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The Wandering Mind

The Secret to Remembering Your Vacation Better

New research shows us how to make that trip stick.

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Source: Jenny Adams, Buddha Wears Fanta, used with permission

I forgot a camera on the most visually incredible day of my life. No, really: I was in freaking Uganda, and I climbed onto a small boat for an all-day water safari on the Nile, and seconds after we'd pushed off from the pier, I realized I'd left my iPhone plugged in at the main lodge, the resort's only charging station. I writhed with frustration as we pulled within feet of a 12-foot crocodile, his huge jaw hinging open in warning to reveal a

toothy grin. I shook my fist as we passed by huge piles of hippos, sunbathing and flopping over one another as they let out their bizarre bark, heh heh heh. I face-palmed as we pulled up between two halves of a huge herd of elephants, half on the shore and the other half grazing calmly from a grassy island cropping up from the Nile. The boat pulled over so our small crew could hike to the top of Murchison Falls, where the river, a mile wide in other spots, rushes through a crevice just a few yards wide.

But you know what? The whole experience forced me to actually look — to take in every moment without the distancing effect of a screen in-between. And I noticed that when people asked me about my trip afterward — a trip that included epic stops in the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest for encounters with unconcerned gorillas, a nighttime safari ride through Kidepo Valley where a male lion regarded us from 15 feet away — that single day was the one I recounted with the most detail.

Turns out researchers figured this out long before I did. Many studies show that we remember stuff we've photographed less well than stuff we've merely seen. (One interesting study from Fairfield University in Connecticut found that taking a zoomed-in photo of a detail — in the case of the experiment, it was of artwork during a museum tour — *enhanced* recall, suggesting that, wielded correctly, cameras can actually help us take a sight in more thoroughly.) The logic is simple: Our lazy brains lean on technology to do the remembering for them; we figure the smartphone will capture the event, so we don't need to really attend to it ourselves.



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In fact, an in-press study released last week found that "a preoccupation with smartphones resulted in the impairment of the family vacation experience as an autobiographic memory"; in other words, being iPhone-obsessed meant people actually remembered fewer details about their trip of a lifetime.

Of course, my friends took photos of the river safari and were more than happy to share them. And the whole experience actually convinced me to intentionally put my phone down more on my next trip, and instead take everything in IRL. A frustrating experience turning into a lesson in mindfulness? That's the kind of epiphany travel is all about.

References

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Yu, X, et al (2017). The Impact of Smartphones on the Family Vacation Experience. *Journal of Travel Research*. Online first, published May 1, 2017.