



## Want to Authentically Experience Other Cultures Abroad? Go to the Food Markets

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When I visited London many years ago, our traveling companions suggested that we spend a couple of hours at Borough Market, the city’s famed food market near the southern end of London Bridge. I crinkled up my nose and shrugged my shoulders, but reluctantly went along.

My less than favorable attitude abruptly shifted shortly after we arrived at the place where people in the borough of Southwark have been supposedly buying and selling groceries for a thousand years. My eyes darted back and forth from one stall to the next. The first aroma to grab my attention was that of delicious Indian street food favorites like samosas, bhajis, and crispy dosas that were being hawked. There was also the Brit version of a grilled cheese — a “cheese toastie” — with its blend of English cheeses on local sourdough, which smelled spectacular. And of course, how could we not salivate at the scent of another British staple — the succulent savory pie?

Since that day in London, I’ve found that the best way to fully experience other cultures when you’re abroad is to check out the local food markets. Food is a gateway to absorbing the unique essence of a place and its people, so wandering through a market can be a great way to begin really discovering foreign country and culture. I hold this to be true regardless of where in the world I have roamed.



Image via Sandy Bornstein

A few years later, on a trip to South Korea, I was wandering through the Gukje International Market in the port city of Busan and was mesmerized by a maze of interconnected streets that were filled with commerce. Stores selling things like clothes, home goods, and accessories lined the both sides of the road while food vendors sitting at low tables were parked in the middle. Fragrant and vibrant colored flowers added to the mix. At the nearby Jagalchi Fish Market, the smell of fresh crab permeated the air, octopi swam in tanks, and I could feel the stare of the sea urchin's eyes on me.

While I love to eat seafood, I preferred the more eclectic mix of foods at Gukje. I watched as locals congregated to cooks that prepared traditional Korean dishes. Some patrons plopped down on stools to eat right across from the vendor who'd prepared and served their meal, while others ate on the run. I struggled to find any signs translated into English, which prevented me from partaking in the epicurean escapade due to a host of dietary restrictions. Later on I learned that some of the local delicacies so eagerly lapped up by people included chungmu gimhap (dried seaweed rolls stuffed with rice, served with spicy radish and boiled squid), gimhap (steamed white rice and various ingredients rolled in dried seaweed), and sundae (steamed cow intestines stuffed with various ingredients).



Image via Sandy Bornstein

Foreigners were more reluctant and dilly-dallied with their requests. Wave after wave of people entered the streets. Patrons patiently waited in long lines at the most popular spots. Thinking back, I wish I'd had an interpreter so that I could have better understood the culinary cacophony.

I had considerably less trouble in Israel, where English is spoken alongside Hebrew. At the Mahane Yehuda Market in Jerusalem — commonly referred to as "The Shuk" (translated to "the marketplace") — I could read some of the Hebrew signs and my questions were answered in English. The shop owners were eager to talk and offer samples. Several asked where I came from while others were interested in knowing what I planned to visit in Israel. In between these quick chats, I took bite-sized morsels of freshly baked cookies



Image via Sandy Bornstein

Like many other urban markets, the mixture of smells became intoxicating as I wandered without constraint. But when a whiff of chocolate caught my attention, I zeroed in on the multiple varieties of halvah (ground sesame seeds and honey) as well as a few traditional Jewish baked goods — braided challah, rugelach, and mandelbrot.

In my travels to these places and others, immersing myself in the culinary delights of food markets has been a definite eye-opener.

### Here are a few useful pointers I've learned from experiences:

- 1) Before you get to your destination, make sure to do some internet research to find some food market options.
- 2) Once you get there, make sure to ask the locals about the best markets to explore. Residents usually avoid tourist traps, so it's a good way to find something you know is authentic.
- 3) It's always advisable to double-check any market's schedule before planning an excursion. Opening and closing times for food markets vary from place to place and sometimes from season to season.
- 4) It's also a good idea to arrive shortly after the market opens. The walkways are less crowded. It's easier to see what each shop is selling and take in all the stalls. It's also the best time if you like asking questions or chatting with the vendors.
- 4) Be aware that, in some foreign cities, enticing street food may not strictly adhere to health and safety standards. When in doubt, it's best to err on the side of caution

Just like visiting a new city opens your eyes to another part of the world, food markets expose people to local and ethnic foods from a variety of places. So sometimes the best understanding of where you're visiting can come from exploring the local food preferences. And by indulging in local cuisine, your travel experience will be more complete.

But be warned: once you're hooked, like I was when I lunched on fish and chips all those years ago in London's Borough Market, you'll be looking to have an authentic food experience wherever you travel.