

Tattoo Tourist

Ink souvenirs emphasize experience over extravagance

BY MIKE GOLDYS

TRAVEL LIGHT AND far is the ideology I subscribe to when I trek near and abroad. I pack only what's needed, book modest rooms and, when I can, return home with no more items than I traveled with. My goal is to immerse myself in the local culture, cuisine, music, sports and art.

My journeys have taken me across six continents, 27 countries and 30 states. Memories of long adventures, odd experiences and new friendships will remain with me forever. Aside from photos, many travelers like to commemorate their trips with souvenirs. But, let's face it, keychains and shot glasses are often relegated to drawers or shelves collecting dust next to other tchotchkes. How, then does someone honor their adventures in a way that's different and lasting? My answer: tattoos.

Since 2017, I have collected more than 40 tattoos throughout my global travels and cross-country road trips.

Why tattoos? Call it a graphic version of a passport stamp. One customs agent explained that many countries no longer stamp passports due to ink costs. Well, I thought, if ink no longer decorates my passport, the next best canvas is my skin.

Through the often painful process of getting tattooed, friendships can form. Athens, Greece, tattoo artist Klavdios Tselos, of Athens Tattoo Studio, says, "There are a few people that I stay in touch with. Every one and every session (is) different, but the vibes in my booth are always the same: supervibes." In September 2021, while he tattooed me for nine straight hours, we chatted about food and the tattoo industry, and we shared music. >



Klavdios Tselos' Greece-centric tattoo design



Goldys with Anita Nunes in Iceland



Nate Greco's work at Oddity Tattoo in Florida



INKING ISSUES

Timing is everything when it comes to getting a tattoo while traveling. In hot locales, tourists must consider the power of the sun. Nate Greco at Oddity Tattoo in Sarasota, Fla., advises tattoo seekers to plan accordingly.

“The hardest part about tattooing out-of-towners is healing something on the go or while enjoying your visit,” he says. “I have had the problem of people being sunburnt and unable to tattoo. Everybody saves their tattoo for the last week of their vacation after getting a bunch of sun.”

Obtaining ink abroad can also come with challenges. Anita Nunes, owner of True Love Tattoo Lisboa in Lisbon, Portugal, and guest artist at Reykjavik Ink in Reykjavik, Iceland, says that language is the biggest hurdle when she works with clients from different countries. “It’s always good to have a friend or colleague who translates,” explains Nunes. “Some situations are more difficult than others. If people want a specific word or a sentence (tattooed) from a foreign language, it may only make sense in a certain way.”

I had such an experience in 2019 when I was tattooed by Alexandr Baharevich, an artist at Maruha Tattoo Studio in St. Petersburg, Russia, because he spoke little English at the time. For three hours, he had a close friend who speaks English keep me company and translate. Despite not communicating directly, I never felt more welcome during a tattoo experience.



Goldys and Alexandr Baharevich in Russia

HUMAN PASSPORT

Originally, my goal was to tie all the tattoos to the place or culture I’m exploring. “I get this kind of request very often,” Nunes notes. “When people want a tattoo that reminds them of a trip somewhere; that’s what they go for. It’s a souvenir that lasts forever.”

For this reason, I often seek out talented artists who specialize in a style that reflects the country. When I planned a trip to Athens, I placed a deposit more than a year in advance for an appointment with Tselos, who specializes in a style of tattoo that pays tribute to Greek architecture. “There are a lot of requests based on my architectural cities specifically,” Tselos says. “All these different (Greek architectural) views give my designs something special.”

Thinking of getting tatted the next time you travel? Ben Koopman, from Blue Lady Tattoo in Melbourne, Australia, says you’re probably not alone: “It’s slowly starting to build up with traveling clients again now that people are getting more confident to travel.” ■