

My Oyster Card Holder

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by Ahmed Riaz

I collect cheap mementos during my travels. Whether it's kitsch keychains, tragically designed airline safety cards or movie ticket stubs, I'm always looking at the underbelly of plentitude for the perfect object to hold memories of where I have been.

My favorite memento started its life as a Oyster Card holder. Oyster is a transit card used for London's Underground and transit systems. It comes in a plastic blue case, with a textured hinge bifold that has thermal graphics all over it. The holder came for free with the purchase of a month's worth of transit. I bought the Oyster card during the winter of 2005 while visiting London during a two month hiatus between jobs. An eager wanderlust had led me to take the long way home visiting various parts of the world. Just as I was leaving the UK, I paused as I reached out to throw away the now valueless card. With a moment's hesitation I threw away the card but kept its holder. It was the perfect memento to represent my travels.

Once back home I soon started using the holder as a wallet. It always brought a smile to my face when I pulled it out. It served to remind me of my time as a nomad, to never get too comfortable, and to never settle down. It smelled like freedom. I appreciated the simplicity of the bifold, a type I had not tried before. I could slide a few bills tenderly into the front pocket (the textured spine would crack if I forced too many things within its fold). Slim and sexy, it forced me to be simple and shed things it couldn't fit. I fell in love with the brightness of the object. Bright blue and unashamedly plastic, it was cheap and simple.

Carrying it I felt proud, even clever, for repurposing an object I had almost thrown away. Looking back now, I suspect the cleverness was not entirely my own. With its gratuitous front pocket, folding wallet-like ability, and message on the inside cover pleading "Please reuse your card," it was clearly designed for preservation.

Nothing embodies my trip for me more than my Oyster Card Holder. Whenever I pulled it out of my pocket the unmistakable bright blue would get noticed and spark conversations around winter sabbaticals and nomadic freedom. It wasn't just an object—it was a way of life.

A few years down the line, the Oyster card holder began to fall apart. My re-entry into a real life and a new job required me to carry business cards and more bills than could comfortably fit inside. The strain of adding a few credit cards and an ID card to the mix took its toll, and the Oyster Card Holder cracked at its seams. A tiny rip became two tiny rips, and then the two expanded. The flimsy plastic material of the holder had not been built for this purpose. The inside cover slowly starting peeling away. The transfer printing on the cover eroded softly with repeated use. The bright blue gradually faded.

Instead of allowing it to completely come apart, I put it out to pasture. As the Oyster Card Holder was fading so too was my resolve to be a nomad. The desire for stability entered my life just as the card holder left. I couldn't always be in transit.

