

# Intimacy in the creative tourist experience

Xavier Matteucci and Sophie Gräf

## Abstract

**Purpose** – Research has revealed authenticity and intimacy as inherent and important qualities of many tourism spaces. Intimacy, in particular, has received little attention in creative tourism studies. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the ways in which tourists articulate experiences of intimacy in creative holidays.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A total of 73 testimonials posted by creative tourists on the internet platform *Vacation With An Artist* are inductively analyzed following a constructivist bricolage methodological approach. Both thematic analysis and the constant comparative methods are used to make sense of the textual data.

**Findings** – Four main themes characterize intimacy in the creative tourist experience, namely, the domestic sphere, mentors, embodiment and experiences of bonding with meaningful others. This study suggests that creative tourism appears to be a path toward more authentic forms of cultural tourism and host–guest intimacy.

**Social implications** – Collaborative and creative heritage-based experiences are presented as an antidote against superficial tourist–host encounters based on mere economic exchange. The creative tourist experience, underpinned by a desire for authenticity and intimacy, has the potential to forge strong social connections and to foster positive emotions and cultural sensitivity. It is argued that through collaborative, creative experiences, tourists are more likely to contribute to a fairer allocation of power and control of resources and to more widely contribute to the well-being of the wider community.

**Originality/value** – Experiences of intimacy have received little attention in creative tourism research. This study represents the first empirical attempt, to the best of the authors' knowledge, at specifically exploring this socio-psychological phenomenon.

**Keywords** Sharing, Authenticity, Bricolage, Creative tourism, Intimacy

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Introduction

The last two decades have seen a growing interest in creative tourism. Creative tourism has been described as a subset of cultural tourism whereby tourists, guided by creative locals, engage with locale-specific endogenous cultural resources. For instance, some creative tourists travel to Japan to learn Japanese calligraphy from local experts. Creative tourism is often presented as a more sustainable form of tourism because creative tourists tend to stay at the same location for extended periods, and tourist–host relationships based on culture and creativity are arguably more likely to foster residents' quality of life and resilience than conventional forms of cultural tourism (Richards, 2021; Scherf, 2021). Furthermore, because hosts possess the skills that tourists are looking for, some argue (e.g. Duxbury and Bakas, 2021) that tourist–host encounters are more egalitarian. In ubiquitous tourism services, host–guest relations typically follow the principles of “genuine hospitableness” (van Rheede and Dekker, 2016) whereby hosts cater to the needs of tourists in a way that host–guest relations are dictated by the needs of the tourism industry rather than the needs and values of host communities (Ratz, 2000). However, in a creative tourism context, hosts and tourists meet, share knowledge and practices and discuss ideas. This form of relationship relates to the notion of “host as shepherd” (van Rheede and Dekker, 2016, p. 79), which has the potential to turn visitors into friends (Selwyn, 2000). In creative, community spaces,

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tourist–host encounters can be more spontaneous and foster intercultural dialogues, which appear to be more authentic in the eyes of both tourists and hosts (Smith and Zátóri, 2016). While the nexus between creativity, cultural heritage and tourism destinations has received some academic attention, empirical investigations on the nature of the creative tourist experience remain scarce (Matteucci and Smith, 2024).

Most work on the creative tourist experience has sought to devise a motivation-based typology of this segment (e.g. Remoaldo *et al.*, 2020; Tan *et al.*, 2014; Zuluaga and Guerra, 2021), to understand the meaning of creativity in heritage-based activities (Tan *et al.*, 2013) and to explore the personal benefits of creative tourism experiences for tourists (e.g. Argod, 2014; Matteucci, 2018; Matteucci and Filep, 2017). Studies on creative tourists have identified a number of characteristics, which offer a broad understanding of who the creative tourist is. For instance, creative tourists are portrayed as individuals seeking to expand their knowledge, develop some skills and nurture their creative potential (Binkhorst, 2007; Remoaldo *et al.*, 2020; Richards, 2011). If self-development (or learning) appears to be an obvious and central motive underpinning much engagement in creative tourism, previous research has also identified more subtle motives such as the quest for authentic experiences (e.g. Creighton, 1995; Gombault, 2014), the need to meet and interact with like-minded people (e.g. Menet, 2020; Remoaldo *et al.*, 2020), the need to remedy a lack of self-esteem (Matteucci, 2014) and the desire to negotiate and nurture one's cultural, self-identities (e.g. Argod, 2014; Mills, 2019; Skinner, 2007).

Gretzel and Jamal (2009) suggest that creative tourists are “empowered consumers” searching for poetic and aesthetic experiences “through embodied, physical engagement with the environment and with technologies” (p. 477). Moreover, a general trait shared by most creative tourists, Zuluaga and Guerra (2021) note, is their desire to interact and share personal experiences with local hosts, and to immerse themselves in the local cultural context. Creative tourists undoubtedly belong to this segment of tourists who are fundamentally concerned with creating their own unique experiences by “living like a local” (Richards, 2018). Matteucci and Smith (2024) have similarly remarked that “immersive, active and sensuous engagement in heterogeneous spaces (or non-tourist spaces) is a central feature of the creative tourist experience” (p. 87). With respect to immersive experiences, these authors have also underscored the role of authenticity and intimacy as inherent and important qualities of many creative tourism spaces. The creative tourism literature seems to concur with the argument that what most tourists may be looking for through leisure travel is, in fact, a privileged, intimate time well spent with meaningful others (Trauer and Ryan, 2005). Despite the significant role of intimacy in tourism experiences (Lin *et al.*, 2019; Trauer and Ryan, 2005), few studies have examined experiences of intimacy in tourism contexts. In this paper, therefore, we aim at filling this research gap by exploring the ways in which intimacy is articulated in creative tourists' accounts about their experiences.

### Intimacy in tourism experiences

The literature in tourism studies has primarily documented two types of experiences of intimacy. On the one hand, intimacy has been presented as an emotional bond that one experiences with a significant other, such as a travel companion or a member of the host society; on the other hand, intimacy has been discussed in terms of an atmospheric quality or a special tie felt in relation to a place. With respect to the former, Trauer and Ryan (2005) have argued that “the quality of the holiday experience depends upon the degrees of intimacy that exist between travelers” (p. 490). Evidence for this argument can be found in studies of girlfriend getaways (e.g. Berdychevsky *et al.*, 2013; Kong *et al.*, 2022) and of shared travel experiences among pairs of same-sex friends (both males and females) (e.g. Matteucci *et al.*, 2022) where intimacy takes the form of physical proximity, verbal communication (e.g. intimate talks) and a spiritual connection with other people.

Intimacy as an emotional bond felt in relation to a place is commonly conceived as *place attachment* (Williams and Vaske, 2003). Place attachment is a multi-faceted concept (Dwyer et al., 2019), which is associated with a multiplicity of positive affects such as sense of place, with direct links to spatial and social identity and the notion of rootedness (Giuliani, 2003). The relevance of place attachment to identity is emphasized by Belk (1992) who argues that to be attached to particular places is “to make them a part of our extended self” (p. 38). While one may develop emotional bonds with a place without direct experiences in that place, place attachment is more often established through multiple contacts (e.g. human interactions with community members) within an area (Giuliani, 2003). Furthermore, Giuliani (2003) cites Dovey (1985) who remarks that place attachment shares the same experiential quality as the experience of home, which connotes a safe, intimate and comfortable space of familiarity in a strange world.

In the creative tourism context, intimacy has been associated with a sense of conviviality and comfort experienced in the domestic sphere of artists’ studios (e.g. Matteucci and Smith, 2024) and home cooking schools (e.g. Bell, 2015; Mills, 2019). Through sincere communication, and moments of togetherness, creative tourists and hosts can nurture new solidarities (Latham, 2003) and develop empathy for one another (Windress, 2016). In the context of transnational salsa dance courses, Menet (2020) observes that a strong sense of belonging to a community of aficionados (or a feeling of *communitas*) tends to foment close ties between participants. Furthermore, the “skin-to-skin texture” of the dance performance allows individuals to experience one another sensually in ways that confer creative tourism spaces intimate relational qualities (Törnqvist, 2018). Whether through intimate talks, the closeness of confined spaces or the proximity of other bodies, experiences of intimacy within creative tourism spaces, Matteucci and Smith (2024) argue, can promote well-being through empowerment, bonding with meaningful others and self-transformation.

## Method

To research creative tourist experiences, we used secondary data in the form of short reflective accounts (or testimonials) posted on the internet platform *Vacation with An Artist* (hereafter VAWAA). The VAWAA platform (see <https://vawaa.com>) connects tourists with local artists from various artistic fields for immersive learning experiences. The artists featured on the platform are considered experts in their art form, and the creative experiences offered range from Ebru painting in Istanbul and clay sculpting in New Mexico to tango dancing in Buenos Aires. In April 2024, we gathered 73 testimonials posted by international travelers coming from 16 countries (with more than half of the testimonials posted by American travelers), resulting in 15,441 words of text with an average story length of 211 words. In addition, to contextualize the tourists’ testimonials, we collected 2,629 words about the artists (bio sketches and location). All stories were written in English and included personal photographs taken during the VAWAA experiences. The photographs were not used as a basis for analysis, but these helped us to contextualize the creative tourists’ experiences. Table 1 offers an overview of the data (type of experience, destination and tourist background). We selected artists based on two criteria: their craft had to be an endogenous cultural resource, and stories had to be substantial (not superficial in their content – for example, including emotions, personal reflections and some rich contextual information). Consent to name the company (VAWAA) in this paper was provided to us. Also, pseudonyms are used to ensure the anonymity of the creative tourists cited in this paper.

Our methodological approach can be described as *bricolage*. Methodological bricolage posits a collapse of boundaries between various disciplinary literatures, methods and paradigms (Rogers, 2012). In short, bricolage means to draw from whatever research tools, analytical procedures and types of data are available (and useful) to shed light on social phenomena. While bricolage entails a constructivist epistemology, which acknowledges

**Table 1** Types of creative tourist experience and tourists' profiles

<i>Art form/craft (destination)</i>	<i>Tourists (gender/place of residence)</i>
Japanese calligraphy (Japan)	Catherine (F/USA); Felissa (F/USA); Andrea (M/Italy); Lina (F/ USA); Srujana (F/USA); Emmanuelle (F/ France); Sarika (F/India); Kate (F/Australia); Katie (F/Hong Kong); Anuja (F/USA)
Ebru painting (Turkey)	Gema (F/Spain); Bettina (F/Australia); Aditya (F/USA); Natalie (F/USA); Nelly (F/Mauritius)
Leather shadow puppet making (Malaysia)	Talweez (F/Australia); Emilia (F/UK)
Natural textile dyeing (Vietnam)	Hung (F/USA); Luisa (F/UK); Kim Marie (F/Vietnam); Ana (F/Vietnam); Di (F/UK); Susie (F/UK); Yvonne (F/UK); M (?/Singapore); Andrew (M/USA); Patricia (F/Mexico); Lesley (F/USA)
Tango dancing (Argentina)	Michael (M/USA); Pamela (F/USA); Mark (M/USA); Kjell (M/USA); Alka (F/India); Kat (F/USA)
Dhokra metal art (India)	Gitanjali (?/Canada); Jai (M/India); Steve (M/USA)
Jewelry making (Argentina)	Lynn (F/Luxembourg)
Sculptural jewelry and metal smithing (USA)	Elaine (F/USA)
Traditional brass bell crafting (Japan)	Michael (M/USA); Terry (M/USA); Ronald (M/USA)
Jewelry making (Catalunya)	Elish (F/USA); Momoko (F/USA); Susan (F/USA)
Indian classical danced (India)	Sofia (F/Canada)
Linocut printmaking (Mexico)	Tara (F/USA); Angela (F/USA)
Stoneware and graffito pottery (India)	Hermione (F/Singapore); Jahnvi (F/India)
Red clay ceramics (Mexico)	Melissa (F/Mexico); Terycka (F/USA)
Experimental ceramics (Mexico)	Scottie (F/USA); Nuvid (F/USA); Celeste (F/USA); Bonnie (F/USA); Dasom (F/USA); Claire (F/USA)
Woodturning (Uruguay)	Shireen (F/USA); Megan (F/USA); Adriana (F/USA)
Ajrakh block printing (India)	Steven (M/USA); Barbara (F/New Zealand); Marja (F/The Netherlands); Heidi (F/The Netherlands); Jen (F/Hong Kong)
Historic Greek cuisine (Greece)	Sherry (F/Hong Kong)
Culinary techniques (Mallorca; Spain)	Mary (F/USA); Taisa (F/?); Cassandra (F/USA); Janet (F/USA)
Regenerative beekeeping (USA)	Alise (F/USA)

Source(s): Authors' own work

and embraces subjectivities and which views research processes and outcomes as a social construction, bricolage also accommodates other perspectives, such as pragmatist and new materialist thinking. Methodological bricolage, therefore, reflects the trends toward the blurring of genres now prevalent in qualitative inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). We entered into a dialogue with each other, the data collected and the multidisciplinary literature that we deemed relevant to understanding creative tourism experiences.

To make sense of the textual data, we drew inspiration from both thematic analysis as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), and the constant comparative methods initially introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967). We first read the data set in its entirety, which allowed us to familiarize ourselves with the creative tourists' accounts. Then, we coded the text, highlighting interesting and salient features within the text. By sticking closely to the data, we gave provisional labels to chunks of text. These labels or codes were explored further in subsequent analytical steps, which also sought to sort and synthesize information. Further analytical steps included comparing our codes with other similar codes across the stories, refining codes, elaborating theoretical categories (or themes) and integrating them into a coherent theoretical account. A thoughtful theoretical account provides nuanced, contextual information and clarifies the conditions and circumstances that give rise to feelings, actions and interactions.

To ensure trustworthiness of our thematic analysis of the data, we resorted to two types of triangulation, namely, *researcher triangulation* (the two authors separately coded the same data and produced tentative categories, which were then compared and discussed) and *theoretical triangulation* (using multiple theories and the findings of related studies to

scrutinize the data). Below, we present four main themes, which characterize intimacy in the creative tourist experience.

## Findings

Intimacy in the creative tourists' experiences has been articulated in terms of four dimensions, which consist of the domestic sphere in which creative experiences take place, the role of inspirational artists as mentors, embodied experiences and bonding with meaningful others. In the following subsections, while each theme is reported separately, it is worth mentioning that an overlap exists between these four themes because intimacy is not an isolated phenomenon. Instead, intimacy is a co-constituted experience in which people, practices, objects and spaces are imbricated and act upon each other. What this paper demonstrates is that intimacy can take the form of bonding with a mentor through meaningful conversations and sensuous practices with locale-specific materialities within the domestic realm of artists' studios and homes. Below, we illustrate each theme with selected quotations from the creative tourists' accounts.

### *Domestic sphere*

Many creative tourists have reported rich immersive experiences in the company of their artistic hosts. A distinctive feature of creative holidays through the VAWAA platform is the opportunity that tourists have to experience an art form and a destination through the experiential lens of a local. Immersive cultural experiences are not only facilitated by the guidance of a local artist, but many creative tourists are also hosted at their instructor's home. Often, as [Matteucci and Smith \(2024\)](#) note, multiple social domains interweave in creative tourism: semi-commercial spaces such as artists' studios, the private space of the home environment and manifestations of hospitality toward visitors. Entering the domestic sphere in which local artists and artisans work and live makes the creative tourist feel like a cultural insider. In the following excerpt, in the context of a Japanese calligraphy workshop in Kyoto, Cindy reveals how she has become intimate with the Japanese culture:

Some of the special highlights (surprise surprise) were actually off-studio. From our daily lunches where we met some of Chisako-san's friends, to exploring Kyoto together. Chikako-san's relaxed schedule while we were there allowed her to spend even more time showing us around - from the Kyoto national museum, to Sanjusangendo temple, to enjoying Chazuke and pickled vegetables, it truly was an immersive experience. A special treat on our final day was to watch her mom and nephew practicing in the studio. This was a true bonus! Just being around her and her family, both in and outside of the studio has opened us up to so many new aspects of Japanese culture.

In Cindy's account, the domestic sphere relates to various dimensions such as sharing everyday meals with her local host, tasting homemade or locally produced food such as "Chazuke and pickled vegetables," mingling with her instructor's friends, and spending time with her host and her relatives in the private and public spaces they inhabit. For example, sharing meals with her instructor afforded Cindy interpersonal experiences of closeness and connection with Japanese people and culture. The domestic sphere, as [Godbout and Caillé \(1998\)](#) remark, is the privileged space within which gifts are given and sharing takes place. Experiences of intimacy and conviviality happen in mundane and spontaneous moments of togetherness "in and outside of the studio." In the context of a stoneware and graffiti workshop in India, Madison similarly refers to penetrating her instructor's domestic sphere when she writes that "beyond pottery, Ranjita also introduced me to the different foods and culture in Pondicherry, as well as her social circle." Furthermore, the following excerpt from Jenny, a creative tourist who visited Vietnam to learn about natural textile dyeing, alludes to an intimate experience, which arose from convivial encounters with female farmers from the local community:

My fondest memory was when we were heading back to the village and she veered off the main road onto a field. I was on the second motorbike, and we followed. She saw some of the other ladies she works with herding their cattle, so we stopped off to see them. We sat under a tree and shared sticky rice Thao had in her purse and visited the women. As the minutes ticked by, more and more women came to sit with us under the field, and Thao was our interpreter. It was one of those surreal moments you're lucky to experience when travelling where you feel like you're in a completely different world, but you feel very much at home.

The intimate experience articulated by Jenny resonates with the notion of convivial atmosphere as described by [Rokka et al. \(2023\)](#), who suggest that convivial atmosphere entails affective bodily encounters and temporalities. In Jenny's experience with Thao, her textile dyeing instructor, spontaneity is encapsulated in their serendipitous encounter with the female farmers Thao has been working with. Temporality is revealed in the slow pace of traveling through Vietnamese rural landscapes, and extended time spent sitting "under a tree," a calm and humbling experience. Embodied experiences cannot be disassociated from entangled materialities, which play a central role in the females' time spent together: sitting together under a tree, eating and sharing "sticky rice," and gazing at meadows where cattle are grazing. The experience of Vietnamese rurality belongs to "those surreal moments" for the paradox of feeling both estrangement "in a completely different world" and comfort as if being "at home." The notion of convivial atmosphere corresponds to a space of hospitality that is filled with an affective energy, one that is conducive to feeling positive emotions, belongingness, empathy and place attachment. Thao, the Vietnamese textile dyeing artist, here acts as a cultural broker in facilitating intimate access to a domestic backstage in rural Vietnam.

### *Inspirational artists as mentors*

A prominent theme in the creative tourists' accounts is related to the influence of artful and sympathetic hosts and instructors. For many tourists partaking in a creative workshop, the artist or artisan hosting them holds a central position. Not only are local artists seen as heritage bearers for preserving and reviving cultural heritage assets and practices, but artists also act as mentors to their guests, inspiring and empowering them to further develop their own artistic skills. Thus, the artists' influence often goes far beyond the mere acquisition of skills. Below, a quotation from Sandra, a British creative tourist in Malaysia, exemplifies local artists as heritage bearers:

Mohd Jufry is the only Dalang in Penang (shadow puppeteer whose skills have been handed down by generations of other shadow puppeteers, in his case his grandfather). The studio was full of the most intricate puppets, some of which were nearly 100 years old and were designed by his father and grandfather.

The Malaysian rootedness of both the art form (leather shadow puppet making) and the artist's expertise is unambiguously associated with the transmission of knowledge across generations. This multigenerational knowledge makes Mohd Jufry authoritative and authentic in his art form. Like with Thao in the Vietnamese context, through Mohd Jufry, as a cultural broker, Sandra is afforded intimate access to an ancestral puppetry tradition. Intimacy in the creative tourist experience is, therefore, constituted through the co-enactment of culturally rich, embedded practices and materialities of the host region. However, beyond cultural expertise, what makes local instructors mentors is their abilities to inspire, empower and stimulate their guests in variegated ways. For instance, Benjamin, who teaches culinary techniques in Mallorca, is not only presented by Evelyn as "knowledgeable," "passionate" and "an amazing teacher," but also as "a really great human being":

Benji is a compassionate and patient teacher. He gave me constructive feedback when I needed it, but also made sure to boost me up with positive reinforcement whenever I deserved it

(even a little bit). He celebrated my progress and helped me feel more confident in the kitchen. My favorite moment: I was chopping some parsley to garnish our dish, and after I was finished, he showed me the better way to do it while explaining the nature of how herbs behave. He proceeded to demonstrate, and to my surprise, he still garnished our dish with my 'imperfect' parsley. He really espoused the philosophy that imperfection is necessary to learn in the kitchen, and I loved how he demonstrated that [...] On top of all that, Benji is genuinely a good human. He was a pleasure to be around, and worked really hard to make sure I had an amazing experience in Mallorca. I felt his compassion every single day.

Many words of sincere appreciation toward their instructors are expressed by the creative tourists on the VAWAA platform. There, intimacy is often revealed in terms of intellectual exchange and a spiritual connection with the artists. For instance, a British female creative tourist reports having had "many heart to heart conversations [with her instructor] through the week about art and craft, design and culture, and life *per se*." In a similar vein, Tom, an American tourist, praises his tango dance instructor Viviana when he writes that "her energy and passion for tango are beyond infectious." In [Matteucci's \(2012\)](#) study, many creative tourists similarly expressed their admiration toward their dance instructors; one of them said that she found herself in the "presence of greatness" when she encountered some flamenco artists (p. 120). It is the close proximity and meaningful interaction with inspirational local artists that promotes both emotional and intellectual intimacy between tourists and hosts. Furthermore, what the creative tourists' accounts have revealed is that tourists do not experience the world outside their bodies and senses, as "tourist practices mobilize embodied interactions with humans, non-humans and various materialities" ([Mertena et al., 2022](#), p. 1). Below, we attend to the ways in which intimacy unfolds in creative embodied experiences.

### *Embodied experiences*

The creative tourists' stories are replete with bodily and multi-sensory descriptions. What stands out in their accounts is not only the pleasure derived from embodied experiences but also the meaning they ascribe to their immersive activities. The pleasure felt during creative tourism experiences is illustrated in the following excerpt from Lucy, which also underscores the sensually rich and multi-faceted nature of creative tourist activities:

The week was an endless bombardment of the senses: vibrant colourations of the world, the smells of indigo, newly turned soil, the touch of nature, the taste of local food and the constant heart-lifting laughter of the artisans as they interwove my education into the chores of their daily life.

Lucy's textile dyeing holiday in Vietnam was highly rewarding for many reasons that she discerningly summarizes as "an endless bombardment of the senses." The combination of the adjective "endless" with the word "bombardment" intimates the profusion and intensity of the sensual impressions registered by the tourist body. Here, the basic five human senses are intertwined: the sense of sight (vibrant colorations), the sense of smell (indigo, newly turned soil), the sense of touch (touch of nature), the sense of taste (local food) and the sense of hearing (laughter). The expression "heart-lifting laughter" suggests the playful character of the creative tourist experience. It further connotes the idea of positive *affect*, or a trans-individual force encountered between the individuals. This positive *affect* is akin to the notion of convivial atmosphere ([Rokka et al., 2023](#)), an intimate space conducive to feeling joy, comfort and happiness.

Embodied creative experiences are associated with manual work practices, which are presented as highly gratifying and meaningful. For instance, as part of a Dohkra metal art workshop in India, Jason commented that "Learning to make metal art, sculpting the wax, working with my hands, pouring/casting molten brass at 900 degrees celsius brought me immense joy." In a different context, satisfaction is expressed by Kimberly, who commented that "wood turning is extremely satisfying. I am now hooked on the feeling of getting a good

cut, and the smell of fresh shavings!” Beyond mere sensuous pleasures and satisfaction, for some creative tourists, performing manual work is perceived to be intrinsically valuable in that it allows them to get away from computers and the use of digital technologies. The value of manual work is clearly articulated by Kathleen when she says that “Creating with my hands gives me a lot of joy. This VAWAA was a good reminder to step away from the computer more often!”

Embodied creative tourist experiences have been linked to self-development and self-discovery. For Kimberly who participated in a woodturning workshop in Uruguay, self-discovery is apparent when she says that she is “now hooked on the feeling of getting a good cut” and that “After [her] time in Montevideo, [she is] seriously considering buying a lathe.” The creative holiday seems to have sparked her new interest in woodturning, something that she has discovered in Montevideo and that she may pursue upon her return home. Learning or self-development is another clear benefit of creative tourist practices through becoming intimate with non-human materialities (e.g. wood or metal). As the following quotation from Patricia illustrates, tourists can acquire new skills through tactile practices:

As someone who mostly works digitally, it was so satisfying to use my hands to make physical, tangible things. I could see my control and progress change each day as I got a better grasp of the craft.

Based on Patricia’s comment, two observations can be made. First, tourist practices or performances, such as using and moving hands, can be understood as “entangled machines of knowledge production” (Matteucci and Smith, 2024, p. 43). Second, there is a link between becoming intimate with textures, smells, objects and practices, and cultivating cultural sensitivity.

### *Bonding with meaningful others*

What the creative tourism literature has documented so far is that social encounters are an essential dimension of the creative tourist experience. For instance, a sense of intimacy has been associated with friendship ties (e.g. Matteucci, 2018; Windress, 2016), the feeling of belonging to a community connected through passion (e.g. Törnqvist, 2018) and love (e.g. Menet, 2020). The VAWAA data offer similar insights. Many tourists reported shared, pleasurable moments punctuated with personal life stories, laughter and fulfilling conversations with their instructors. Rebecca, for instance, emphasizes that her instructor’s hospitality, as epitomized by sharing family meals, was “the most beautiful part” of her time in Mexico. She commented the following:

In addition to pottery, you’ll be immersed in a rich cultural experience that Macrina graciously shares. To me, this was the most beautiful part of my time with her. From eating dinners with her family, to joining them at the local market, she invites you along her daily tasks with enthusiasm [. . .] I found Macrina to be warm, inviting and funny! We shared a lot of laughs and memories that I will cherish forever.

A significant element of the creative tourist experience is revealed in the act of sharing. In Rebecca’s words, Macrina is generous for sharing with her “a rich cultural experience,” which includes family meals, shopping experiences at the local market and “a lot of laughs and memories.” Rebecca’s experience accords well with Belk’s (2010) observation that sharing is “a potentially powerful [way] that creates feelings of solidarity and bonding” among people (p. 717). Furthermore, according to Belk (2001), individuals who share the same interest or passion in something tend to report a sense of pseudo-kinship. Indeed, the act of sharing with creative tourists within the intimate and domestic sphere of the artists’ private life has made tourists feel as if they were invited as quasi-family members. This aspect is illustrated in Tiffany’s words when she writes that “Macrina and her family are very

welcoming and incredibly sweet. From the moment I arrived, I felt like part of her extended family.” In some creative tourism experiences, the boundaries separating the self from the other collapse, which gives way to more egalitarian relationships between tourists and hosts. Hospitality is deployed as gift giving rather than as commodity exchange.

The following quotation from Amber provides further evidence for the argument that not only can sharing be a facilitator of social communication, but also as an act of communion it is a form of self-extension (Belk, 2010):

The workshop with Adriana was an eye-opening experience for me. She was a superb teacher and designed the workshop to cater to me, and I learned many techniques I didn't even know existed. All pieces she creates and around her studio are beautiful and thoughtful. I was inspired by her way of pursuing work and life. Having lunch outdoor and a late-night outing with Adriana and her boyfriend to celebrate my last day was so special and one of my favorite memories!

Amber went to Barcelona to partake in a jewelry-making workshop. This is how she met Adriana. She notes that among her “favorite memories” was the enjoyment of sharing food with Adriana (and her boyfriend). In this anecdote, again, the domestic sphere is the privileged space within which sharing takes place (Godbout and Caillé, 1998), and sharing food, in particular, is a momentous bonding ritual (Belk, 2010). By way of further illustration, in the subsequent excerpt from Alice, bonding is facilitated through conviviality (“women were so incredibly welcoming”), intimate conversations (“about life”), sharing (“their crafts and traditions” and “experiences they were able to share with me”) and slow, ethnographic experiences (“spend time with Thao and watch her relationship with the Nùng An women”):

The workshop was beyond anything I had imagined. I learned so much about natural dyes, but more importantly I was able to connect and learn so much with Thảo and the Nùng An women. Their understanding of craft was so meticulous and refined, but I also enjoyed our conversations about life and the experiences they were able to share with me [...] The Nùng An women were so incredibly welcoming and open to sharing their crafts and traditions with us. It was so rewarding to spend time with Thảo and watch her relationship with the Nùng An women and the relationship they've developed over the years working with each other. These will be experiences and memories that I will cherish for the rest of my life.

## Conclusion

A nuanced analysis of creative tourists' narratives can explain intimacy as a relational quality beyond the discourses of creativity and self-development. As a space of playful encounters, our study has shown that the creative tourist experience is underpinned by a strong sense of being-in-relation. While learning and desires for authenticity are significant dimensions of creative tourism, ultimately, creative tourists want to be affected through immersive practices and intimate socialities. As cultural brokers, local creative hosts play an essential role in the creative tourist experience. As Matteucci and Smith (2024) remark, “the essence and the value of the creative tourist experience stem from relational encounters with people, practices, places, heritage and with a plethora of other non-human elements” (p. 93). Here, we have similarly presented intimacy as the sensuous entanglement of rewarding, immersive experiences within the convivial domestic sphere of inspirational artists and as bonding through communal elements of sharing. Our analysis also suggests that creative tourism appears to be a path toward more authentic forms of cultural tourism and host-guest intimacy. These findings reflect the literature on creative tourism (e.g. Matteucci, 2017), which indicates that there is a link between rich embodied experiences and a close connection with hosts and the region visited. This study thus reiterates the view that the context of the tourism experience indeed matters significantly (Edensor, 2006). In addition, Belk (2010) reminds us that, for Durkheim (1964), becoming intimate with others is the most important determinant of human behavior. Intimacy, therefore, deserves further attention in creative tourism scholarship.

Some marketing implications can be drawn from our study findings. First, because it has become evident that tourists are not only motivated to develop creative skills but also to have more authentic experiences by living like and with a local, the promotion of creative tourism should emphasize intimacy of host–guest relations and the benefits of relational cultural encounters, such as fostering local knowledge production, heritage preservation and an ethics of reciprocal care. Second, through collaborative experiences, tourists are more likely to contribute to a fairer allocation of power and control of resources and to more widely contribute to the well-being of the wider community. Third, for meaningful, intimate experiences of heritage with inspirational local hosts, creative tourism practitioners need to tailor their offerings to only host a very limited number of tourists at a time and include “off-studio” experiences based on food sharing, social encounters and experiences of the landscape of everyday life.

The scope and type of data used are limitations in this study. While the 73 testimonials retrieved from the VAWAA platform afford some invaluable insights into the nature of the creative tourist experience, many of the stories are short (less than 300 words) and not focused on intimacy as a socio-psychological phenomenon. Furthermore, because research based on secondary data does not allow further exploration through probing questions, fieldwork, arts-based and visual methods as well as interviewing techniques would benefit studies on intimacy. While our study sought to holistically explore intimacy in creative tourists' testimonials, it would be worth investigating how, and to which extent, different forms of creative activity relate to different forms of intimacy. For instance, would dance be more connected to physical intimacy than handicraft activities? Likewise, would yoga and other mind–body–spirit practices be more closely associated with spiritual intimacy?

Despite these limitations, the social value of this paper lies in highlighting intimacy as a way to forge social connections and to promote positive emotions and place attachment through creative tourism. For instance, as [Dwyer et al. \(2019\)](#) argue, research on place attachment may further our understanding of sustainable tourism practices, which have the potential to make local communities more resilient. Studies of tourist behavior that focus on the social value of creative heritage-based experiences are particularly needed in the face of alienating digital worlds ([Wright, 2025](#)) and accelerating anthropocentric disruptions to communities. Against the dissolution of local communities, like [Wanner et al. \(2025\)](#), we call for more sincere forms of hospitality, which would not only transcend mere economic exchange between hosts and tourists, but would also thwart the ubiquitous issue of cultural commodification ([Moretti and Matteucci, 2025](#)). Despite often inevitable economic transactions, this paper presents collaborative, creative tourist–host encounters as a positive social force for both tourists and communities.

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