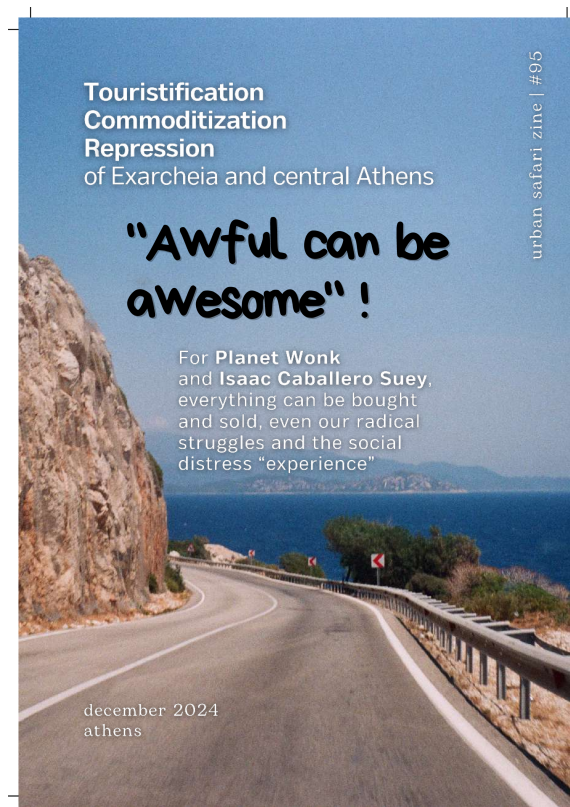


# Dark Tourism and Commodification of Exarcheia and Central Athens: “Awful Can Be Awesome”

For Planet Wonk and Isaac Caballero Suey, Everything Can Be Bought and Sold, Even Our Radical Struggles and the Social Distress “Experience”

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Isaac Caballero Suey / Planetwonk Experiences

**For 23 to 49 euros per person, several platforms offer you the opportunity to visit “unexpected”, “alternative”, “rebellious” and “awful” Athens with “locals”! These are urban tours where obscenity has no limit**

As people who are struggling, living and working in Exarcheia and, more generally, in the center of Athens, we see the urban capitalism siege every day. It is transforming the very nature of our relationships, and nibbling away at our spaces of life, solidarity and freedom. The expression of this violence takes several shapes: from the eviction of populations described as “undesirable” – with all the racism and class violence this implies – and of squatters and social spaces in urban areas intended for “attractive” policies, to tourists, property developers, investors and, ultimately, to the profits of the ruling class. This process leads to the criminalization of our struggles, as well as trials and imprisonment for people of the movement and people on the move (of course for exiled and racialized people, not tourists and digital nomads!), an urban space increasingly under police surveillance, private “security” companies and cameras, and so on. Urban capitalism represents a market based on the unbridled exploitation of a working class, an often immigrant and invisibilized workforce to build luxury buildings, clean the countless Airbnb and hotels, cook or wash dishes behind the scenes in restaurants, or deliver coffees and meals to homes.

In Exarcheia, this violence also takes the shape of “alternative” tourism, which has been developing there for several years. The Municipality of Athens and the European Union are working to develop this industry by playing the fake democratic card of “local participation”, notably through the “Curing the Limbo” pilot program (2018–2021). As part of this, saBarBar project and Troubadours Digital (the latter funded by the Ministry of Culture and Sports) have, for example, offered “alternative” tourists “a special tour of the Exarcheia neighborhood: students and theater enthusiasts, musicians, songwriters, people with expressive concerns of different nationalities and cultures, disperse to Exarcheia’s corners, squares and streets to present their own version of the neighborhood. Based on residents’ testimonies and oral history material, they create songs and short performances, composing a creative map of the neighborhood”. At the time, comrades from the neighborhood prevented some of these activities from taking place.

## **Are Squats and Spaces of Struggle “Social Enterprises”?**

This is Athens, a partnership platform between the Municipality of Athens (through its Tourism and Development Company) and private institutions such as the Greek Tourism Confederation and Aegean company, is also branding Exarcheia by promoting guided tours by “locals” to discover “alternative Athens”. With a promise: “Explore local life and get off the beaten track to discover the authentic side of Greece thanks to our tours”. Quite a program! Exarcheia is described as a “rebellious” neighborhood of “street artists”, a “lively and dynamic hub of radicals and free thinkers”. Navarinou Park (squatted and created by an assembly of residents!) is promoted by This is Athens. Without naming them, the anarchist squat K\*Vox and its self-organized clinic ADYE are even mentioned to attract tourists! Squats and spaces of struggle thus become “social enterprises”,<sup>1</sup> a label that has much more to do with management, state policies, NGOs, philanthropy and charity. This tragic capture of our radical struggles by commodity society is not only cynical, but also violent, given the extent to which those who fight for these spaces of freedom are suppressed by the authorities and capitalist interests.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thisisathens.org/activities/tours/urban-alternative-athens-tour-review>



Welcome to Athens, a place full of collections representing everyday life.

In 2022, the Municipality sought to dust off Athens' image with a communication campaign intended to "rebrand Athens after years of crisis" and to keep tourists in the capital longer, before they consume the Greek islands. This is Athens teamed up with Google and the Greek Ministry of Tourism to create the "The City is the Museum" app. The catchphrase: "Welcome to Athens, a place full of collections representing everyday. The app enables "Athenians to share their favorite places and the stories that make Athens an exciting and modern city". It features an audio walk called "Athens is changing", to "understand Athens' cultural landscape, from underground skate stores to street art culture to the ever-changing Omonia Square". Here we see how "culture", "modernity", "change" and "development" are used to both attract a tourist population and exclude those considered as "undesirable" (refugee people, people surviving in the street, drug addicts, radical militants). While luxury hotels and residences are proliferating in Omonia and the so-called "commercial triangle", the police hunt of the *classes galériennes* [French slang word for a person's social class in precariousness, economic poverty, who carries a social stigma but has a muddling through system] goes on in the streets of central Athens, as do the murders of racialized people, sex workers and LGBTQIA+ people.

"New York like Athens. Millions of Americans and visitors had the opportunity to admire the city and its images, through the video of the campaign "Athens: the city is the museum", which was presented on the impressive giant screens of Times Square, for two weeks. Flavors, aromas, music and its rich cultural identity make Athens one of the most exciting destinations. @thisisathens" Source: Instagram of Kostas Bakoyannis, former Mayor of Athens

The commodification, dispossession and touristification onslaught comes from the State, the Municipality of Athens and the EU policies, but also from the touristic companies themselves, from the largest to the smallest. It is a systemic problem, but we would like to mention an telling example of this "alternative" tourism market: that of guide Isaac Caballero Suey, a former consultant who presents himself as a politician and founder of Planetwonk Experiences. Present in several countries, including Indonesia, Mexico, the Philippines and Sri Lanka, this tourism platform is particularly well established in the center of Athens, where it "offers" (however, you still have to spend between 18 and 32 euros per person!) several themed tours. There is something for every single (alternative) taste! "The Awful Athens", a 'Feminist Walk of Athens', 'LGBTQ Greek History' or 'Understanding the Refugee Crisis', the purpose is to "make us realize that none of us are immune to turbulent times, that the refugees of today are escaping real danger. By understanding their situation, we can start to change our attitudes". On every visit, the promise is quite audacious: "Not seeing the city as a tourist"! This is how the platform sells its products: "Our experiences are similar to being in a documentary, not ordinary tourism. You are free to think for yourself and to ask your own questions. You won't forget the experience; it's one-of-a-kind, thrilling, and engaging. Many of our guests tell us they couldn't do it on their own. In fact, we rarely have groups larger than 14 persons (most groups average around 4-5 people)." In this way, the "alternative" tourists are not given the impression that they are participating to mass tourism. Because this is tourism like no other, "behind the scenes", more "exclusive", "participative", "engaging". We also suspect that the relatively small size of the tourist groups is due to the intention of not attracting too much attention from local residents and activists, some of whom would no doubt have a lot to say to these "alternative" explorers.



## **“Extra-Spicy” Dark Tourism**

Yet some of us in Exarcheia have noticed Isaac Caballero Suey – his sidekick Maria or other “locals” linked to other platforms – strolling the streets of Exarcheia with groups of tourists. And there’s reason to be dumbfounded at the sight of the guide showing padlocks for short-term rentals hanging from building entrances and explaining the anti-Airbnb posters of the Coordination des luttes d’Exarcheia. The “alternative” tourism entrepreneur promotes his tours with photos of the Embros squatted space in Psirri or the former refugee housing squat City Plaza, located near Viktoria Square, where he even stages himself as a counter “to stories most tourists don’t know”. After his visits, the latter are dithyrambic. One of them writes: “I felt safe throughout, and Isaac was excited and able to answer every question we had on the tour. The issues discussed on the tour were heavy, as was seeing and hearing about the souls affected.” These “souls” become a backdrop that illustrates “live” what the guide is saying. Seeing “real life”, “authentic Athens”, off the “beaten track” of millions of tourists, means putting ourselves in the overhanging (and therefore violent) position of observing the galley slaves who survive on the streets of Athens. They are objectified and become an attraction to satisfy the voyeurism of those who are struggling and facing systemic violence.

The guided tour is like a more or less “spicy” dish that you can personalize *ad infinitum*. That’s exactly what another visitor said when she described it as “really cool, unique experience. [...] In this tour you get a history lesson and it paints a picture of how Athens has changed over the years, and how gentrification will continue to change how it will look in the future. If you are interested in the deeper and darker version of this tour, he [Isaac, ed. Note] will offer the “extra spicy” version”. While warning “sensitive souls”, the “Horrible Athens” themed tour promises “godforsaken places and a lot of urban decay: awful can be awesome. Dare to see it.” Obviously, this is “the extra spicy version”: dark tourism, suffering tourism.

## **Commodification and Museumification: A Repression Machine**



*"Gratuitous violence against a paying world"*



However, Isaac Caballero Suey isn't just a tour guide: he's also the co-founder of Prohorame, a "Social-First Publisher in Greece and Cyprus" and "social e-commerce" platform where you can buy sex toys, sanitary pads, "wellness" and "zero-waste" accessories and "feminist clothing"! Under the pretence of "authenticity, inclusivity and dialogue", this is a perfect example of social and pink washing. We're not surprised, then, to see the right-wing daily-newspapers Kathimerini offering in 2018 a flattering portrait of Prohorame and its founders Katerina Kontarini, Maria Kalogeropoulou and Isaac Caballero Suey. Kathimerini explains that "compared to other women's organizations, Prohorame is not run collectively, it is not ideologized; it is based on the individual". Isaac Caballero Suey shares the essence of his feminist view: "We are first and foremost feminists before being anything else. The most radical collectives want to convert people. There's a central line, a certain point of view on issues. We defend the individual voice of each person. That's why we're often referred to as neoliberals."<sup>2</sup> This individualizing vision of an inoffensive, bourgeois feminism does indeed marry very well with the 'alternative' and 'diversity' entrepreneurship that transforms protest movements and social distress into commodities and tourist attractions. What linguistic deviousness lead to speak about "participation" and "engagement" when it's all part of an "urban safari" with an intermediary, a highly paid "expert"?

The commodification and museumization of our imaginary and subversive practices are part of the same repression machine. We will always be on the side of life and people in struggle and in movement, in squats, assemblies and self-organized kitchens.

LIVE LIKE A "LOCAL": 700 EUROS SALARY, 500 EUROS RENT

IF WE DON'T REVOLT IN EVERY NEIGHBORHOOD, OUR CITY WILL BECOME A BIG  
ATTRACTION PARK FOR THE RICH AND TOURISTS

PLATEIA, STREFI, POLYTECHNIC, EXARCHEIA WILL NOT BECOME A MUSEUM

NEITHER SUPREME GUIDE, NOR "ALTERNATIVE" TOURIST GUIDE

LONG LIVE ANARCHY

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.kathimerini.gr/k/k-magazine/951638/prochorame/>



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