

Transcript of Podcast 17 – Mental Health Part One

{Intro}

BECKY THE TRAVELLER: I kind of did a very brief tot up of the numbers, and it must have been over a thousand people who knew somebody, or personally had suffered with, with some form of mental health

{intro music – jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a weekly series looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, Ian Oliver, also known as The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Brit with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

Eagle-eared listeners may notice that I didn't do a podcast last week, Eagle-eyed readers may notice the title and subject matter of this podcast and go 'but that's not what you said last time'. The two are connected, and I'll come onto that point later.

But before that, let me recap all the other things that have been going on in the past fortnight. Fortnight – a word that until recently I didn't know was a Britishism. Two weeks. The word seems to have developed from the longer phrase 'fourteen nights' in Middle English, so it's a perfectly logical word. A similar word that has since been lost is 'sennight', because English already has a perfectly cromulent word for that – 'week'.

So how are you all this sennight? I haven't had any recurrence of my headaches this past fortnight, despite a few beers along the way. Certainly not as many beers as I had been drinking – I have definitely cut down quite considerably – and I do feel a bit healthier now. The bathroom scales in my friend's house claim I'm 91.6kg – I don't know if this is a standard weight for someone of my height and demographic, but I'm pretty comfortable with it.

I did have a couple of nights on the alcohol a couple of weeks ago, indeed when I was editing my previous podcast in the pub below the hostel I was staying in, near Victoria in London. I was down there to meet my videographer friend Joe (from 'This Way Up Travel') – he's the chap who's working on making the documentary about the hike I did last year across Great Britain, but one of his latest ideas is to do more filming in and around London. This is where I come in – as one of my entire blog strands is around the fact that everywhere is interesting, and people should explore places closer to 'home' to find them; I've already written about some of the lesser boroughs of London and at some point soon I'll be doing a couple of podcast episodes on them, so because I know quite a bit about London in general (more than he does), Joe sees me as the perfect person to present/voiceover his filming with interesting titbits. Note that I live in Sheffield and he lives in ... Hackney.

Anyway. We didn't do much filming in the end, due to the weather not being terribly friendly (strong wind, with occasional downpours); we decided to do a bit of wandering around the borough of Camden, which is both larger than you expect and a rather peculiar shape – when I've been researching for my pods and blogs, I keep finding museums and points of interests that I've gone 'oh what borough is that in, what, Camden, again?! After a bit of filming at the Angel Islington and Camden Market, we wandered around the Jewish History museum before grabbing lunch.

One thing Joe suggested, after we'd relocated to a pub in Camden Town to avoid the rain, was

that I ought to re-examine the adverts I'd posted on Fiverr, and which, incidentally, I've not had any offers from yet, to stop trying to cover all basis in one advert and make lots of different posts for each different thing I want to do. I haven't done this yet, obviously.

Related to this, as I mentioned in my last pod that might happen, my friend Amy did give me a book that I could record my reading for her. It's "Inferno" by Dan Brown, at about 149,600 words. Yeh, I mean ... for comparison, my podcasts average between 5 and 7 thousand words. So, either she has supreme confidence in me or she wants to humour me by giving me a tome like that, so she can say she tried to encourage me even though it's slightly disconcerting. Ha, we'll see. No, I haven't started it yet either.

We had another storm over the weekend, but not quite as virulent as the ones earlier in the year. As I type this, looking out the window, I see sunshine, and this seems to have been the pattern this year; stormy weekends and drier weekdays (although as you heard earlier, not completely dry!). I am getting a little bored of the rain; I am fully aware that that's what makes the grass green and the flowers grow, but there's a difference between the two parts of the sentence 'average annual rainfall' and 'in a month'.

Fortunately the pattern has been for the storms to hit on Saturday lunchtimes; this has been very useful for my Parkrun escapades, because running in the rain is not often on my list of 'joyous things to do on a Saturday morning'. Obviously I grew up as a cross-country runner and we used to have races on a Saturday morning, so I have ran in hail and snow before now, but that was when I had to, and I do Parkrun for fun.

I was out both Saturdays since my last podcast, both at my usual run at Sheffield Castle; the first was in glorious sunshine and I unexpectedly smashed my personal best to finish in 26m 16s, which still makes me about average but I've gone through life being average so that's pretty cool. The following week was duller and damper, and they had some issues with their timing equipment so that I ran 26m dead despite not feeling particularly swift means I'm counting it as very unofficial. One point of note about this latest run though is I finally met up with one of the other barefoot runners in the Sheffield area, Hannah; she's both younger and fitter than me so I only saw her briefly at the start and the end – in the run she was well over a minute in front of me.

It's the Sheffield half marathon later in the month. I still haven't decided if I'm going to enter it yet; I want to wait until the last minute to check out my fitness level for jogging such a distance. That this week seems to be quite sunny means I can start to willingly drag myself out for a training run out in the roads, which will be a good step – yes the pavements here in Sheffield are pretty smooth so it's not a concern to jog barefoot on them. Not sure about the roads at the far end of the half-marathon course, though Hannah has before and will be again barefoot for the half marathon. But then she's an expert.

I've also found myself busy Sundays recently. I don't know how well what I'm about to say is going to go down with my audience, but certainly a couple of the friends I've told have been quite positive. Since arriving in Sheffield, so covering three Sundays, I've been popping to church.

Now, although taking place in a traditional-looking church building (it's actually a Grade II listed building constructed around 1700, and the first non-conformist chapel built in Sheffield), it's, well, it's Unitarian, obviously.

I've known about Unitarians for quite a while, and I've always felt their world view ebbed closely to mine. Plus, of course, their remit is quite vague – from liberal Christians at one end to avowed atheists at the other, they have a space for pretty much everyone in between, so services don't feel particularly, as my uncle might say, 'God-bothering'. Indeed one of my online friends is a 'religious educator' for the Universalist Unitarians in Houston Texas, and despite knowing her for maybe ten years, I've still no idea what she herself actually believes. Partly my attendance is to try to 'find my tribe' (probably my 'phrase of 2020') spiritually, but

I'm finding it's also helping me in terms of my own mindset – recent subjects spoken about have included 'letting go' and 'a sense of place', both of which are things close to my own heart.

Give me a year and I might end up a Unitarian lay-preacher. I mean, it's no different from Podcasting about political thoughts, right? Heh.

Now, for once, all this is important to what I want to talk about on this podcast. If you remember last time I said I was going to do 'ethical travel'. Well, last week when I was coming to write it up, I ... simply didn't feel up to doing it – I felt I'd would be better served doing something less mentally strenuous and more aligned with self-care. So that's exactly what I did – I sat on my red and read books. That the books needed to be back within the library system in Nottinghamshire the next day otherwise I'd be paying a fine may also have been a factor (and yes I could have renewed but there were two I'd already finished at that point as well so didn't really see the point keeping them).

One of the books I did renew though, and that's a self-help book on social anxiety.

Now, it may surprise you to know that someone like me would say that, given that I travel around the world, usually on my own, and often to more unusual destinations where tourist infrastructure might be a bit less coherent and forgiving. See, when people in my everyday life come across me for the first time and I'm discussing my travel style with them, they come to a number of conclusions. Firstly that I'm completely potty and foolhardy, obviously, but then that I'm incredibly brave. "Oh, I could never do anything like that" is something I often hear, along with other, less tactful, comments along the lines of "When will you ever settle down like a normal person?".

Leaving the latter comments aside, the whole 'you're so brave' thing I have major issues with. I certainly don't feel brave; in fact very often I feel incredibly self-conscious, wary, and anxious.

As I've discussed before in previous pods, I'm an introvert who travels solo, often to obscure places, so much of the time when I travel it's me, only me, in an alien culture and foreign language. Normally I can cope; a combination of bloodyminded determinism and general curiosity sees me through. But there have been times when I have shut myself in my room for hours on end, unable to face the everyday life that's happening outside. A couple of times I've come home sooner than I anticipated, because what was going on in my head was too distracting, too loud, and I'll talk about those situations later, as I also have issues with mild depression.

See, the thing is, every so often, I have a 'wobble', usually caused by nothing more than a word, a phrase, a reaction by others, or just one little thing that sets me off down a road of thinking too much negatively.

It's not as if I can't anticipate it either; every single time I fly into somewhere new, I get the same thought processes in my head - will I be understood? Will I be laughed at? Will I cope with this? I do my best with specific bits of knowledge beforehand (like, how do you catch a bus, pay for it, etc – remember, "knowledge is power"), and usually it's enough, but sometimes the demons win. What makes it all the worse for me is I have an over-developed fear of failure, and again I'll talk about this shortly too.

Very often though, for me it's the 'social' angle I find it hardest to deal with. My introversion, coupled with a fear of standing out, of having low self-confidence in what I do which means that I'll be the 'obvious foreigner' and people will laugh at my attempts to communicate or even just the way I present myself, means I can barely introduce myself to a crowd of people, it takes me a great deal of self-belief to even go into a shop in some foreign cultures, and sometimes the thought of going somewhere new and arranging everything on the spot fills me with dread.

And yet I've done all this before; travelled solo to so many different places, so many times. So why I should still feel like this so often is a mystery to me.

Often the little things build up in my mind even once I've left the airport and have spent a little while in a new country. Sometimes this is the build-up of lots of little things, and in a way this is partly what happened to me in Indonesia and why I came home early rather than explore the country at length. Note this was during my 'year out' a few years ago – my original intention had been to travel for the whole year but I think I was just too inexperienced for that, and after two and a half months of travel I was feeling quite mentally raw.

At the time I also had the added issue of having a partner back home who was, at the time, being quite 'clingy' and 'needy' – one of the many MANY reasons I'm single is because I'm not very attentive and prefer being with people who are equally ... casual I guess is the word. Obviously travelling for a long period of time when your partner is back home isn't exactly a great situation but I've been used to long distance relationships and I'm fine with them. She, however, had not and was not, so even a couple of weeks beforehand I was having emotionally-draining conversations

With that as a background, the little things that happened in Indonesia just built up and knocked me a bit more than they had any right to. Even before I got there my plans for the country had had to change because Timor-Leste had a public holiday so I couldn't get a visa so I couldn't go overland into West Timor and instead had to fly to Bali. Once there I couldn't draw money out the ATM at the airport because the machines didn't like my card. After finally managing to get money, I found there was a really low limit per transaction, meaning I knew I'd have to go through the process again in a much more rural location. I'm sure I got majorly overcharged for one of my bus journeys; that I made it to a lovely village with a superb and chilled hostel but couldn't spend a third night as it was full but nowhere else for the next couple nights seem both any good and available; that some of the places I planned to go onto later were really into the unknown and finding any information about them, let alone booking anything, was proving tricky; that it was too hot and humid – uncomfortably so – it just all affected my mood a little, exacerbating the other issues. None of those things were in any way bad, but having them all happen with a background of already feeling fragile, and I guess I just couldn't cope. I'm sure it would have all worked out fine had I stayed, but equally because of the way I was feeling, mentally, I couldn't be at all certain that I just wouldn't end up feeling worse. And the one important point to know about travelling is that you have to enjoy it. There's no point in forcing yourself to go somewhere, to continue to be somewhere, if you know you won't enjoy it, as that will just lead you to end up hating the place and possibly even hate travelling in general.

It was a weird place for it to happen though; I only ended up spending four or five days in Bali, in Padangbai, which if you don't know it is a very calming and quiet town that most people simply use as a passthrough on the way to Lombok or the Gili Islands. The country itself is beautiful, relatively cheap, varied, and interesting – indeed it should be the perfect place to explore and spend some time, to rest and chill exactly away from all these mental roadblocks. Weird how things happen.

But anyway, I sat on the balcony of the hostel, cried for ten minutes, then booked a flight home for the next day. I toyed with the idea of leaving to go somewhere else, but I realised it probably wouldn't help – I'd just be having the same feelings surrounded by different scenery – so going home to sort out the issues might be the best thing to do.

I had similar issues seven or eight months later, when instead of travelling down eastern Africa for a couple months, I had less than a week in Ethiopia before coming home – here the problem was mainly financial - I was getting very worried I wouldn't be able to afford the trip so I was concentrating too much on not spending money, which in turn was making me overthink about everything from places to stay to skipping meals; I think in the space of three days all I had to eat were two burgers, and even for me that's unsustainable, especially given

how much I walk. This affected how I saw the country as well – I couldn't enjoy my time there and again every little thing that went wrong (from not being allowed to get the right visa, to not being able to find my original guesthouse at the start of the trip, to always feeling stared at by the locals) just got to me.

I know I was over-concentrating on the bad side, but to be honest a part of me was thinking 'your heart's not in this, it was a bad decision; at least you've come out to find that out'. I toyed with the idea of changing plans completely and just flying down to South Africa immediately, where I figured I'd probably enjoy the backpacker vibe more, but in the end I figured there was only one logical thing to do; maybe I'd simply been travelling too much, maybe I was only doing this because I said to myself I would, rather than for any logical reasons or for any real enjoyment.

My two-month trip to Dubai and East Africa lasted only a week and a half.

Maybe with hindsight, I'd have been better off going to South America instead (that had been my other option); at least it would have been somewhere different, perhaps with a more appropriate 'vibe' for me at the time, but sometimes you don't know what's going to happen until you get there. I think it was very much 'right place wrong time'

I intend to go back to visit both Indonesia and Ethiopia at some point in the future; neither of my experiences were a bad reflection on the countries, but more on my mental state at the time of my visit. A few months later, after going back to work, I did take a three-week jaunt to the bottom half of that intended trip, from Zambia down to South Africa, and it was fabulous and enjoyable, mainly because I was in a much fresher state of mind at the time.

Yet, part of my problem is, if I don't do what I intended to do, first time, I leave myself open to the belief that that given trip has been a failure, both in my eyes and in the eyes of everyone I know. It's like – if I say I was going to do a lot of travelling to interesting places and see all this wonderful stuff, but then if I decide that I don't because I'm too much of a wuss then I'll have let myself and the world down, and that I won't be able to be trusted when I say I'm going places again. Unreliable. Easily prone to backing out.

Ultimately, of course, it isn't and I'm not – either side of those setbacks I did experience a lot I wouldn't have expected to have the opportunity to, and obviously nothing ever goes to plan; I may have missed out on much of South America and remote Indonesia, but I've certainly seen and experienced the bulk of what I set out to see (Chernobyl, Aral Sea, West Africa, etc), and in myself I feel a much more self-confident person having done so, especially as much of it was solo travel.

Maybe in part I start to believe that I'm only travelling to these places because I said to myself I would, rather than for any logical reasons or for any real enjoyment. Maybe also there's the feeling that : hey I've got this opportunity to go to places; if I don't take it then what the heck am I doing – wasting my life and someone else could have had that chance and they could have done it better.

In response, my friends all tended to say the same thing: that these places will always be there, and it's better to do what you enjoy rather than forcing yourself through them because you feel you have to, and that's definitely true.

There's a danger here of comparing myself to other people. It's easy to do on the Internet (especially Instagram), perfectly posed pictures in picturesque places - beautiful people in beautiful surroundings with nary a whisper about the troubles they had getting there or any indication that their life and travels are anything but serene. Of course we know it's a lie, but it often feels really hard to talk about the bad things, the way you feel, lest it detract from the image of travel.

Similarly, across much of the travel blogger sphere, there seems to be a desire to say 'yes' to

everything – that Fear Of Missing Out, those '23 Places To See Before You Die', those 'Quit Your Job' memes etc. Which is great, fantastic, everyone needs something to aim for, a dream to fulfil, but sometimes those dreams are unrealistic in the short term. And yet it's again hard to live up to, and that you're not at that level means I'm not ... 'worthy', I'm not 'as good' as they are.

And then there's the feeling that : hey I've got this opportunity to go to places; if I don't take it then what the heck am I doing - wasting my life and someone else could have had that chance and they could have done it better.

It's also about personality. Even despite the issues that go wrong (and they do), there's a whole bunch of people out there who seem to be able to go travelling for months at a time without any major problems. Or that they bust through the problems, take them in their stride, and not dwell on them.

I always imagine these people to either be much more self-confident than I am, or be travelling with someone else, and that can help share the stress. With regard to the latter, I think my 'last-minute' style and air of casualness tend to chide with most people. The 'oh it'll get done eventually, don't worry about it now' kind of attitude. I know certainly from the folks I used to work with that they were amazed that I've done less organisation than they'd expect for this trip (but then they're also amazed I only travel with hand-luggage – my style of holiday in general is very different from theirs).

It's the former that rankles with me more, and reminds me why I shouldn't compare. They always come across as the sort of people who can communicate in foreign languages, or if they can't, aren't afraid to look the fool. They all act self-assured, comfortable and confident in who they are, and this stands at strong odds to me – the introvert with strong issues with promoting themselves and speaking in public.

To be fair, I've improved over time. One thing my style of travel does is force you into anxious situations in the first place. Maybe this is what people who first meet me mean when they say "you're brave" – because I travel solo, because I tend to go to places off the beaten track where few other tourists are around and where the local infrastructure isn't fully geared up to handle them anyway, I often have no choice but to not be as insular or quiet.

It kills me. But I have to do it anyway. My fears are usually unfounded, at least 'in the moment'. I don't spend the day locked in my accommodation. I do catch local buses. I'll concede I tend to eat less because I'll often not know how cafés work (do I sit down first? Do I order at the counter first?), and I'll eat more street food because it's much easier to point, plus the price will often be written in full view so I don't have to myther about trying to understand what the vendor says and can easily just hand over appropriate money, but often, having done it once makes me feel a bit easier in myself.

But only a bit. Only until the next conversation. I may have improved, but only marginally. It's why I feel the only way I'd ever learn a foreign language is to be forced into it. It's one reason I walk a lot (so I don't have to brave public transport until I'm comfortable knowing what to do). It's one reason I never ask for directions, and instead use maps. It's one reason I go food shopping in supermarkets rather than corner shops and street-markets. It's one reason I like shopping online for things like nail varnish. I do all of these things even at home in the UK, so imagine how I feel in a foreign environment.

And on the rare occasions I try, tumbleweed. In a social setting, if I make a joke, no-one even giggles. If someone else makes almost the same joke, the whole table erupts in raucous laughter. If I go into a shop, I'll sometimes have to ask several times because the shopkeeper doesn't understand what I'm saying or isn't clear what I want, often because I can't make myself clear and I fall over my words. If I come up with an idea, it's ignored. So it's often easier just to stay silent and not project.

I don't like being the focus of attention I guess, or at least I don't like it where I'm absolutely not in control, where I'm not fully knowledgeable about every little detail. I used to be a data analyst, and this meant I occasionally had to create presentations for both my stakeholders and upper management. Apart from difficulties in creating the presentation itself because I lack conceptual vision, I had no problem standing in front of an audience and giving that presentation. And why? Because I made sure I knew my stuff before we started, I made sure I could explain every eventuality, every last detail. In the real world this is much harder to do, and I don't want to be seen as, well, 'the idiot who knows nothing, did you hear what he asked? Hahah look at him, the strange man, everyone laugh at him'. I am aware this doesn't happen. But equally that's exactly how it feels if I walk into a shop and ask – I feel like everyone's looking at me, thinking how foolish I am., how I don't deserve to be there because I'm just a nothing they'd rather not have to deal with.

I don't even like using the phone; I dislike answering it and being put on the spot by someone at the other end, and I absolutely hate making phone calls, as I feel like I'm interrupting someone doing something much more important, that what I have to say is inconsequential and irrelevant, and that the person I've called would rather not speak to me. Even if it's their job to speak to me. I also get very tongue-tied, I hesitate, I can't think clearly at all, I mumble, and I just don't project myself with any degree of confidence. I find it very hard to think off-the-cuff – I could never do improvisation, for instance.

As an aside, you may be interested to know that I write every last word of this podcast, even down to the casual asides. And I write it how I would naturally read it, even putting things in brackets, even putting in the pauses for effect, and the subtle voice pitch changes. Because there's absolutely no way I could fluently reel off even a sentence if it wasn't written down – I'd forget what I'd already said, never mind what I wanted to say, and the whole thing would be an unmitigated disaster, even with the power of editing.

Connected with this, I'm also really bad at 'selling myself'. I find it hard enough to answer casual 'what is your blog about' questions on other people's guest posts, never mind actually promoting what I'm good at on sites like Fiverr. It's why, apart from my initial automated tweet, I rarely promote my blog or podcast on social media – you'll almost never see tweets from me reminding people that old posts exist. It's also why I've never made money from the blog. Because almost no-one knows it exists. Because I don't talk about it. Because I don't like promoting myself.

There's two aspects to this – firstly I'm not a salesman so I find it hard to talk about myself and what I do without my overthinking it and feeling it all sounds quite 'slimy' and 'I'm only talking to you because I want you to do something for me'; I automatically think I'd come across as 'I'm just using you to get clicks'.

The other reason is because, as alluded earlier, I genuinely think other people are better at this than me. All of it. Different people, of course, but still. There's so many bloggers out there writing so much stuff that more people want to read, that more people find useful, and I'm here looking a bit like a history textbook: old, worn, and slightly smelly.

This of course leads to a problem. Two years ago I was made redundant and my feeling was that I could use this as an opportunity to take what I can do and make a couple of side careers out of it, earn enough to get by and fund my travel obsessions, and generally just take it easy for a while.

This ... hasn't happened. Instead I've spent most of my money on beer and travel, earned nothing, and now I have to face up to the fact that unless I do something pretty damn sharpish, I'm going to have to go back to a full-time office job. And no-one wants that. But of course, because I don't have that faith in myself, because I don't have that self-confidence in what I do, nor in how to promote myself, I fear that's exactly what's going to happen. And that's not going to do my mental health any good at all.

There have been times when I've been lying in bed, still in bed at like 3pm, and I just haven't had the wherewithal to get up, because I don't see the point, because I don't have the ... self-belief that anything I do will make my life better, will make anyone else's life better. I descended into a funk towards the end of December, with the soundtrack of a rapidly chaotic country imploding on itself, and only beer keeping me sane, feeling helpless to my own and society's failings, knowing that I can't make a difference.

And then I spend my time distracting myself with Twitter because it's much easier in the short term than attempting to do anything about it, because doing something is hard and doomed to failure, because I'm no good at it so I know it won't work. And that becomes a circular concept because then I lie in bed thinking 'it's all going to hell and there's nothing I can do' even more.

This is why I moved to Sheffield. Sometimes I find changing my environment helps my mood – it works when I travel, surprisingly – I've felt in a low place in several places across the world and moving on to a new town, or country, does sometimes work (I'm grateful to Vilnius and Adelaide for lifting my spirits when I've been feeling down in the previous city), but as you heard earlier, sometimes what I need is simply to reset myself and start anew.

Certainly that I've been doing stuff here is a good beginning – both Parkrun and the Universalist church are kind of social activities that force me to come out of my shell that bit more, and that I'm drinking far less beer can only be a good thing – but there's so much more I need to do, so many more places I need to brave, so many more things I need to promote myself for. It's just a question of will I have the confidence in myself to do it.

Sorry about that, I know it sounds like one heck of a self-focused braindump stroke therapy session that you probably didn't need on a Thursday. Next week I'm handing pretty much the whole pod over to you though; I've got several people who want to talk about how mental health affects them when they travel, so hopefully that'll be much more interesting and relatable.

Until then, keep washing your hands, and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

{Outro theme tune, same as intro, just a different bit of it}

{Outro voiceover:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice. I'm pretty bad at that sort of thing myself, so I'll understand perfectly if you don't.

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Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}