

So, Those Cool Souvenirs You Bought on Vacay Might Not Actually Be Legit



TESS DAVIS

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BY: KATIE A. PAUL AND TESS DAVIS

Here's how to tell.

The only thing better than traveling to an exotic location? Shopping for one-of-a-kind souvenirs when you get there! Just ask Carrie Bradshaw, who famously visited the old souk, aka open-air market, in Abu Dhabi in [Sex and the City 2](#).

It's only natural to want a little piece of a country to take home, but one thing many people don't know is that buying some souvenirs and works of art may actually be [harmful](#) to the place you visit or even pose a risk to you (remember what happened when Charlotte York gave in to the ["forbidden experience"](#)?!). So you might want to think

twice before picking up that cool statue at the boutique shop in the bazaar!



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From the deserts of Egypt to the jungles of Cambodia, purchasing an artifact as a reminder of your trip could potentially be funding criminal groups. Who knew, right? Across the globe, organized criminal networks and even terrorist groups like ISIS are stealing and smuggling precious items for major cash. While these trinkets might look killer on your mantel back home, keep in mind that not only can purchasing them fund organized crime, but it can actually break the law.

“Tourists today are increasingly sophisticated, and know to avoid buying ‘blood diamonds,’ or trafficked wildlife products like ivory,” said Deborah Lehr, Chair and Founder of the [Antiquities Coalition](#), a not-for-profit dedicated to cultural heritage preservation. “But there is a thriving black market in ‘conflict antiquities,’ which is on par with these other global crimes, yet seldom discussed.”

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There is a strong demand for rare artifacts in the West, and traffickers know their consumers well. The United States alone accounts for [43 percent](#) of the global art market — that means traveling to Egypt, Jordan, or even Peru can make you an easy target for pushy salesmen.

But there’s no need to worry — the Antiquities Coalition has you covered. Here are some red flags to look for when considering purchasing a keepsake in a foreign country:

Does it still have dirt on it?

Fresh dirt is a sign that the item was removed directly from the ground. Looted artifacts don’t just come from museums — many are ripped straight from the ground before an archaeologist can ever get to them. Dealers might tell you that dirt means it’s real, but what they don’t tell you is that it also means the piece is illegal.

Is the object sacred?

Does it look like it came from a temple, church, synagogue, or mosque? If so, it was probably meant to stay there. Historic religious centers are common targets of traffickers from South America to Europe and Asia.



Was it originally immovable property?

Does it look like an inscription that may have come from a wall? Or perhaps a statue that is missing its feet? If it looks like it took some effort to remove, it probably did. That's a huge warning sign.

Are there small numbers painted onto the base or edge of the object?

If you see numbers or letters carefully painted on an object, proceed with caution. These are typical museum or excavation registration numbers; an object containing these numbers was likely stolen from a museum or archaeological storage. (Indiana Jones can't keep track of everything.)

Is the country you're visiting in crisis?

Crisis doesn't necessarily mean war-torn or dangerous — even the beaches of Greece are suffering from economic downfall. Any type of crisis can open the door for illegal trading.

Is the seller suspicious?

This one is pure intuition. If your gut tells you it's a sketchy deal, you're probably right. Your safest bet is to move on.

Does the price seem too good to be true?

If the item seems cheap — too cheap — it's for a reason. Even if it isn't looted, it's probably a fake being passed off as real. Either way, it's probably illegal.

"True story: when I was in Israel a few years ago, a shop owner told me he'd sell me an ancient piece from 'the time of Jesus' at a 'good price.' I knew right away it wasn't legit, so I confidently told him I wasn't in the market to buy. He quickly moved on to the next tourist when he realized he wasn't going to make a quick buck from me (as they often do)." - Katie A. Paul

Does the antiquity have ownership history?

Just like your fave designer bag, legal antiquities should have some proof of authenticity — like the ownership history (also known as provenance). If the dealer can't provide proof of this or other relevant paperwork like permits, then you can't either, and the object could be [seized](#) at customs or worse — you could be [seized](#), too.

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Needless to say, the checklist for safely and legally buying an ancient piece of your adventure is long and takes all of the fun out of souvenir shopping in the first place. Fortunately, there are some super stylish things you can find instead that capture the memories of your trip and even do some good in the process. Here are just a few ideas from some famous UNESCO World Heritage countries that are hot spots for tourism.

Jordan:

Pretty pieces from Petra. Bedouin jewelry is a must-have if you are exploring breathtaking scenery from Raiders of the Lost Ark. Be sure to make your way through the site's many Bedouin shops along the trail. You will find incredible statement pieces that literally can't be found anywhere else in the world. Even better, they're for women, by women!



Peru:

One pot, two pot, old pot, *new* pot. In Peru, many efforts at protecting sites from looting are directly linked to the [development](#) of the local economy. Purchasing handmade replicas of pottery with traditional designs not only gives you the ancient look of an artifact, but you can also feel good knowing that your money is going directly to the artists who live and work there. Plus, these pots will look incredible in your home and also make one-of-a-kind gifts.

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Cambodia:

Adventuring in Angkor Wat? [Artisans d'Angkor](#) is an organization that has helped to save the practices and traditions of Khmer arts, which were nearly lost in the 1970s civil war. The pieces are so incredible that they have even replaced stolen pieces at Angkor Wat and elsewhere.



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No travel is complete without exotic textiles. The weaving and dyeing of Khmer silk was once regarded as some of the best in the world. It has now been saved by the [Institute of Khmer Traditional Textiles](#), which brings together women from around Cambodia to preserve the traditions. Stop in their store in Siem Reap to get your own museum-quality piece!

Egypt:

Finding the obligatory (but fabulous) souvenir scarf. Whether you are in the Khan al Khalili souk in Cairo or a Nubian Village on the Nile, you can find beautiful handmade scarves all across Egypt. Be sure to haggle for the best price! It's an experience you'll remember every time you wear it.

So, you STILL want a treasure from Tut's tomb? Get one directly from Egypt's [Supreme Council of Antiquities](#) — a replica, of course. Egypt's antiquities specialists are some of the best in the world, and their expertise shows in their

art. Pick up a piece of ancient Egyptian art to hang in your apartment — and help fund Egypt's antiquities preservation as a bonus!



KATIE A. PAUL

When traveling to any foreign country, it is the people, places, cultures, and heritage we encounter that make a simple trip become an unforgettable experience. With purchasing knowledge, you can help preserve these places and their people — and return home with some awesome souvenirs to show off. That's what we call a #winwin.