Transcript of Podcast 041: Influencer Integrity

{Intro}

PRACHI: What do you think of 100% transparency? Do you think people are being transparent enough? Do you think people are being, I don't think so, but are people being too transparent?

{intro music – jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:
Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a fortnightly series looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, 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 :)

It's been slightly longer than I'd anticipated since I last spoke to you all. All manner of reasons, all manner of feelings and things, but you were never far from my thoughts. Very little is far from my thoughts because I'm a chronic over-thinker, but you all know that anyway.

Partly the delay was caused because of getting as many contributions for this pod as possible, and for the associated next one. But also, well, things. All of the things.

I was on antibiotics for a week. A couple of weeks ago I noticed my right ankle had swollen up a bit and looked a bit red. Well, a bit more red than it usually does – I've got long-term issues with it that I really ought to see a doctor about, if my doctor wasn't so hard to get hold of (I could send them a fax because of course we all live in 1993 ... but to make an appointment I have to phone by 8.30am. And they don't do e-mail at all. Plus they're 25 miles away, so making within-day appointments isn't convenient for me), but anyway, this was something slightly more ... concerning, shall we say. I once spent four weeks in hospital, including one in intensive care (ER), because I had blood poisoning, in that leg, so I'm always wary of anything that goes wrong with that leg. Well no, not 'wary', what actually happens is I feel an ache and then hyper-focus on it for several days rather than just accepting that the most likely reason for the ache is ... well, like, ever since the blood poisoning incident I've had an on-off ache in the side of the top of my leg, sort of sideways to the buttocks, and I've always worried about what it was and what could cause it and will my leg eventually fall off and whatnot. Anyway I was browsing Instagram the other night and I happened to come upon an image about aches in the top of the leg. Turns out the most likely reason I have it is because I'm getting old. Charming.

Anyway, I digress. This anti-biotic event. Had a long night waiting around in the local A&E, which conveniently is 10 minutes from where I'm living, and I had a good array of other podcasts to listen to. It turns out I had a mild cellulitis (skin) infection and a dose of flucloxacillin would kill it. The only downside to them was – the instructions said 'take two, four times a day, on an empty stomach. Don't eat 2 hours beforehand or 1 hour afterwards'. Factoring in time for sleep, I'm like 'so when exactly am I going to eat?'. Listeners, I basically stopped snacking on chocolate. You'd've thought I'd've lost weight as a result, but a lack of running (because dodgy ankle) plus compromising by making my lunches bigger, kinda didn't make that happen.

Unrelated, but still a factor, for some reason I've been feeling quite lethargic recently too – more tired than I usually am, and less focused, if you can imagine such a thing. I go through phases with this, I have an intense session of updates (and I updated four blog posts in four days last week), and then I can't seem to maintain it and have to break off for a week or two.

In more positive news, I did meet my friend Kate-Frankie last week in York, for a nice drink and catch-up. It was really nice to see her again – I'd not met up with her since I was on my way back from my Hike Across Great Britain two years ago (the anniversary of the start of which, incidentally, is this very week; the weather was much, much different!). It was before the pubs opened up inside drinking, and we had to make bookings which obviously requires far more organisation than planning than I'm used to, but it turned out pretty well. We were worried that it would be raining – some pubs didn't take bookings and would open only if it was dry (I guess they don't have benches outside with umbrellas), but as it turns out not only was it a grey but dry day, but also we weren't pressurised to vacate the first place after our two hour booking expired so we stayed a bit longer, then we had a casual saunter around York before heading to the other one.

Also positive, the recording studio I went to last month have sent me my completed voice reels, and they sound good. Like, really good. Weirdly, I feel quite confident about this. The studio sent me a list of voice agents who might be interested in having me on their books, while a broadcaster-oriented friend on Twitter (Pip, who has her own podcast – The Travel Goals Podcast) has given me a few tips and thoughts to ponder on. I've not done anything with my voice reels yet, because by the time you hear this episode I'll be on a two-week holiday away from home (more about that in my next episode), but when I get back I have a plan. Well, *I* don't have a plan, one of my friends does, but again, more about that, and her, next time.

But, onto the subject of this pod. This is something that's been in my mind for, well, pretty much ever since I started my podcast really, but I've always had … easier things to talk about, I guess. There's a whole series of related subjects, but what I want to concentrate on in these pods can be best summed up as 'influencer responsibility', about whether it's important to think about what we say and do, because of course people are listening.

Firstly though I just want to say something about the word 'influencer'. Many people really hate this word, for reasons varying from being tarred with the same brush as 'people who climb mountains in frilly dresses and fall off cliffs taking selfies', to concerns about how understanding of the word misrepresents what people actually do, to it just being a 'meaningless' word that doesn't mean anything. Is it merely another word for 'advertiser'? Does it mean everything you do is 'branded content'? Are you getting everything for free? Do you even believe in what you write or produce, or are you doing it just for the clicks?

In truth, we are all influencers. Every single one of us. If you're eating a biscuit at work and someone goes 'oh that looks nice, what is it?', you're an influencer. If someone says 'nice dress' and you go 'it has pocketsssssss', you're an influencer. If someone buys a book, a bag, a game, visits a museum, a city, a country, because of something you suggested or things you've said. If someone takes up a new hobby, or uses a certain activity provider, or changes the style of their fashion or their garden or their house, because of a recommendation you've made or even to copy something you'd done. If someone changes energy provider, internet hosting site, or supermarket because of you. You're an influencer. Everything you do and say is seen by your friends, by communities, by strangers, from conversations around a chiminea at dusk in someone's garden, to simply walking past someone and having them like your shirt enough to go quickly online and buy something similar for themselves. And every time someone makes an action, takes a decision to buy or do something, which they may not have done had they not seen what you've done and seen, then you are, directly or indirectly, consciously or accidentally, influencing them – you are an influencer.

Normally, this isn't a problem, or an issue. Despite the amusement in my old office job that we were asking customer satisfaction surveys that said 'on a scale of 0 to 10 how likely are you to recommend us as an energy supplier to your friends and family' (no-one, I repeat, no-one is down the pub having deep conversations about their energy supplier or house insurance, especially not positive 'they're great' ones, regardless of what TV adverts might have you believe. In truth, the the most common answer in those surveys was 'you're ok', or 'you've

done nothing wrong yet' and the most common score was 8), if you do have those conversations, no-one really sees anything wrong about them anyway. Similar to how people choose plumbers, or therapists, or, I guess, voice recording artists. It's all done through word of mouth (these days 'word of mouth' is more a written testimony on freelancer sites but it's still a case of 'I used them, they're great'). People accept this as a natural part of society and community – indeed people actively seek out opinions and ideas, especially if they're looking to spend a relatively significant amount of money on something, be it a new pair of shoes, a boiler, or a holiday. And people are also more likely to trust the opinion of a close friend, family member, or someone they know reasonably well, over that of a stranger.

So why should content creators, especially in travel, be seen as different? I guess because in a sense, it's more their job. It's one thing to trust the opinion of someone, but you take it as red that they're giving you a neutral opinion. Travel content creators are more 'salespeople' in a sense – we're either selling ourselves (in terms of 'I wrote about this, go and have a look'), and many of us have adverts on our blogs and podcasts so it's in our interest to drive people to our content, or we're in partnership with brands: with tourist boards, hotels, transportation companies, luggage providers, clothing firms, gear and equipment manufacturers. So in that respect, are we able to be completely neutral? Can we be trusted to give advice about an object or a destination without it sounding like a sales pitch?

Most people who 'influence' in an everyday life are doing it only when prompted, plus they're not necessarily getting any reward from making suggestions other than the nice feeling of knowing that they're helping out a friend. The next step from this of course is the 'referral code'. For example, 'hey, if you sign up to this energy provider, I'll get a bonus, which we can share', or 'if you sign up to this site using my code, you get 15% off'. This is surprisingly common in the everyday world, as well as being the backbone of affiliate programmes on the internet. Does that make you any less trustable if you say that to a friend about something as benign as home insurance? Does it make a difference if you're talking about it to a friend if you're a civil servant or a hairdresser, to if you're a travel blogger who's using that very act as an income stream? There's an argument to suggest if you're in it more for the money, that you may not actively believe in what you're 'selling', but how different is that to anyone who takes part in an advert? Does British jazz drummer Moses Boyd really drink Buxton Spring Water? Does Olympic swimmer Rebecca Adlington eat John West tuna? And if you have a distinctive voice suitable for adverts like Come Dine With Me's Dave Lamb, are you really going to consume every product you talk about? And are they given lots of free samples as a payment for it? Maybe they do, maybe they don't, does it matter? We don't think of things in those terms, at least not for famous people doing their jobs.

Is it that much different for a travel blogger going 'hi, I'm in this B&B in Scotland, isn't it great?', even if you know they've been given that stay in payment for a positive review/series of Instagram posts – for the most part those places *are* lovely, and whether it's a leading UK travel blogger like Emily Luxton doing it, or a nationally-recognised celebrity like Sue Perkins, the content would be the same and both are being created for the purpose of promoting that B&B, the content provider (whether Emily or Sue) is being paid to create that content. It's their job, and they just happen to be very good at it, and both are well-respected people with their respective audience.

Another fellow travel blogger, albeit someone with a job outside of the travelsphere as well, like me, is Kate-Frankie, from "This Could Lead To Anywhere", who talks about the topic of influencer responsibility in general terms, but does bring up this issue around money, and being paid to 'influence', like a sales function.

{Kate-Frankie – This Could Lead To Anywhere}

Ok, oh boy, this is a big one, that affects stuff.

So, I think this is one of the things that bothers me about social media platforms sometimes, the kind of real big influencer stuff, and the sponsored posts, and people doing it right or not doing it right, whether

they're being truthful, whether they're giving a perspective of a place that is just for kind of money in a way, and they know they're just gonna make money and be able to work with more brands and stuff if they're really hugely positive about it, and that almost kind of like ... selling yourself to the point of 'you don't care how dodgy it gets', and I've seen some bad examples of it, and I think I've unfollowed the people because I just find it so dishonest, and people who have gambling sites for example on their blogs, and I really don't like that and I know everyone has their opinion about it, but I just think promoting things that can be harmful to people ... you know, it's not great, and I try to be quite responsible on mine and really think about the things that I'm posting, and sometimes just ... don't post if I feel conflicted about something, but at the same time I want to be honest to the audience I have, and I do feel like you have a responsibility to be honest.

If I take on a Press Trip for example, I'm going to really heavily research it and discuss with the DMO [Destination Marketing Organisation] or whoever I'm going with – the hotel or whatever that I'm kind of getting free, which is essentially the way I'm being paid – I'm going to look into that, I'm going to look into the country, I'm going to think about whether there are any conflicts of interest for me, and I'm going to really set out the exceptions for them, and boundaries, that I need to be honest with the things that I'm putting up. I'm not the kind of person that's just going to blast them if something goes wrong, and use Social Media as this way to get my own way or to kind of vent and get further freebies from them or something like that, it's not that kind of thing. I'd go to them directly, explain what had happened, and give them a chance to respond or change things or whatever, and then honestly talk about that, and I've talked about when things haven't gone right, and where customer service kind of comes in and I think that's fine and I think we actually need more of that, rather than just 'oh yeh, go here, it's amazing' and you go and it's actually really not. You have to remember there are younger people following you, there are families with kids who have one holiday a year they're taking, on your advice; they don't want to waste their money on something that's not going to be great, so don't just say positive stuff.

But there's a whole lot around ethics and blogging and influencing that can get into some fairly dangerous territory, and really it comes down to me about whether you can trust the person, whether you can trust their judgment, whether you look at their feed and it's constant kind of freebies and stuff – why are they taking those jobs? – and I think people are starting to be way more savvy about it, and they're starting to see 'ah that person got all of that stuff free', and if it's constantly like that, you do start to question 'does this person do anything where it's not for their benefit, bank account' kind of thing.

Now, there's many different ways I could have taken this episode, in terms of influencer ethics, but many of them have been done to death in great detail. What I want to talk about is about responsibility and integrity, about whether we as influencers have a duty to be honest about what we talk about, and whether we have the right to be critical as well as positive, or whether the old adage beloved of older generations than mine of 'if you have nothing good to say, say nothing' holds true.

Travellightblog on Twitter says this about integrity. And what he says is pretty much my view too, to be honest, but then I'm a little unusual in the travelsphere because I don't use my blog or pod to make money; it's not my career, so I guess it matters to me less to 'say the right thing'.

{Travelling Light}

As a travel blogger, being honest about my experiences is really the only duty I've got. The moment I compromise that, my integrity's complete shot. You might as well not read my stuff. I'm here to provide an honest account, not to produce some fictionalised garbage.

The concept came to mind initially because of a throw-away comment I once said on Twitter that caused a lot of debate and some criticism. I mentioned that I didn't like Italy, that I'd been a couple of times and it hadn't 'clicked' with me. Cue a whole series of comments from people either going 'oh but you haven't given it a chance; go back and you'll see it's great', or going 'don't be stupid, you are wrong', or even 'how dare you dismiss an entire country just because you've only been there twice'.

Which is all very well, except ... before I visited Bangladesh in 2019, I did a websearch for something like 'what's Bangladesh like to visit'. It's not a country many travel bloggers visit, certainly not from the Anglosphere, so I didn't have a lot to base my expectations on. And when I did look, pretty much all the blogs out there at the time were profoundly negative – too busy, too noisy, difficult to get around, not much interesting to see, dirty, I wouldn't recommend it. Now, as it turns out, I really liked Bangladesh, I thought it was a fascinating and interesting country, and definitely one worth visiting, but my point is more – no-one was being critical of these other bloggers for casting the country in a negative light based on their experiences of one visit, and mostly through the lens of a White Western traveller. Yet I visit Italy and go 'yeh it's not for me' and people have the audacity to slate me for it? It feels similar to the aphobia that sometimes appears – the dismissal of my asexuality as 'oh you just haven't met the right woman yet' or 'are you broken?'.

Since that initial Tweet, I have been to Italy again, I spent another few days in the north-east, and no, it's nice, it's pretty, it's historic, but it's still not in my top half of favourite countries, and no matter how many times I visit, it's not a place I'm ever going to really enjoy. Not compared to other countries where I've had that buzz and connection either straight away, or after a couple of visits. I'll always prefer Albania, Slovenia, France, Belgium, over Italy. I suppose I should say why, I guess? It's hard to explain though, it's very much a feeling, a sense. It's partly because the first time I visited I had a major social anxiety issue and came home early because I couldn't cope with it, but that was very much on me. It's just though every time I've visited since (and I've been there four times now, which makes it one of the countries I've visited the most, oddly enough), I've always felt quite anxious, of obviously standing out. Partly it's because I don't speak Italian, and I always fear in certain European countries people are judging you more for that (contrast with Germany where I've felt they may well be doing that silently but they feel much more accommodating to random British tourists). There's also the anxiety in everyday settings - little things confuse me, like even the process of buying a pastry in a cafe (choose, get a ticket receipt, pay elsewhere, collect), which I avoid by simply not eating, because I'm not comfortable in having those conversations and demonstrating I don't understand anything because I'm just a stupid foreigner for everyone to laugh at.

Also, I think it's because while Italy has a lot of things that attract me, it's ... people over-enthuse about the country and it's really 'not all that'; everyone builds it up to be much greater a venture than I've ever found it to be in my expectations. So I feel a bit of pressure to 'like' it, and that just makes me resent it a bit more.

Are these good enough reasons to say 'I don't like Italy as much as other people think I should'? I'd like to think so – I can't necessarily explain or even control my emotions and feelings about a place, and I suspect everyone has similar views about some place or other.

Laura Lundahl explains this, as always, far better than I do.

{Laura – Ethical Travel/Not Liking A Place}

Of course we can say we didn't like a place or not; we're human beings, we have opinions. What I tend to do with my blog, and just conversations in general, is, if I didn't like somewhere I'll make the caveat: 'this was just me tho, you might have a completely different experience'. Just because Portland wasn't my cup of tea doesn't mean it won't be yours.

But then there are also situations where there are actual issues and actual things and not just a vibe that makes you not like somewhere, and I think it might actually be irresponsible to *not* mention that to people. So, for example, I went to Istanbul as a solo female traveller, and as such, I did not love it. I'm the only person I know who has done that, most people go with friends or with family, and everyone else absolutely raves about Istanbul, so my conclusion from that is, had I gone with somebody else, the harassment wouldn't have been nearly as obnoxious. So what I would tell other female solo travellers is: 'I didn't like Istanbul but this is why; if I can remove that from the situation and just focus on the sites

that I saw, it was amazing, so don't go to Istanbul alone.' So I'd never tell somebody to not go somewhere, but I would make the caveat of, you know, 'Rome has pickpocketing issues', or 'be careful of certain countries as a female or as an LGBT person'.

And then also too, this is like a side note but, maybe negativity will also make somebody else's trip better? So, for example, when I went to Warsaw, I had really low expectations, because everything I read about the place said that it wasn't great, and I loved it, absolutely loved Warsaw, and I probably wouldn't have liked it quite it as much as I did if I hadn't been going in expecting the worst weekend of my life, so...

My blog's unofficial tagline is 'I go to these places so you don't have to'. Laura once had a short stopover in Brunei. It's a country I know almost nothing about, save where it is. The '80 Days' Podcast, who kind of do similar pods on lesser-known countries, cities, and regions to my geographical-based episodes, but there's three of them and they're far longer and more detailed, and much better, did an entire episode on it, and that's pretty much all I know. Laura's conclusion was, and this might not be an exact quote but the gist was 'this is the most boring place I've ever been'. Pretty, certainly, but ... dull.

In a similar vein, I've come across a couple of people online who have visited Djibouti – I think one was wheresjpnow on Instagram but searching for specific posts on Instagram is almost impossible. Anyway, both he (if it were he) and the 197travelstamps blog were both under-enthused about the city and the country, almost to the extent of not recommending people visit, mainly because of the cost (one of the most expensive and least value for money countries in the world), the lack of infrastructure, and the feeling that because there's so many international military bases there, everyone assumes you're a foreign army officer, or a spy – taking pictures anywhere seems to be pretty much verboten. Plus apart from a bit of stunning scenery, there doesn't seem to be any other reason to visit the place. Apart from, you know, if you're a spy.

This is the sort of information I need to know when I'm planning a trip. If I'm going to spend lots of money visiting somewhere, I want to make sure it's worthwhile and that I'm not going to regret it. I mean, I've never actively regretted visiting anywhere but there have been certainly places, cities, countries, that I've felt afterwards 'my time and resources would have been better served visiting somewhere else'. I don't just want to know what's in a place, I don't just want to know what the views are like, or where I can buy a cute cupcake, or even the best museum. I want to know how a place feels, how it would make *me* feel. I want to know how it makes other people feel, whether they enjoyed it, whether they felt safe, whether they felt there were places they should have gone instead. And I want people to be comfortable talking about that, rather than just always giving a positive bent to everywhere they go.

Two people who also mention this, about being honest rather than positive, are Prachi and Morgan from the AlienEating blog.

{AlienEating}

MORGAN: today we're here to talk about if as travel influencers we have a responsibility to tell people if they should or shouldn't go places. And absolutely. I would 100%. I think, I believe in 100% transparency in all things. Why lie about things? I get marketing and promoting and ads and stuff, but there's so many people in Instagram that are telling you how, they're always on a beach swing, with a perfect body, and they have a perfect boyfriend, and the water is the bluest water you've ever seen, the sand is crisp and white, and there are places like that but not every place is like that, and I think we don't need more people telling us that. There's a lack of people being honest, and being like 'oh Tallinn was amazing and beautiful, but also there's a thousand people there'.
PRACXHI: There're never really sharing the other side of the bad shit that you see, like the millions of tourists, and how people are constantly bugging you to buy shit that you don't want to buy.
MORGAN: Yeh, if you're sitting on Patong beach, there's going to be a guy coming to you every three minutes being like 'do you want a smoothie?', 'do you want these wristbands?', 'do you need an apron?' like, all these things that you didn't even know they sold at the beach, they're going to try to sell you. Not

that that's bad, but people don't talk about that and I think absolutely it's okay to be honest with people and your followers or whoever, that places aren't exactly what people say they are on Instagram.
PRACHI: It's important that you give people the realistic perspective of what you're going to see, so people don't think it's some easy breezy beautiful cover-girl adventure when you go there. Like, you are going to be sitting in the toilet for three hours after eating that street food pad thai; it's not always easy, you are going to hit lots of bumps in the road while you're there, even thought it's going to be a lot of fun 90% of the time.
MORGAN: Yeh, I thought Patong beach was going be like hot bros shot-gunning beers and playing volleyball and it was ...
PRACHI: ... not that!
MORGAN: sun-burnt fat Americans just lounging doing nothing, and people selling me stuff. So, with that, when you have people on Instagram selling this unrealistic vision of travel, you have people going out in the world and thinking that's what it's really like, and being ignorant, and then getting disappointed. To be honest, when I went to Patong, I was upset, I was like 'what is this place? This is creepy; there's needles in the sand.'
PRACHI: This is not what I paid for.
MORGAN: Yeh, and then you get upset and you see all these things and they're not what you think, so I think we need to be honest, tell the real side, so we get people out there, educated, then people know what's really happening.
PRACHI: Of course that doesn't mean you don't go there, and that doesn't mean you bash the place as a travel influencer, it just means giving a more realistic perspective, so that other people can decide if they want to go to that one place or not. For example, Morgan and I, the two of us live in South Korea for the past two years and before coming here, neither of us knew the entire country smells like a solid hot fart the entire time, you know, like, if I knew that, I would have maybe thought, as someone who doesn't like weird smells, that I don't necessarily want to come to this country. And, like I say, it's important to give people a realistic perspective of what they're walking into.
MORGAN: And you don't know people's stories. So, if someone has a picture on Instagram, that's them in a clear...they're at a resort, they're probably at a resort, they're paying millions of dollars. They have those quotes on their Instagram like 'jobs fill your pocket, adventures fill your soul', like okay I get that, great, but I don't have a million dollars, I'm going to be staying in a stinky hostel after the Tomatina festival with 71 lads on holiday shouting 'lads on holiday!'. People's experiences are going to be different so you always need to take any opinions from travel influencers with a grain of salt, whether people are bitching the entire time on their blog or they're telling you 'everything is beautiful and I found myself in Goa'. You just need to know that.

And we're back to integrity again. But before I talk about a little about the integrity of my own brand, I want to bring in Amanda Kendle, from the Not A Ballerina blog. She is herself one of those travel bloggers who goes on branded trips, and here gives her view about how it feels be an influencer, and what to do when integrity becomes important for brand purposes.

{Amanda Kendle}

So the question of whether influencers as influencers, I don't really like that word but it's the best word to describe what we do in some ways, do we have a right to say we don't like something? Yes, absolutely, but let me qualify it. So, I think, if I travel and I'm being hosted, or it's a sponsored trip or whatever, and I don't like something, then I need to, well, I need to tread carefully in respect of what the host has organised for me. Ideally, before I do something that I think I'll dislike, I'll say to the host "I don't think that's ... I don't think that fits with my brand." For example, if they wanted me to go to a zoo, I would say 'sorry, that doesn't fit with The Thoughtful Travel brand, can we find something else to spend that time?', or that kind of thing. If I'm just going on my own trip, I'll still post about it as a quote unquote influencer but I'm not hosted or sponsored or anything, would I say I don't like something? Yes, if ... yes, I would, definitely, but I would give reasons. So I would say 'I don't like this particular attraction because – er, I don't know, it's a tourist trap and the locals aren't seeing any of the proceeds from it, or, it's in some way an irresponsible tourism thing, bad wildlife tourism, whatever.

So I would definitely give reasons. If I just don't like it because it's not to my taste, I would say that too, but in a nice way, because, like, if I go to an art gallery and I find the art boring, well probably I wouldn't even go, for a start, or I would just say 'it's not to my taste, you know, here it is', because I know

the people who listen to or follow me have different opinions and that's okay too.

So I guess, what I'm trying to say is, yes, as an influencer it's very important that we are honest about our opinions, but in a qualified way because we know that not everyone is going to share our opinions, and as long as we have a good reason for what we say, and we're not being outright offensive and rude, then yeh, I think it's okay to say we don't like stuff.

Having said that, like there's very few instances where I can think of where I didn't actually like a destination. There's always something I do like, or some way that I tell a story about it, or something happens to be that I do find I like, I actually - I'm really struggling to imagine a place that I disliked, so I think perhaps I just have the capacity to like everywhere because I love travelling so much that it doesn't really matter what's there.

But we should be honest. That's my two cents.

I'm not a 'travel influencer' in the sense that I've never been on a Press Trip, I've never been paid to write about a place. I guess it doesn't fit with my writing style in a way, because I'm more likely to talk about history and overall culture, rather than specific details and events – what I write is less suited to drive people to a place, and more suited for, how you might say, background reading, so in that respect I think my entire view on influencer responsibility is slightly different to many of my peers and friends on Twitter.

It does open the questions of 'what does The Barefoot Backpacker stand for?', and 'what are they trying to achieve with what they write?', in that I'm not actively trying to 'sell' anything (be it a product or a destination), and does that mean I don't need to be as 'honest', or be held to as high standards of 'integrity' as my peers, because there's nothing riding on it? If zoos don't fit with Amanda's brand for instance, what does or doesn't fit with *my* 'brand'?

I'll be honest, I've not really thought about it, not in a marketing or influencer sense. I mean, over the years it's clear I have certain principles – for example budget travel, lesser-visited places, historical and cultural activities; it's incredibly unlikely, for instance, that you'd hear about me spending three nights in some hyper-luxurious beach resort in Mauritius and actively doing so would probably affect my brand and how it's seen by people. Having said which, it's not somewhere it would occur to me to go anyway (as per Episode 38, on Bucket Lists), so not only would doing that cause my brand to lose a certain amount of integrity, it would be somewhat out of character for me to do in the first place. The question I need to ask myself is, are my principles stronger than my potential opportunities? And, I guess, for the purposes of this podcast episode, if I had the opportunity to go to somewhere I didn't like, or didn't want to visit, on a paid trip where I may not have the opportunity to be honest, would I go? I don't honestly know; it may depend on where it was. Like, I regularly make a joke about Luton being the worst place I've ever spent the night, but if Luton's tourist board asked me do a piece for them, then of course I would, because it's the sort of place that matches my brand. They're not going to, because Luton doesn't have a tourist board. Because it's Luton. But what about a regional board from Italy? What about an over-sea resort in Maldives? Honestly, I could definitely work with the former – I may have stated on record that I don't like Italy that much, but that doesn't mean under the right circumstances I couldn't enjoy it; after all most of my irks about it are largely psychological and based around social anxiety. The latter however, that's probably beyond my limits. I'd rather leave it for someone who'd appreciate it more.

One of the things I'm looking into going forward is to work out more about what my niches and my brand statements are, but that's something I'm paying someone to sort out, but more about that next time.

So what have we learned today? 'Influencer' is seen as a dirty word sometimes, but really it reflects something we all do every day, often without realising it. Travel bloggers are often held to a higher standard to celebrities even if they do the same things. But equally integrity is hugely important to influencers, otherwise we are just seen as generic salespeople with no real

passion behind what we do. And that it's perfectly valid to say you don't like a place as long as you have a valid reason for it.

Unless it's Luton, I guess.

{standard section separation jingle}

Well that's about all for this pod. Uncharacteristically, my next episode will be next week, as I'm continuing on this subject of influencer responsibility. Then, I'll be looking more at it from a political and ethical angle. Until then, get regular check-ups, 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.

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