencing a culture from "inside" is frequently articulated as exceptional as well as intimate. Such integration into local life may foster cultural understanding, exchanging worldviews and connecting on a human level, leading to intimate and more egalitarian relationships between visitors and hosts.

### ***Multi-sensory experiences***

Creative tourists describe their embodied experiences as truly joyful, meaningful and gratifying. For instance, Raj, who participated in a metal art workshop in India, commented: “Learning to make metal art, sculpting the wax, working with my hands, pouring/casting molten brass at 900 [degrees Celsius] brought me *immense joy*.” Likewise, Sophie described her multi-sensory experience as follows:

There is something about holding the brush in hand, with intention and focus, feeling the brush touch the paper, moving gracefully with each stroke. This act in my mind is sheer beauty. Now every time I see a piece of calligraphy, I picture the artist, moving, flowing and dancing with the characters. I’m glad we stopped to smell the Sumi ink.

Here, embodied experiences not only intensify authentic emotions, but also become embedded in long-term memory, contributing to place attachment and satisfaction (Suhartanto et al., 2020; Min et al., 2023). In another context, Jenny states “Creating with my hands gives me a lot of joy. This VAWAA was a good reminder to step away from the computer more often!”. Hence, embodiment can be conducive to self-transformation, which is when tourists’ experiences provoke personal change (Amaro et al., 2025).

Furthermore, multi-sensory and bodily experiences immerse tourists into foreign cultures. In the subsequent quote, Nora, who learned Japanese calligraphy, openly shares her feelings revealing how multi-sensory experiences connected her to the local culture.

We found learning Japanese calligraphy to be challenging in a deeply rewarding way — the act of slowing down, making the ink by hand, and using our brushes to draw the kanji was ultimately quite meditative. The practice and our time with [the artist] taught us so much about this traditional art and philosophy, and through it, Japanese culture and language.

On another account, Holly, who joined a pottery class in Mexico, explained that her “hands-on learning experience was both educational and enjoyable [where she] gained valuable insights into traditional techniques and cultural significance of Zapotec pottery”. Farah describes her experience as “an endless bombardment of senses” where she specifically reports how each one of her senses was activated during her creative tourism in Vietnam. Joe adds that he has witnessed “hundreds of years of tradition [have been] passed on by [crafting brass bells in Japan]”. These quotes illustrate, how activating multiple senses connect personal experiences of authenticity – characterized by genuine emotional response through bodily activities - with the perception of authenticity in craft, heritage, culture and tradition (Moore, 2021). It is noteworthy that the sense of taste was often related to experience of authenticity. Through entering the domestic sphere, tourists get to know local food through their hosts. For example, Catherine, who participated in a ceramics class in Mexico, interestingly reported learning about the local culture through taste: “The food that [the artists] provided was delicious and every single meal felt like receiving a hug in the form of food. I loved learning about traditional Mexican dishes.” Cultural authenticity can, therefore, be experienced through tasting and creating local food, which, according to Okumus (2021), is an aspect of authenticity that deserves further scrutiny.

In summary, authenticity is conveyed via multiple descriptions of multi-sensory and bodily experiences, which represent two main dimensions: the feeling of genuine pleasure as existential authenticity and immersing oneself into another culture through activating all senses.

### **Conclusion, practical implications and limitations**

The analysis of the 73 stories from tourists sought to increase our understanding of the complexity of authentic experiences within the context of creative tourism. This paper, therefore, contributes to the growing body of knowledge on authenticity in creative tourism experiences. The study has shown that creative tourists experience authenticity through places, in which a cultural manifestation is embedded, through their local teachers as heritage bearers, through entering non-touristic spaces and through multi-sensory and embodied experiences. It is worth noting that these dimensions are closely connected to one another. Tourists encounter

objective authenticity through exploring heterogeneous neighborhoods and through learning from and being guided by their indigenous artists. Being immersed in local communities' everyday life, tourists encounter an intimate relationship to spatial authenticity. Through embodied experiences, visitors articulate genuine feelings of pleasure, which resonates with Wang's (1999) notion of existential authenticity. Authenticity in the creative tourist experience is also expressed in terms of extraordinary and intimate experiences, which facilitate the tourists' understanding of the local culture "from the inside". Therefore, further research may explore how experiences of authenticity can be transformational for tourists in terms of intercultural learning.

Since the VAWAA data was retrieved from a commercial website, the results of this analysis primarily reflect a western and middle-class perspective. Despite some methodological limitations, the social value of this paper lies in highlighting non-staged authenticity, collaboration and creative co-creation as ways towards greater cultural understanding and more egalitarian encounters between visitors and hosts.

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