Transcript of Podcast 042: Influencers & Political Responsibility

{Intro}

AMANDA KENDLE: So, I guess that's a long winded-way of saying, in answer to: 'would I go to a place depending on; if I don't agree with the government?', the answer is 'it depends'.

{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 :)

This is an episode I'm recording quite a way in advance. You'll notice too that it's only been a week since my last pod. This is because the two episodes cover a very similar topic so it made sense to keep them close together, and also to write/record/edit them at the same time.

I'm recording so far in advance (as I type this it's Sunday 23rd May) because I'm actually away right now, travelling. I know, right? Don't worry, I'm not anywhere far away and stretching the regulations and definitions of the UK Foreign Office Travel Advice. If you're listening to this on the day of release, I will be (I am? I don't know how English Verb Tenses work in this situation) in Glasgow, but I'll have just spent a week travelling around the Orkney Islands.

Obviously Orkney isn't, you know, Kiribati or somewhere far away and off-the-beaten-path, but it's a place I've been interested to visit for a while, and to be fair it's not somewhere I think that many people even here in the UK know a lot about, much less visit. And given I have 25 days holiday to use from work in my holiday year, which ends on October 5th, and to date I've used precisely two, it seems a decent idea to go and visit.

You remember two years ago, after my Hike Across Great Britain, I took a trip out to the Outer Hebrides – I even did a podcast episode later on, on my experiences (Episode 22) – and while I was there I realised I really liked that sort of place – the multitude of interesting and varied islands I could just wander through. Similar to how I felt in Vanuatu I guess (Episode 5). But also, I wondered how similar and different the Outer Hebrides would be to Orkney; both island groups far enough off the coast of Scotland to be found in 'inset boxes' on road atlases, and depicted in much less detailed scale.

Due to the Covid situation, I had to book lots of things in advance, including ferries, so unlike my trip to the Outer Hebrides, I wasn't able to just wander at a whim. In addition, some of the archaeological sites and museums are indoors and, at the time of my visit, still closed; this affected which of the islands it would be logical to visit. As I haven't gone yet, I don't know how it will go, but I'm sure it'll all be fiiiine. I'll talk more about it next episode (one day I might even do an entire episode on Orkney, but I think this time I'll wait for a second visit when I can get out to the islands I'm missing (including Hoy, Rousay, and North Ronaldsay).

If all goes to plan, I'll have a full week there, including some wild camping, which I haven't done since that Hebridean adventures, and the weather seems to be improving. It's scheduled to be cool, but mostly dry at least. I had to pop into a camping store just before I left, to buy some things that on my Hike I'd been borrowing off Becky. Like a camping stove. Plus I needed to replace the water bottles that I'd ... managed to lose/forget en route. I also bought a new hat, heaven knows how long that'll last, and a new pair of hiking trousers because I'm

getting fat.

The plan then is to go to Glasgow and Edinburgh with my friend Laura so she can get a feel of both cities and decide if she wants to live in either of them. With me. And whether the lure of Scotland is strong enough to drag her away from the practicalities of living in London. But that's a tale for another time.

In other news. You know how I'm a flighty, disorganised individual who has certain … character traits that often prevent them from doing certain simple tasks? Because I lack focus (as well as some amount of self-confidence)? And that leads to me sitting in front of my computer going: 'I can't do this; I need to do this; let we just check Twitter for 10 seconds first' that turns into 3 or 4 hours of rabbit holes on Wikipedia or something? Well, I was having a random conversation with one of my close twitter friends, Victoria (you'll have heard her on my podcast a few times before), but the upshot of that chat was that … I've now hired her as a kind of Virtual Assistant. She's completely in charge of my Pinterest account because I … Pinterest to me is like Accountancy. I can probably do it. But it would bore the pants off me and I'd just … rather not. But she's also helping me in other ways, including promotion of both my blog/pod, and me itself, and sorting out some admin that I've forever been reluctant to do and been burying my head in the sand for. It's great for me because it means I can get on with doing things I enjoy, or which I want to, and leave her to the stuff that I don't. "I enjoy Pinterest" she said, which means we obviously have a very different definition of 'enjoyment'.

One of the things she did help me do was something I haven't done since about 1994, because of my social anxiety, and fear of humiliation. Although she couldn't legally do everything, she did make the initial call to … a dentist. My teeth are pretty awful and I was always scared of approaching a dentist for that reason – I just didn't want to be shouted at or told 'what have you done you silly man?' etc. And I know it's an unfound fear, but still … but Victoria was lovely, she phoned a dentist and told them about me and the receptionist was lovely and when I called them they'd already been primed for my call so it was a much more comfortable conversation. And yes, my teeth are pretty poor but the dentist didn't talk about it, they were just factual and told me what I needed and so over the next few months I'm going to do something about it.

She's also going to help me sort out my brand image, working out what I stand for, and what I'm best off advertising myself as. I have many different niches, which only have the vaguest overlaps, and while I'm not planning to abandon any, what she will help me with is to make maximal use of my position in those niches, and essentially ensure I'm doing everything I do in the best way I can. Whatever that involves. Possibly not foot pictures. Even if that would be, as per my last episode, definitely 'on-brand' and showing consistent integrity.

So, while my previous episode was on influencer responsibility and integrity in general, this episode is on a slightly different branch of the same topic – whether we, as influencers, have a specific responsibility to be consistently ethical and political. If people see what we do as travel bloggers, podders, vloggers, and figure 'if they're doing this, we can too', in terms of activities but also destinations. And whether we can afford to be 'political' in terms of viewpoints, or if we need to be 'destination-neutral'.

Roobens, from Been Around The Globe, gives his overview on this topic.

{Roobens – Been Around The Globe}

A lot of bloggers say they do like ethical or political travel. Basically that means they don't go to this-or-that country because of this-or-that reason. For example you can hear 'I don't go to the US because of all the things they do to Black people'; or 'I don't go to Russia because they kill Gay or Lesbian people'; 'I don't go to Myanmar because of the Rohingya', 'I don't go to … I don't know, I don't go to Israel because of what's going on with Palestine' – honestly I'm not a big fan of this … I mean, you can do whatever you want to, the thing is, if you're really like 100% being ethical, I mean you can't go to many places, you know, because I don't think there's a country which is completely innocent regarding its history.

This is a great view, in that he pretty much says 'it's none of your business what I do and where I go'. In a sense it's the way that most people travel, most people who aren't directly influencers anyway.

I said in my last episode that 'everyone is an influencer' and this also applies to holiday destinations. Like, you meet up with acquaintances, maybe in the office, maybe in the pub, or even just out in the street, and you start taking about holidays, and you say 'I had a lovely two weeks in Israel, I explored the historical and cultural sites near Jerusalem, then had a few days on the beach at Eilat. I even took a night in Wadi Rum across the border in Jordan.', and your friends or colleagues go, 'oh that sounds really cool, was it worth going?', and by the end of the conversation two of them make a note to take a holiday in Israel next year. At no point in that conversation does the subject of Palestine come up, and, if we're being honest, it would be a little weird if it had. In general, people don't choose holiday destinations, don't choose to travel to places, based on such things as government policy or cultural beliefs. The nearest you get is when people go 'oh, is it safe?', and if we're being honest, unless you're going to an actual warzone, yes this is a subtweet to my mother, 'safety' is more defined by 'personal safety' – are you likely to get harassed at every step, is it safe to walk outside or are you going to have to take taxis everywhere, etc.

This is all very well if you're, I don't know, a bus driver in Edinburgh whose entire social media presence is debating the finer points of your football team with your colleagues and continually getting owned on your Facebook status by your wife. This is also a subtweet. But if your job, if your entire brand, is a travel-related one, and people are following you for your travel content, when your entire influencing ability is around travel, it might be slightly different.

There is, of course, a nuance to this. If your entire travel blogger branding and content involves visiting and writing about, say, cute cafés, or quirky B&Bs, or country hiking, then the finer points of political ethics probably don't concern you. People might argue 'oh we shouldn't be encouraging people to go to Israel because the government is spending all its money suppressing the Palestinians' but if your blog brand is, I don't know, 'The Falafel Fairies', then your entire reason for being there would be to sample some of the best vegetarian food in the world and, frankly, you'd be seriously missing a huge part of your potential blog niche by avoiding it for political reasons that have nothing to do with your blog.

There is no blog called 'The Falafel Fairies". I checked. There's a 'falafel-fairy' on Tumblr but that's about it.

The difference, and the difficulty comes, when part of your blog niche, your brand image, edges towards words like 'ethical', or where your blog is openly political in nature. Hi, I'm The Barefoot Backpacker, an Asexual, Aromantic, Demiboy, who openly writes political statements, is a member of a political party, and who chooses destinations based on history and culture that have been largely driven by political events.

Technically I'm not allowed to drive in Russia, apart from the obvious reason that I can't drive, period, because they passed a law (ostensibly aimed at Transgender individuals) that said the authorities could deny the granting of licences to those with certain "psychiatric disorders". Asexuality has certainly been counted as a psychiatric disorder under the DSM – the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – which is used as the principal authority for psychiatric diagnoses, at least in the USA and by inference across much of the world.

Obviously that's a bit of a peculiar and niche side-thought, but it's one example of a wider thought. My podcast Episode 7 was all around Sexuality and Travel, and the concerns that people in the LGBTQIA+ community (hereafter referred to as the 'Rainbow People') have when they choose somewhere to travel, and why they/we might choose to go to a certain

country over a certain other country. Being asexual puts me in less danger for my sexuality than being, say, Gay or, especially ,Trans (I can certainly give the presentation and impression I'm a straight male, albeit a slightly quirky and off-kilter one), but being one of the Rainbow People makes me feel I should have a certain solidarity with the others and restrict my voyages away from places where they would be repressed, or at least made to feel unwelcome.

That said, my brand is strongly aligned to 'difficult' places, to going to destinations others may not want to, or even be able to, go. Remember 'I go to these places so you don't have to' also applies to people travelling vicariously through me, and, especially with a country like Russia, or even Uganda, where being a part of the Rainbow Community is not just illegal but also punishable by life imprisonment, my going there with a Queer bent, but also with the knowledge that I can probably travel there quite safely, means one might argue it's, rather than being a place I should avoid, in fact actually quite important that I go, so I can assess and feed back the situation to the rest of the community about what life is like there for Rainbow People, and show how it feels 'on the ground', speaking with people rather than just judging what the government says.

Amanda Kendle, from the Not A Ballerina blog, kind of makes this point, by talking about how the people are often different from the government which represents them, and just because you have an issue with the latter, doesn't mean you should blame and ostracise the former.

{Amanda Kendle}

So, would I go to a country if I disagree with its government or its culture? I think they're two different things but let me start, let me focus on the government. I think this is definitely a case-by-case basis situation. Funnily enough I was just devouring Stephan Orth' 'Couchurfing in Iran' book, it's for the Thoughtful Travellers Book Club this month, and I've been devouring it, because obviously, as it says in the title he couchsurfed his way around Iran, and wrote about it. And he has part of a chapter where he discusses, you know, should you go to countries where you disagree with the government, so kind of exactly that, and the final sentence, two sentences, I think sum up a really good way to approach it, and he says "this is the reason I have an explicit answer to the question of whether you should visit a country where you are at odds with the political leadership. There are no bad places, if the reason you are travelling is to meet people.", which I think is pretty smart because by meeting people and exchanging information and experiences, and exposing them to different .. if they are open to learning about your own culture and the differences then that can be valuable, all of that kind of stuff I think is worthwhile. And I'll have definitely visited countries where I don't agree with everything the government does, for example I've been to Russia twice and I don't agree with a lot of things they do, for example their approach to LGBTQIA like that, those kinds of policies are definitely not ok but it hasn't stopped me from going to the country, so I guess I say, no, I'll often still go.

I think where it gets for me, where I might decide not to go is, for example, my son and I are both really intrigued by North Korea, but I feel like if I went there, I don't know where the money I would spend goes, and does it prop up a corrupt horrid government, you know, I don't feel like there – I don't feel like you can go to North Korea and help the local people with your tourist dollars; it's all so tightly state-controlled so then, as much as I would love to go, I don't think that I would for that reason.

This question of government policy versus ordinary people's view is quite an important one, especially when you start to look at the follow-on effects of actively avoiding countries because of government policy.

There's two ways to view this. Firstly, that the government represents the people, and that government policy is merely reflecting widely-held beliefs amongst the public. Quite how largely such beliefs are held is of course open to opinion, but it's certainly true that in some countries, notably in a few African ones, there is for example a strong body of public opinion against Queer culture, and it would be remiss of people to only think in terms of what the government says. For example, the news agency Deutsche Welle has reported one Ugandan, upon the passing of yet another anti-LGBT law in May 2021, saying "Banning homosexuals

should have happened in Uganda like a century ago. This is Africa. Therefore, homosexuality is immoral, it is not religious, and it is not natural. Men should marry women and women should be married to men". A 2017 survey by the incredibly long-named 'International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) have suggested in the country as a whole, around 41% of people suggested the Rainbow People should not be granted the same rights as straight people, 54% said people in same-sex relationships should be regarded as criminals, and 33% said they'd try to change someone's sexual identity. The government's opposition is definitely strongly supported by Ugandan society. It must be said though that opposition to LGBT people is a relatively new concept – by 'relatively new' I mean it's a legacy of colonialism. Far from being 'un-African', as the Ugandan quoted earlier would like to believe, homosexuality was common and accepted before the arrival of the British; when the British invaded they brought their moral values of the time with them, and imposed them on the people. Because we were very good at that sort of thing.

But that's a side issue. My point is that currently, being one of the Rainbow People in Uganda is very dangerous, and leading activists have been murdered in the country with absolutely no hesitation or resulting punishment of the murderers. Being a Gay travel blogger means that Uganda is probably not on your list, not just because of the government but also because of the people, and there's certainly a feeling that, regardless of whether you're in the Rainbow or just a supportive ally, places like that should be avoided in solidarity.

However, sometimes the government policy is, maybe not at odds with everyday culture and people's views, at least irrelevant and separate to it. Here, you start getting into the debates about – by avoiding a country because of government policy, are you in fact punishing innocent civilians who would be otherwise making a living from tourism and related activities, so by boycotting a country, you're hurting the very people who are victims of the regime.

Of course, one has to bear in mind that citizens of a country pay tax, and therefore indirectly every purchase you make in a country funds the government in some way, so a strict reading of 'ethical travel' means assessing which is the more moral course of action, but in practice there's a huge difference between, say, staying in large hotels which may be giving backhanders to the government, and couchsurfing and eating in locally-run small restaurants and therefore giving money directly to the people rather than hoping the government funds infrastructure properly, which it ... frequently won't.

There is also an argument, driven more by idealist political activism than any practical considerations, and frequently seen mostly in the far-left, that countries with particularly distasteful governments are best off having revolutions, which will only happen when the people themselves feel they have no option, or when there's enough of them clamouring for the same thing that they feel they have a chance, and by boycotting a country, withholding your visits and therefore your cash, you're helping to guide a country down that very route. This always feels a bit harsh to me, and somewhat unethical. People are not your playthings, and it's not your role as a foreigner to directly affect the internal affairs of another country. Unless they specifically ask for your help, of course, but that's a very different situation. As a political blogger, I'd argue that we should be giving support to oppressed peoples in whatever way feels appropriate, and if that means visiting them, funding them, or even just helping to amplify their voices to a wider audience, then that's what we should be doing.

Tayo, the 5 to 9 traveller, talks about this in a bit more detail.

{Tayo – 5 to 9 Traveller}

What I've realised is people are always going to judge about where you're travelling, why you're travelling, who you're travelling with, you know, the money you spend on travelling. It's quite difficult to really separate yourself from judgment, we all do it, myself included, even if we try not to, and so when it comes to, you know, unethical places, it's quite difficult to really have a clean mind about that, and what I mean by that is ... it's really governments that makes a place unethical, not people. So

sometimes when I think about things about boycotting, I'm like actually who are the people who are really going to suffer if you say 'you can't travel here'.

Obviously in some situations I believe there's a period where you shouldn't travel there, a prime example here is Israel at the moment and the attacks on Palestinians settled in a particular place, and the unsettling of that. I don't think now would be the right time to be going to Israel and travelling all over. And it's important to look at the whole ... when it comes to your choices in travel, look at the whole picture. Now for example, South Africa during the Apartheid times, some people would encourage people not to travel to South Africa, but now South Africa is a common destination, so you know there are ebbs and floes to these things, and it's really important that we don't write off a country based on ... actually what we forget is what governments are doing. And governments are made up of people, but actually day-to-day civilians they might not, well often they're not involved in these decision-making, and actually when we don't go to some of these countries, we take away from them who might be dependent on us to learn about what's going on in their country, to share what's going on in their country, and even just to bring in income to their families, and maybe I'm thinking about it in a very ... well, I probably am thinking about it in a privileged position, but I always think at the core, everyday people suffer the most, and so I don't know ... I think actions really come from the top, and actually what we could do, rather than necessarily travelling, is to really put pressure on the government of our own countries to make changes in these other countries where people are oppressed.

One point that I think is important to make at this point, and which I briefly touched upon earlier, is that it might in some way depend on why you're going to a particular destination.

Now, let's take myself as an example. As already mentioned, I'm a blogger and podcaster with a strongly political bent, and who is part of a community which is directly affected by politics. But equally I'm more than my branding, honestly, I am, and my choosing to go somewhere as The Barefoot Backpacker might be different to my choosing to go somewhere as an ordinary individual with no intention to blog or pod about it. And the decisions I make about travelling while representing my brand may well be different to those I make if I go 'you know, I really fancy a week somewhere, with no pressure on me to document my travel on Instagram Stories'. Do I hold myself, as a private individual, to the same ethical constraints as I would feel I should stick to if I were travelling as my brand?

I'm a bad person to talk about that, in a sense, since the two are inextricably linked (in my more non-binary moments I have contemplated changing my name by Deed Pool to 'Barefoot Backpacker' with a salutation of 'The', which would bugger up many a company's personal details form. But then even as a kid I never understood why it mattered if I was a Mr, or even why there wasn't a male version of Miss or Ms, given that 'Master' is generally reserved for children), but for many travel bloggers, the difference is quite clear – it's when it becomes financial, when it becomes part of their job.

What I mean by that is the concept of Press Trips, of working with local tourist boards or accommodation providers. Situations where you're effectively being employed on a freelance basis for a organisation operating on behalf of the government, so whatever content you produce must be seen with that in mind.

Let me take an example: Saudi Arabia. There's a country which, through the eyes of Western culture, is quite restrictive in terms of human rights. However, it's also a country with a fascinating history, some unique scenery, and definitely some very interesting cities. Getting to Saudi Arabia as a tourist is very difficult, though until recently it was pretty much impossible, and the Saudi government are also quite self-aware of the reputation it has, and is putting quite a bit of money into promoting tourism and providing travel bloggers with Press Trips and easier ways to visit. It's also a country whose people are generally seen to be very friendly and accommodating to foreigners – indeed it's a basic tenet of the Islamic faith and is seen across much of the Muslim world; Iran has a very similar split between government and general culture.

For many travel bloggers, that's a very strong lure. But for the more political writer like

myself, it's a tricky one. I am fully aware that Saudi Arabian policies are quite at odds with my own view on ethics, and it would be a bad fit for my brand to be associated with it on an official basis. But equally, it's not a country I'd actively choose not to go to, because in many ways it's a place very much on-brand for me to visit (a difficult and unusual place that many people won't go to, but with a deep history). On that basis, I think it's a country I would at some point be interested to go to, albeit not one high on my list because there's easier countries to visit, but equally if I ever did go it would be very definitely be out of personal interest, and one I'd either mention on my blog only in passing, or I'd write some deeply political posts about, long after I'd returned. I wouldn't be keen to go on a government-sponsored trip to it.

Kate-Frankie, from This Could Lead to Anywhere, talks about this and refers to another country with a dubious government that was the proposed location for a large travel blogger conference.

{Kate-Frankie – This Could Lead To Anywhere}

Interestingly, in terms of 'would there be any places I wouldn't go for ethical reasons', there are two sides of this answer to me. My work takes me to countries to find disadvantaged people, and students, and sometimes just brilliant academic students, but a lot of the time I'm trying to reach people who are in areas of conflict, in areas where women for example, we're doing a big scholarship on women in STEM, and I have to try to reach places where there's much less of that, so less women going into Science Technology Engineering and Maths, and so some of it is, at the moment I'm doing that in the Americas, so it's Venezuela, which is having a huge number of challenges at the moment, but I would absolutely if we had to go out there I'd go, because the ultimate end goal, the means justifies it. Having to get out there and get in front of students - we're not, we're doing virtual at the moment, but – in the future I will go to places where things are tough for people because ultimately I'm trying to give them something really worthwhile and change lives and I think that is very important.

However, in the blogging kind of influencer side of it, and with the platforms that I have, I probably wouldn't be the same answer for you on whether I would go if I was just given a free Press Trip. I've thought about this, I'd spoken to a brand that was working and trying to set up a big influencer (at least 20 people) going to Zimbabwe, and I thought about it, and it was their link – they were really linked in and had a contract with the government, so the government were like going to be putting the money up for the influencers, and in turn they were going to get the boost from tourism, but also there were some other things, again going back to ethics, where it was 'we want you to come, but we want you to write positive things'. And that's the other side of the coin, there is a lot of pressure on influencers to say very positive things from the off, from the very beginning of the conversations, and you're almost like ... not 'forced', but definitely very strongly encouraged to say certain things, and that puts me off straight away. But that's me personally, and I know that people have very different opinions.

I have been to Zimbabwe. I found it to be a very interesting country, and I spent a few days travelling around it, mainly exploring its history rather than its current politics, and when I wrote about it that's what I concentrated on. I wasn't avoiding current issues so much as not seeing them as relevant to why I was there. One could argue that feels like a cop-out, and that by doing that I'm no better than people actively promoting the government, but equally one could argue that by staying in local accommodation and paying for locally-sourced guides and so forth, I'm directly helping the people rather than the authorities.

But I also have another point to make, and it's one I've made before. It's why, although I consider myself a political travel blogger, I don't ever describe myself as an 'ethical' one. It's also, in part, how I justify visiting countries like Russia and Zimbabwe and China. This is going to be quite a controversial viewpoint; I'm prepared to listen to counter-arguments but it is one of the few things I feel quite strongly about.

A lot of 'ethical travel' is concerned with 'other countries'. It is, essentially, an example of the White Saviour concept, the feeling that we as westerners have an obligation to help out parts of the world that need our interventions, because we've got it all sorted and we know best and

countries won't improve without our help.

Well, as I see it, there are two things wrong with that. One of course being it's incredibly arrogant of us, and possibly neo-colonialist, to think that countries actively need our help. Especially as, as previously mentioned, it's partly because of us that those issues in some places are there in the first place.

The other issue is that it strongly implies that the countries we live in are squeaky clean and don't have any issues of their own. There've been an awful lot of protest movements in the last couple of years that suggest that this might not actually be the case. For example, in the 2021 Rainbow Europe survey by the ILGA, which ranks 49 countries in Europe from 0-100% in relation to their respective legal and policy practices for LGBTI+ people, only 17 have a score above 50%, whilst precisely one, Malta, has a score above 75%. From the point of view of the Rainbow People, there's a long way to go even in our own countries, so to criticise other countries for their attitudes is a little rich. My own country, the UK, comes in tenth. This is a country where transgender people have actively sought (and been given) political asylum in New Zealand because of the cultural criticism and discrimination they have gotten from UK society.

Now, you might think 'yes but transgender rights aren't important to the vast majority of people'. But of course an attack on one group is an attack on every group, 'first they came for the gays' and all of that. In any case, there are other entire communities and groups culturally and often politically repressed, for no other reason than 'we can'. Traveller (with a capital T) and gypsy communities, immigrant populations, and of course, The Big One - #BlackLivesMatter protests didn't just come out of thin air; systematic repression over centuries by successive governments and societies, that we are all part of, prove that if we're worried about how governments control their people, we need to also look inwards. Obviously we can do both; I'm not saying it's wrong to criticise and object to other countries' policies, and highlight them as the restrictive and cruel practises that they are, but equally we also need to do the same to ourselves.

The logical extension of this view of course is that if you're advocating not going to a particular country because of its policies, then by rights you shouldn't leave your house, or possibly emigrate, because every time you spend money in your local supermarket, every time you pay tax on your earnings, you too are funding a repressive regime. It feels weird to think of it in those terms, doesn't it? But if you're going to object to the way China treats the Uighurs (WEE-gor), or Myanmar treats the Rohingya (RO-hin-ya), then you equally need to object to the way the Australians treat the Aboriginal Australians, or the Canadian and US governments treat the First Nations, or even how pretty much everyone in the Global North treats any immigrant population (even those from other Global North nations). If you're a Brit and only now noticing how the UK government policy is treating EU citizens, imagine that it's been like that for years even for Americans. And now imagine how they view Syrians, Somalis, and the Senegalese.

Someone even more blunt than me on this topic is friend-to-the-pod Laura Lundahl, who's very vocal about the subject of immigration.

{Laura – Ethical Travel/Political}

I don't really abide by ethical travel, because every country out there has its faults, so if you're going to be an ethical traveller, there aren't that many places you can actually go. So, when I went to Cairo a couple of years ago, it's one of the most amazing experiences of my life, everybody was very kind to me and you, know, it's Cairo, so when I posted pictures of the pyramids on Facebook, someone attacked me for having given money to the Egyptian Government, and I'm like 'I'm not going to not go to the pyramids, love'.

And the thing is too, when Westerners act high-and-mighty for not going to, say, Uganda, for LGBT rights, you're 1) bragging about not helping an economy that needs help, and 2) you're pretending that our countries are any better?

In fact, there is one country that I do refuse to go to right now, I'm not going to give any money to their government, and that's the United Kingdom. The UK has some of the worst immigrant treatment in the world; I know this because my Masters degree is *in* immigration policies in Britain, and I'm literally writing a book about how horrible they are. I absolutely refuse to give another dime of my money to that country until the current government is gone and the replacement government changes the system. That being said, the Labour Party also often supports the policies that have destroyed countless lives, so I'm not holding my breath. And I'm an American, so obviously my country does some shit too, but I can't avoid giving money to my government. But also it should tell you something that the country that takes toddlers from their parents isn't the worst in the world for immigration rights. The UK is literally dead last in the developed world for allowing British citizens to marry non-Europeans, and God knows what's about to happen after Brexit for any Brit married to a European. They made me leave, cos I lived in the UK, and they made me leave despite my distinction-earning masters degree and three languages. They say that the NHS is shit because immigrants use it even though immigrants work in the NHS, and pay more in taxes than they take out, so we actually subsidise the British usage. But this rhetoric means that non-EU citizens in the UK actually have to pay a pretty large fee every single year for using the NHS, despite the fact they already pay taxes. So immigrants are literally fined thousands of pounds every year for no reason other than the fact that they're foreign. This doesn't happen to the same extent in other countries.

So, no. I was treated poorly. I have friends who have good-paying jobs, and yet they struggle to make ends meet purely because of their passport, because of the fees imposed on them by the home office, and they're just itching to be able to treat Europeans the same way.

And so all the people that squawk about not going to 'x' country for 'x' reason magically never bring up the inhumane shit our own countries do. So spare me your self-righteousness, and go and see the things in Uganda. And you never know, maybe the owner of your hostel is Gay and you're giving him money.

Calm down!

As I type this, my Twitter timeline is full of comments about the situation in Ghana, where the government is cracking down on, and arresting, Rainbow activists. This is probably something not a lot of people here in the Global North know about. Equally, back in Britain, leading Black Lives Matter activist Sasha Johnson, who had previously received death threats, has just been shot in the head. There is horror and danger and repression everywhere, and nowhere is perfect.

Anyway. Ethical travel is also quite a relative concept, as it depends on what your own moral and ethical standpoint is in the first place. This, for example, brings us back to Israel. Whether you have ethical concerns about the actions of the Israeli government in their actions against the Palestinian people largely depends on your view of the conflict in the first place – there's a lot of people on both sides who have strong ethical beliefs that their side are 'in the right'. And this obviously passes over to travel blogging – if you actively visit and write about a place, especially if you do so at the behest of an official organisation, you're deemed (rightly or wrongly) to be supportive of that government's actions. And it might well be that, in some cases, you are. Not everyone in the travel blogging community is on the same side, not everyone has the same beliefs. So while a large proportion of the travel blogger community might actively avoid a country and criticise people for travelling there, there may well be a section who don't agree with that position in the first place, and thus see no problem, ethical or otherwise, with visiting. There is no 'one true' ethical position anyway, and it's not really our place to gatekeep, especially with people who are coming at things from different sides.

It is true that, maybe due to the nature of travel, the majority of people in the travel blogger community are centre-left, culturally liberal, and largely open to new ideas, but certainly in my feed I have a few Conservative voters, several strongly religious people on all edges of the political sphere, and even a couple of tin-foil-hat types. I try to avoid arguing with the latter, because I've got better things to do with my life, which is why I've only ever blocked one person on my travel twitter account. To be fair, he blocked me first, but if you're going to talk

a lot about solo female travel, it kind of helps if you're a solo female traveller. And he isn't.

Someone else who talks about the relative view of ethics is Tayo, who you heard from earlier. She also talks a bit about how some of her views have changed over time.

{Tayo – 5 to 9 Traveller}

Sometimes our beliefs in where we shouldn't go and travel can very much vary depending on your political views, what your country's portraying, regarding a certain country. I'd like to give an example of South Africa. I remember when Nelson Mandela was talking about Fidel Castro as a friend because actually Cuba helped them in their fight against Apartheid, so he saw Fidel Castro as a friend, whereas the West – ooh, socialism, communism, it was very anti-that, so Fidel Castro was not liked, and so Cuba was off-limits from a lot of USA citizens. So I went to Cuba and went to travel there, and maybe some people in the West would be like 'ooh you shouldn't go to Cuba, cos of Fidel Castro' but you know there's a lot of good there actually he's done for the country. I'm not saying he's been perfect, but you know there's sort of that give-and-take, you can't just make a sweeping judgment on a country based on the position or background you're coming from, because it can vary. So that's quite important when it comes to making your choices about where you travel.

And I actually think it's quite a personal choice about what you deem is an ethical place to go and visit. So a lot of the time people ask me, 'so where do you not want to go and travel to?', and people are always surprised by my answer. So I'm not really keen on travelling to Australia, and people are like 'why, what's wrong with Australia?', and asking me questions, and it's just ... I have always felt this issue in that I feel that Australia should have progressed enough to still not have Aborigines treated as second class citizens. And I know a lot has been done for that to be rectified, but I feel like there's so much more that can be done, and you know for a country, a Westernised country, I just think they're not doing enough.

But actually my mind has changed, because me not going to Australia means I miss out on learning about the Aborigines, about learning about their culture, their history, about how they have moulded Australia as a country, so ... I think I remember talking to somebody on my travels actually, and I can't remember where I met the person, but they were really just like 'I wouldn't write off a country just because of how history has shaped things or governments have shaped things, and then miss out on meeting those people', and that was quite poignant to me, yeh there's like all those people I want to learn their culture, know about them, and I still have this dichotomy like I'm not overly keen to visit Australia, it's not on top of my list, but likewise now I'm not so dismissive of going there. And I think that's really important that you can change your mindset about a country, and really, to be honest, who am I to sort of dismiss Australia as a place to go and visit when so many countries have, you know, they're treating their ... making second class citizens of various ethnic groups, or tribal wars, so actually it's not just unique to Australia. I think it's more prominent to me, in Australia, but actually somebody else could argue, for example, you know, in the USA, like, how the treatment of African-Americans in the USA is just unacceptable and they don't want to go and visit there.

So it really depends on so many factors actually, and why it's so key for me not to just dismiss a country outright, and look at it holistically in your decision-making about when to travel.

So what have we learned from this episode? We're dealing with a complicated and very in-depth subject where your feelings are often driven by who you are and what you stand for. Boycotting a country may or may not be the right thing to do, depending again on who you are and what you stand for. All countries have issues, including your own, but as long as you're aware of that, it's fine to take a moral and ethical stand. And there's potentially a difference between visiting as a private individual, and visiting as a blogger brand in conjunction with an official enterprise, and that's something to bear in mind when visiting a slightly suspect destination.

And there's definitely an opening for a Middle-Eastern food blogger called "The Falafel Fairy".

{standard section separation jingle}

Well that's about all for this pod. Join me in another two weeks for another venture beyond the brochure. Yep, two weeks, back to normal schedule. I'm going to try to guarantee it, but it also depends on how I feel when I get back from Scotland. Until then, make sure you visit the dentist regularly, 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.}