



Kyle Taylor
The Tech Effect

The End of Place-Based Travel

AS I MEANDER SLOWLY along the winding path that leads from the ticket office to the site of Kinkaku-ji, Kyoto, Japan's Golden Pavilion, with a history that dates back to 1397, I am struck by the serenity.

Like most places in Japan, there is an audible calm to any visual chaos that can be jarring to people who visit from almost any other place on Earth. You can find yourself in the depths of Tokyo's Shinjuku station, used by 3.5 million passengers each day making it the world's busiest train station, and hear only the din of walking feet.

This paradox is one of the most interesting aspects of travel in Japan. But, as it has reopened to the world post-Covid, that tranquillity has largely evaporated, particularly at major tourist hotspots such as those in Kyoto.

As the path begins to open up at a pond, and the Golden Pavilion becomes visible, the peacefulness vanishes, replaced by people shouting "take my picture!" in a

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dozen languages. The battle is now on, arms akimbo, to wedge others out of the way in search of the perfect photo.

What is deemed 'perfect' now is a far cry from the pre-social media age. Once upon a time, people would travel to soak up the sights, sounds and wonders of places far different than home. One of the world's holiest sites, and set against the backdrop of a perfectly curated Japanese garden, the Unesco World Heritage-listed Golden Pavilion is considered one of the most beautiful structures on Earth. The majesty of this 600-year-old building, covered in pure gold leaf, should be the main event. Not any more.

We now find ourselves in an age where there is diminishing value held by places themselves. Instead, the primary function of said place is to serve as a proof point that increases our social capital online. It is our presence in front of the site, not the site itself, that fuels likes, shares, and comments – delivering us microdoses of the brain's happy chemical: dopamine.

It equally drives envy and a sense of loss from our followers, increasing their own sense of unfulfillment, which research shows fuels depression. Our gain is another's loss.

Ironically, we feel this in reverse when looking at snaps of our social media friends' selfies in front of other major sites. We know how we feel when we're on the receiving end, and yet we continue to do it to others in an almost morbid fashion.

It is also fundamentally changing the way in which we capture our holidays and experiences.

Gone are the days of rolls of film, which encouraged a sense of scarcity around photographic memories, to the benefit of

our actual memory. Now, not only can we take a near infinite number of photos, we can also see them immediately, alter them extensively, and share them instantly with the entire digital world.

Moments later, the reactions start pouring in, offering a prompt sense of validation that pulls us further from our real-world holiday as we sit glued to our screens, watching how others are reacting to the experience that we are no longer even having. After all that work capturing the perfect image of ourselves in front of sites far more historic and significant than us, we are pulled further away, becoming the audience of our audience.

This endless cycle within our personal online bubble is now becoming an endless cycle within social media.

The places we must go and the selfies we must take are dictated to us by the places other people have been to and the selfies they took when they were there. It's not enough to visit or even snap a photo. That photo has to be from the correct angle, with the correct light, holding our hands in the correct position, and posted using the correct hashtags to ensure everyone else knows that we know we did everything correctly. Suddenly, a holiday is nothing more than a totally unoriginal photoshoot dictated entirely by someone else's holiday photoshoot in yet another never-ending cycle of self-absorption in search of validation.

The build-up to the holiday itself is even unconsciously, or sometimes consciously, engulfed by thinking primarily about the photos that must be taken. Who cares about contemplating the complexity of Mona Lisa's grin? It's more important to make sure your followers know you saw it in person. Why stand at the edge of the Grand Canyon, pondering how it was carved over millions of years? You've got to post a pic with #sunriseclub so everyone knows you were there at dawn.

Not only do we emotionally suffer from this new-found pressure to keep up with everyone else in a very performative way, but so does our sense of awe, wonder, and insignificance in the face of such marvels as the Great Wall of China, Stonehenge, and the Pyramids of Giza.

In the social media age, the prominence of the place is dying a rapid death, replaced by the importance of our presence. What does the digital world look like when the most important thing to each of us is our existence within it?

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