



Unpacking Memories

After years spent collecting trinkets from around the world, unwrapping carefully chosen festive mementos can bring more than seasonal joy. Indeed, rediscovering them can be like finding old friends again.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY
BY BRIAR JENSEN



I’ve acquired some questionable souvenirs during my travels. Hastily bought from hagglers to halt their harassment, or grabbed at the airport to relinquish the last foreign coins, these innocuous trinkets, often made in China, look out of place back home. With waning attachment they’re eventually relegated to a box, the garage or garbage bin.

One such item had a second coming, retrieved from the rubbish by hubby. It’s a 1980s Gold Coast thermometer fridge magnet, bought in the era of bikini-clad meter maids. Emblazoned with three bronzed, buxom blondes, they are orientated to ‘reveal’ the underwritten ditty, ‘Bum Tid-dy Bum’.

Well past its use-by date aesthetically, culturally and physically – it’s wrinkly around the edges (the magnet not the girls, though given they’re my vintage, they possibly are, too) – we reached a settlement. Deemed inappropriate for the kitchen fridge while we had young children, it was vanquished to the beer fridge more than 20 years ago. Now I think of it, that’s probably why our son insisted on keeping his cans of Coke in there as a budding teenager.

Some souvenirs make it to op shops and I wonder who donated them and why. Was it well-travelled downsizers decluttering, or those clearing out deceased relatives’ estates? I guess souvenirs only hold significant meaning for the purchaser. One person’s treasure is another’s trash. At least they are being recycled and given a second home.

I also wondered who buys souvenirs from op shops, too, until I was tempted by one, recognising its provenance. But buying it felt deceptive, a little like cheating. Inane, really, as you don’t have to visit a place to appreciate or purchase its artefacts.

As I’ve become a more environmentally and ethically aware traveller, I’ve tried to apply these principles to souvenir shopping, too. To eschew the kitsch for meaningful pieces, buy direct from the maker, or at least locally made, and only items I’ll use, wear or display with pride.

A neck pendant featuring two imperfect black pearls, bought from an up-and-coming artisan in a Tahitian market, brings more pleasure than the string of perfect spheres I couldn’t afford at the pearl farm. White ants, marching across the chest of my black apron, always make me

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smile, as did other humorous Pro Hart images at his gallery in Broken Hill. And black-and-white woven cushion covers remind me daily of Indigenous experiences at Uluru.

The first substantial artefact my husband and I bought to support a local artist was on a trip to our New Zealand homeland. Admitting game-shooting was now behind him, hubby sold the shotgun he’d left with family and we used the money to purchase a kauri poutokomanawa, a carved ancestral figure that adorns the central pole in Māori meeting houses. Ours proudly presides over our dining room and is now accompanied by timber sculptures from South Africa, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea and the Tiwi Islands, proving interesting conversation starters (pre-COVID of course, when we could actually have people over).

I confess I’ve succumbed to a risqué souvenir, too. I was reminded of it recently when our young adult daughter, tasked with lockdown dusting, let out a surprised squeal as she picked up my Chilean indio pícaro and his penis popped out. The Mapuche Indian statuette from Santiago, although a bit of fun, was bought direct from the carver and fashioned from sustainable timber, so still within my new ethical framework.

I’ve always thought Christmas ornaments an unusual choice of souvenirs, unless purchasing them from Europe’s Christmas markets. That was until my Kiwi girlfriend gifted me a pōhutukawa decoration. Known as New Zealand’s ‘Christmas tree’, the pōhutukawa is often found arching over coastal foreshores. Their ruby pompom flowers burst into bloom in December, heralding the festive season, family gatherings and summer holidays by the beach – memories I now recall each year, along with those of my girlfriend, as I hang my cheerful blossom.

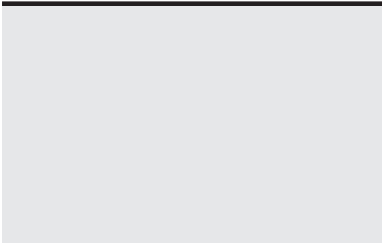
Then I met Irene Garran. Learning about her collection of nativity scenes from around the world has transformed my opinion on seasonal souvenirs. In 1973, as the wife of an Australian Trade Commissioner posted in São Paulo, Irene was invited to lunch at the home of a wealthy Brazilian couple. With her degree in history and experience in archaeological restoration, Irene was astounded by the couple’s antiquities, particularly the woman’s collection of presépios (Portuguese for nativities).

“I’d never seen a collection like this outside a museum,” she says. The next day Irene received a surprise gift, hand-delivered by her hostesses’ chauffeur. It was a traditional Brazilian presépio, with a handwritten note from her hostess saying, “This is to start your collection.” Irene now has 38 crèches, as she calls them, representing 18 countries from Austria to Venezuela.

Irene is not a church-goer, but ecumenical in her attitude to religion. As an artist she’s intrigued how different cultures interpret the Christian story, and how they utilise whatever is at hand to make a nativity, be it humble bread dough, corn husks, bamboo or straw. Her crèches span primitive clay and coconut fibre to Murano glass and silver filigree. Each one reminds her of the craftspeople she purchased them from, be they villagers, nuns, even a violin maker.

Pre-Christmas, while I tussle with twisted tinsel and tangled lights, Irene relives her peripatetic life as she unpacks her exquisite, museum-worthy collection. Rereading cards kept with gifted crèches brings her enduring pleasure. “It’s like finding your friends again,” she says.

After two years of travel restrictions, and still unable to visit family in Aotearoa, my modest Kiwi Christmas collection seems particularly poignant. It’s expanded to four pieces with a silver fern fairy, another gift from my girlfriend, and two quirky metal decorations depicting a kiwi and a sheep sporting Santa hats, bought from Tirau, the ‘corrugated iron capital of the world’. Here rippled tin is sculpted into sheep-shaped barns and quirky shop signs – even a Good Shepherd outside the church. Come December, I wonder if they add Mary and a manger to create the quintessential Kiwi corrugated iron crèche – or would that be just too kitsch? 



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