

Living History

Most museums are indoors, with dimly lit rooms and glass cases holding the treasures of the ages. Visitors wander through, speaking quietly and reading captions printed alongside tiny displays, and use their imaginations to construct the worlds around the artefacts. Many museum visitors, especially children, find this approach to history both difficult and unexciting. They want to enter into the full experience of history.

Beginning in the mid-1800s, European historical organisations began offering “open-air museums,” where visitors could enter buildings set up to mimic the living conditions of the past. This movement influenced North American museums, which eventually developed “living history museums,” which allow visitors to try their hands at using old technology like butter churns and spinning wheels, as well as interacting with staff members who pretend to be people from the target era. Colonial Williamsburg, which opened in 1934, is an entirely reconstructed village, recreating the years when Williamsburg was the capital of Virginia and central to the developments that led to America’s Revolutionary War and the formation of the United States. Visitors can see the meeting house where the General Assembly heard Patrick Henry’s famous remarks on liberty. They can eat in a tavern that serves food right out of the eighteenth century or observe a blacksmith shoeing a horse. Costumed interpreters explain the boycott on English goods—that’s why they aren’t serving tea. They invite visitors to help them mend a fence or make a clay pot. The popularity of Colonial Williamsburg spawned dozens of similar museums all over the United States and Canada.

Living history museums, though popular, are not without their detractors. Critics point out that they present a sanitised version of history—no one in Colonial Williamsburg is dying of cholera. The “slaves” all seem perfectly content. People are polite and refined. It’s possible that visitors would be better off not learning this skewed version of history at all.

The next level of intensity for historical living is the trend of re-enactment. A popular hobby in North America and Europe, re-enactment involves recreating, as perfectly as possible, the conditions of another era and living under them for a few days. Particularly popular are military re-enactments, wherein men (and a few women) dress in military uniforms and recreate historical battles. Charlie Schroeder recently wrote a book, *Man of War*, about spending time with historical re-enactors in the United States. He admits that this hobby is a strange one. “Let’s face it, dressing like a Nazi and sleeping in sub-zero temperatures without a sleeping bag or spending one’s weekend walking around in a loincloth and getting excited about eating a slice of pork belly . . . isn’t how most people choose to spend their downtime,” he writes. The best hobbies tend to be the inexplicable ones, though. Who but a triathlete can understand why someone would want to do a triathlon? Schroeder camped with neo-Vikings and raided “Russia” with a fake German army in Colorado. Along the way, he discovered people whose desire for a connection with an authentic past was so great that they willingly abandoned modern technologies in an attempt to experience what their ancestors did.

For a real experience of one’s predecessors, though, a weekend here or there doesn’t cut it. American Public Television has created a series of television programs—reality shows, really—that send modern-day people back in time and ask them to live there for months. In *Frontier House*, participants had access to the level of technology that would have been available only in the 1880s in Montana Territory. They had to live there for several months, building homes, digging wells, and attempting to store away food for the coming winter. Another iteration of this project, *Colonial House*, tried to replicate the experience of the first English people to settle in North America. In both shows, some participants welcomed and learned from the experience, while others had a disastrously awful time.