

BUSINESS

Europeans Are Flying Across the Atlantic to Participate in Black Friday



The holiday is no longer just about great deals—it's a cultural spectacle, a capitalist equivalent of the Running of the Bulls.

By Brooke Harrington



Eduardo Munoz / Reuters

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My pharmacist here in Copenhagen boards a plane on Thanksgiving Day and flies eight hours to New York just to shop the Black Friday sales; she does this every year. So does one of my neighbors.

When I first heard about this, four years ago, I put it down to the crazy prices that prevail in Copenhagen, where everything costs three to five times as much as it does in the U.S. Even taking into account the cost of a round-trip plane ticket and a few days in a hotel, people could still save quite a bit by arbitraging the dramatic price differences between the U.S. and Denmark on clothing, cosmetics, and especially electronics (though they would have to buy a lot). Go with an empty suitcase and come back ahead in terms of total expenses.

Then I found out that this phenomenon isn't unique to the Danes. The travel industry has built a niche market around this event: There are a whole suite of package tours catering to foreigners who want to participate in the Black Friday bacchanal. Over the past few years, tourists from all over Europe, Asia, and Latin America have paid to fly to the U.S., get up in the middle of the night, and wait in long lines to shop.

The first shopping day after Thanksgiving has evolved from a practical matter of snagging great deals into a spectacle that outsiders find exotic and entertaining—the capitalist equivalent of Spain's Running of the Bulls. In Pamplona, you get frenzied crowds, violence and death; a Black Friday trip gives you all that, plus the chance to score a plasma television.

Surprisingly, the Black Friday custom seems to be migrating to other countries. The U.K. and Brazil, for example, have made the day their own (for a little history of how the holiday came to Britain, *The Economist* has you covered). Now that the dollar is strong against many world currencies, there is likely to be more of this in future. Black Friday may join Halloween as another American export embraced around the world.

But what happens to Black Friday when it is severed from the Thanksgiving context? What do foreign countries get when they extract the rabid consumerism from a four-day holiday ritual, leaving behind the ceremony of gratitude and the time with family and friends? From an anthropological point of view, one might say these new adopters of Black Friday are getting the profane without the balance of the sacred.

The economist and moral philosopher Albert Hirschman once wrote that there are basically two arguments about the impact of capitalism on social life: One school of thought has it that commerce barbarizes human relations, while the other view holds that exchange makes individuals behave in a more civilized manner toward each other. For the civilizing impact of commerce to work, people have to be mindful of their interdependency with others and their self-interest in maintaining those relationships. Thanksgiving functions in part as a ceremony of gratitude for precisely those interdependencies and relationships.

In the U.S., there's been a recent backlash against Black Friday sales that encroach on the sacred space of Thanksgiving. Stores that used to open one minute after midnight on Friday are now returning to normal business hours for the day after Thanksgiving; others, like REI, have even opted to forego Black Friday entirely, urging customers to spend the day in non-commercial pursuits. Some have attributed this to the easy availability of online shopping. But that doesn't square with the rise of Black Friday outside the U.S.: People in Europe, Asia, and Latin America have access to Internet retail, but that has not prevented the adoption of American-style shopping at its most promiscuous. This may be because those societies lack the cultural context that Thanksgiving provides in the U.S.: If Black Friday is an expression of the capitalist Id, Thanksgiving acts as the Ego, reminding Americans that there are better things to do than shop.

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