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The Hawaiian Shirt Disguise

Summer in Vancouver is beautiful: the mountains are green, the sky is always blue (a rarity that is MUCH appreciated by Vancouverites), it's warm enough to go swimming in the freezing oceans and lakes, the hiking trails are ripe for the walking, there are food festivals, movies in the park and overall frivolity and joy.

There's also what feels like six hundred million tourists.

I used to work by the Steam Clock, a very underwhelming Vancouver tourist spot that, albeit pretty, has nothing truly special about it. But every single day, heaps of tourists would crowd around it, waiting for the stroke of the hour when it sings a little song and blows steam. It would make walking in the area insufferable (specially if you have a dog) and the task of getting coffee, tea or food anywhere nearby absolutely impossible without long lines.

I think everyone hates tourists in their own city. They hate the slow walkers blocking sidewalks, the lost hordes with their eyes glued to a PAPER MAP (it's 2017 guys), the crowded buses, the endless lines. But looking at tourists is sort of a fascinating game for me. In Hawaii I noticed it a lot. I call it the "Hawaiian Shirt Disguise".

That sunburned man over there, standing by the sea taking a picture doing the hula, eating "local" food that would make real locals groan, looking lost and incapable of following rules, wearing a bright yellow Hawaiian shirt, that man is clearly a moron, right? He has to be. No intelligent person would behave like that.

But for all we know, he's a neurosurgeon at New York General or a professor of Applied Sciences at Yale. And that screaming lady over there giving the hotel attendants a hard time by not understanding that they can't be blamed for rain when she just rented snorkeling gear, she could be the CEO of an engineering conglomerate or a film producer. The bumbling vacation idiot could get home and handle his job, family, hobbies and responsibilities with the dexterity of a circus acrobat. We look at these people and the stereotypes they are perpetuating and we think we know them, we think we know exactly what kind of people they are.

But truth is, vacations relax us (or they should anyway). And these relaxed versions of ourselves don't *want* to pay attention to the rules or look at the clock. They don't *want* to rush through the streets to make room for the locals. We want to be someone else for those few days, or maybe, actually be ourselves. No, I'm not saying we're all secretly idiots who are just really good at keeping our moronic selves in check, but you know what? It feels good to be an idiot sometimes. If you see me at Disney World, one of my favorite destinations,

you would not associate that Minnie-Mouse-ear-wearing, parade-crying, tacky-shirt-dressed bucket of joy with the grumpy, rude, negative, resting-bitch-face person I normally am at home. It's not *just* because I'm relaxed, but because there are impulses that only come out when you are away from home. And yes, there are savvy travelers and very decidedly "untouristy" people, but that's not what the Hawaiian Shirt Disguise is about! It feels good to be slack-jawed.

I read an incredible travel anthology from Lonely Planet a couple years ago and one of the authors said "our warning signs get wonkier the further we are from home". It stuck with me. Maybe you would never go cliff diving in your backyard lake, but when you're in Thailand or Fiji, it's suddenly irresistible and necessary. Don't feed me tongue at my weekend restaurant, but in a barbecue house in Tokyo it seems like an everyday treat! It's what travel does to us. It makes us braver, more open, more willing to try new things or even revisit old versions of ourselves we thought were dead. It's why I love it. It's not just the thrill of getting to see a new place, immersing yourself in a new culture and trying new flavors, but it's seeing **you**, this open, wonderful, smiling, adventurous you that gets crushed daily by your comfort zone.

So step outside. Get lost. Put on your Hawaiian shirt. And go be stupid.