

## Podcast 097: Luxury Travel

*{INTRO:*

*KATE-FRANKIE: I was gonna say I don't know what I have to say about luxury travel and I'm sat in a like five-star hotel. {laughs} Please don't put that in your podcast.}*

*{intro music - jaunty, bouncy}*

*{Intro standard announcement:*

*Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a podcast 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 Enby 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 a funny old month really, for me anyway. We had snow, we had storms and high winds, we had bright sunshine, and last Saturday we had all of them in the space of two hours. Most confusing. It has been on average better for being outdoors than it was earlier in the month around my previous episode, but still with caveats.

I did manage to get a few training runs under my belt, though I am finding it hard to run as slow as my plan warrants. One of the criteria to judge effort in the runs is known as RPE, or Rate Of Perceived Exertion. This is a very subjective measure whose points will be different for everyone, but in essence it's a 10 point scale from 1 at the bottom which is 'you could do this all day' to 10 which is 'if you do this for more than 20-30 seconds, you'll die'. You'd've thought training for a long distance event would mean a lot of runs at a decent effort. But no. Almost everything on my training plan is described as 'easy runs' or even 'hikes', which see an RPE no higher than 4. For context, when you're putting in enough effort that makes it hard to hold a conversation, that's pushing a 6. It's very much a case of 'easy effort, but for a long time' - in a couple of weeks my plan has 5-6 hour hikes on a Sunday. We'll see how that goes. What hasn't helped is on my last jog, which was slightly harder than the plan said it should be, I managed to pull a muscle in my calf - I hit a sharp incline, my leg literally went 'ker-chunk', and I went 'oh, that's not good'. Fortunately I was only a kilometre from home on a mostly flat section, so a couple of days of rest and I can walk normally again now. Not running on it, but according to the plan, that's fine.

Unrelated, but I have uncharacteristically been quite productive recently in terms of writing and producing content. I'd already completed everything I needed to do for Jet2 and the Christmas Market trip, but I seem to have continued on that vein of inspiration by knocking up a couple of posts about identity, a couple of posts about barefoot running (one's yet to go live but I'm waiting on, unusually for a blog post, a contribution from someone else), and a few posts about my South America trip. The latter I've still to edit the images for, but I wrote them also in preparation for my next couple of podcast episodes, so I'm even keeping up to date with that. There have also been associated Instagram and LinkedIn posts, and I'm even close to issuing some long-form video content. Admittedly that's less on me and more on my VA, but it counts, right?

My VA, by the way, has found an additional client, which is nice and good for her, and she still has resource space to take on work from others, so if you need someone who can edit and publish video content, write newsletters, bounce ideas of contact off, and generally keep you motivated and up-to-date with deadlines, then drop her a line. Her name's Victoria, but you can call her V, and her deets are in the shownotes.

Part of the reason for creating content too though is that my upcoming months are looking unusually busy. I seem to be doing something most weekends heading into mid-June, which is very weird for me. It's largely because Laura is keen to do some trips away to see The North before she moves back down to London, interspersed with events like community meetups, content creator exhibitions, and of course getting outdoors to hike. I'm also away in late February on a two-week backpacking trip, with Laura, obviously, because who else would I go backpacking with. We're off to India, Sri Lanka, and, er, Maldives, thus knocking another country off my anti-bucket list. We're travelling again in early June, but we're not quite sure where yet. It should have been Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda, but it turns out not only is there a bit of tension on the Rwanda/DRC border that could spill over (I mean, there's always tension on the Rwanda/DRC border, which is annoying because there's a volcano on the DRC side I've been wanting to hike up since 2016 but sadly it seems to be off-limits at the moment), but also the Rwanda-Burundi border has been closed since January 2024. And that's awkward, because who wouldn't want to visit Burundi.

We're working on that. Well, I mean, not a peace treaty, that would be impressive. The thing is, Laura's keen on the trip hitting three countries I've never been to, as that would mean I could then visit Norway on my birthday and have been to 100 countries by the time I turned 50. If you count Kosovo. But not Palestine or Transnistria. I don't count countries really, for reasons I've explained before at length, but it would be a cool thing to achieve. The current feeling is the Caribbean, which a) is somewhat off-brand for me, given my feelings about small hot islands full of honeymooners, and b) leads to an absolutely ridiculous follow-up conversation of "why did you go to St Lucia if it's not your scene', 'Well, because Burundi was closed'. Which to be fair \*is\* very much on-brand for my travels.

Anyway. On to the pod.

*{section separation jingle}*

As you know, I am the Barefoot Backpacker. However, there's more to the name than the obvious; indeed I mention this on my website - the name is metaphorical as much as it's literal (as much as it's either, let's be honest, there's a huge amount of Instagram v Reality taking place here). But by metaphorical I mean, I travel cheaply, without frills, without pretensions. I'll stand on crowded buses rather than take taxis. I'll sleep on sofas in places with shared bathrooms rather than comfy mattresses and en-suite jacuzzis. And I'm more likely to eat street food than named restaurants. This means it's very unlikely you'll see my profile associated with any kind of luxury brand. Obviously I'm not saying I wouldn't enjoy it, more rather it's ... not my scene, I don't think I'd get much out of it, and it would certainly confuse my audience. The likes of Peter Dinklage and Brook Taverner do not make dungarees.

It's like with hotels. I see them as a place to sleep, not as a place to be. To that end it doesn't really matter what it is, as long as it's somewhere I can physically sleep - I draw the line at the floor of Stansted Airport, although that doesn't mean I haven't done even that. It wasn't comfortable and I got a cold. But it was cheap and convenient. But I'm like - if I'm in a town, the likelihood is I'm there for a reason and that reason is not the hotel. I'm not someone who chooses a hotel based on facilities, because I'm never going to use them. There's no point going somewhere expensive enough to have a fitness gym, spa, and pool on site because, I mean I never use them in my normal life, why would I use them when I'm on holiday somewhere and out visiting places. When would I even have time to? I barely even use hotel's on-site restaurants and bars, apart from the occasional Premier Inn Breakfast, and even that's more for convenience than pleasure. 'You could give me a night in the Ritz Hotel in London and I'd go ... what do I \*do\* with this?'

Amanda Kendle, from the Thoughtful Travel Podcast, gave me another thought that resonated with me.

*{AMANDA: I don't know if it's a kind of an Aussie thing, I feel very uncomfortable about being served, and so sometimes in luxury accommodation you are kind of too well looked after and I don't know, just makes me uncomfortable.}*

I've never felt comfortable with people being attentive. I can't explain why; I think it just feels a little 'fake', like, they're fawning, they're not really interested in your well-being per se, they just want to know you're doing okay for their own sake. As a people-pleaser, I get that, but I also know people must find it annoying when I do it to them. I just want to be let alone to do my own thing, and if I have an issue or a need for you, I'll approach you. In theory. In practice I'm an introverted Brit who'd have qualms about speaking to reception if the ceiling fell in, but that's beyond the scope of this pod. I've never had the ceiling fall in, by the way. I've somehow managed to avoid that price point.

So, you might ask yourself, why am I doing a podcast about Luxury Travel? What could I possibly say that could fill up an episode? The answer is, surprisingly more than I thought. But in fact it does happen occasionally that I push the boat out a bit and spend more for a bit of niceness and comfort. And the reason this episode has come to mind now is because I did just that on my recent trip to South America, or at least on my way back home from that trip.

But before I get into that, I want to open with a question: what is Luxury Travel? My travel blogger buddy and fellow beer-drinker Claire, who blogs at Curious Claire, gave me a contribution for this pod that, had I just released as-is, it would not have been my shortest episode. I'm grateful for my automated transcription program. But her recording starts by answering this exact question.

*{CLAIRE: Luxury travel is one of those weird things where people have very different reactions towards it. You've got some people that see it as not being authentic, you know, they have this mindset that if you're aiming for luxury travel, you're not a true traveller And then you've got a group of people who aim for it, they see it as something to work*

*towards because it's not something everyone can have, it's not something people can have every time. And neither one of these is wrong or right, it just depends on who you are and how you prefer to travel.*

*The funny thing about luxury travel is there is no clear definition of what is luxury. When most of us talk about luxury travel, we're not talking about hotels that cost, you know, £800-£8,000 pounds a night, it's still something that is, you know, a bit of a splurge, you know, something to treat yourself with and for some people, it will be how they travel all the time and, you know, they'll choose to travel less so that they can travel luxury every time, which, you know, whatever you want to do as a traveller is up to you. It's your travel.*

*I love a little bit of luxury, I know some people don't want to spend the money, I'm quite lucky as I've got older, I've started earning more, and I can splurge more and more, and I love it, I'm not ashamed of it, you know, I'm a big believer in travel, how you want to travel, forget what everyone else says, and if you want the nice hotel, if you want the comfy plane seats, just do it, it's fun.}*

TL;DR "It Depends", and I'd agree. What's luxury to me (like, a private bathroom) is non-negotiable basic standard to someone like my bestie Laura. And I used to work with someone who refused to stay in a hotel with less than 4 stars, which to me is just plain excessive. But we're all different and we all have different starting points.

As an aside, I've seen some AirBnBs on offer for considerably more than £8,000/night. I've always assumed they were money-laundering schemes.

*{section separation jingle}*

But let's start with talking about my taste of luxury on my recent trip. So, a bit of background. When I was looking around for flights to South America, I noticed the cheapest way back was flying on an airline called Air Europa. And it wasn't even close - a one-way from Asunción to London (via Madrid) was £350, which is a ridiculously cheap price for a journey of that length. I'd never heard of them, to be honest, but looked into them and realised they seemed pretty legit - in the same Airline Alliance program (Skyteam) as KLM and Delta. Given the price was so low, I pondered how much it would be to upgrade myself, or at least, how much more Business Class tickets were. And the answer was, only a couple of hundred pound more than I'd been budgeting for the original flight in the first place. Now for once I was in possession of a little more money than I'd been used to having, and figured that this was a reasonable way to use it; if I were feeling a bit weary after two weeks backpacking somewhere I'd never been and didn't speak the language, it'd be a good way to not be cooped up in a narrow airline seat for a long journey - the flight was about 11 hours to Madrid alone. So I did.

Note that this was my purchasing a business-class ticket straight off, rather than coming up to check-in and deciding to upgrade, so this meant I was committed to it, and therefore didn't have to worry about my journey back. *{pause}* For reasons that we'll come on to in my upcoming pods, Contemporary Me ended up being very grateful to Past Me for this decision, conceptually at least.

Asunción airport isn't very big, and so the queue at the gate to get onto the plane was long and disruptive; it was in the way, basically. I appreciated being able to wander around it, pick up a brownie from one of the few catering outlets in the terminal, eat it, then wander through the gate at my own leisure, rather than being stuck in an everlasting holding pattern. I'm not saying that's the biggest reason to fly business class, but it's certainly quite a useful one. "Board at your convenience" they probably said had I been able to either hear or understand the announcements.

The vibes on the plane were nice and chill. I had a comfy seat, at both the window and the aisle, and it was nice to just be able to plonk myself down without any hassle. I was able to stretch out with my feet more-or-less under the frontage where the at-seat monitor was. Almost immediately I was accosted by the aircrew, who addressed me in English, maybe they knew, and offered me a choice of a (plastic) glass of either champagne or a mint cordial type thing. I ended up with both; I'm not that keen on champagne and I love mint, but also, I'm being given free champagne and that doesn't happen very often. In my head, champagne is something served at special events, big celebrations, or posh parties. I rarely remember to go to the first, don't know anyone who does the second, and am never invited to the third. Laura's going to a Black Tie wedding later this year and firstly people in my bubble don't do Black Tie, and secondly, I wouldn't even know where to start with that. Both Laura and V have said I look vaguely awkward and uncomfortable even in a suit; you can imagine how I'd be with something more formal.

Anyway. Champagne drank and take-off having occurred, it was time to just relax and enjoy the flight. And, I mean, I guess I did? In the sense that I didn't feel stressed or irked about the flight, I didn't feel squashed in, it felt rather like I was on a train rather than the plane, although I'd've liked to have been able to see better out the window (even if the

view would have been one of boring endless clouds); it had one of those fancy new designs which darken and lighten automatically. There's a touchscreen button to change the blackout level but it didn't seem to work for me at any point.

Two meals were served on board – the unnamed main meal served an hour or so into the flight, and "breakfast", which came a couple of hours before we landed. The cabin crew did ask if I'd want to be woken up for breakfast; I pointed out I probably wouldn't be asleep. But more about breakfast in a minute. The main meal was a choice of chicken, salmon, or pasta, with a selection of vegetables, a basil salad starter, and a dessert that the menu describes as a "deconstruction by some named chef with crunchy cookies and almond sugar". Sometimes luxury can sound quite pretentious; it was perfectly edible and functional, but it probably didn't deserve to be loaded with the purple prose the menu provided.

Breakfast, by the way, was a choice between scrambled egg and granola pancake. Both would come with fresh fruit and yoghurt. And juice. I had the egg. My problem with breakfast wasn't its quality, but the fact that when your body clock is still working on departure time zone and therefore thinks it's coming up to 10pm, while being served in a time-zone that says it's just before midnight, that's not really breakfast time, is it?!

That flight was to Madrid, as I say, was followed by a much shorter second flight to London Gatwick, only about two hours. This flight was also in Business Class, although this was on a much smaller and localised plane where the difference between business and standard class appears to have been "well, they're slightly bigger seats, I guess?". No-one else was in my row, which helped, but really there was nothing to differentiate apart from the curtain behind me. We got free food. But that leg was otherwise unremarkable and not terribly exciting, to the extent that that I don't even remember what the food was, nor did I take any pictures on that leg of the journey.

And that's kind of my feeling about the whole journey in general. It wasn't that it was bad or anything, it was perfectly pleasant and comfortable, it just wasn't ... I had two fundamental issues with the trip. The first wasn't anything to do with the flights themselves, nor being in business class in particular, but rather to do with the flight timings. My flight left Asunción around 1pm, and, though it arrived in Madrid at 3.30am ish (including an extra hour for the clocks going back), even on landing it was still only about midnight Paraguayan time. So I wasn't tired – I'm regularly awake at midnight. I had a lovely place to sleep, but it wasn't at bedtime; I'm one of those people who can only sleep when they're tired. I did try (and fail) to sleep on the second flight – it being now actually breakfast time as I'd had about a three hour stopover in Madrid airport which clearly isn't long enough to do anything, especially not overnight.

This led to the second issue, which again isn't a business class issue. Simply put, Air Europa aren't very interesting, and the planes themselves didn't buzz with high quality vibes. On the first plane, apart from the window, I had issues with the at-seat entertainment system – I'll often play games on long flights and not only was the offering here that good, the games themselves kept crashing the system. There also wasn't a lot of choice of viewing elsewhere – I'm not a film person but on my flight back from Vietnam in December 2023 I managed to get through four of them; here there was only a paltry selection of things to watch and music to listen to, and nothing caught my fancy. Now, none of this is a business-class issue; it's very much more an Air Europa issue.

Don't get me wrong; I'm glad I bought the ticket, especially after the rollercoaster trip I'd had on my adventures. But, not going to lie, I did feel slightly underwhelmed, due to that whole combo of airline, flight time, and routing coming together in a less than value-for-money way.

That trip from Madrid to London Gatwick had similar low-key vibes to another time I've flown business class. This was a very short journey from London City Airport to Glasgow, back in November 2022 when I lived up there. I mentioned it very briefly on my contemporaneous podcast on beer; if you recall it was when I was coming back from World Travel Market and my debit card had disintegrated in a pub in Harrow the previous evening, so it was a very serendipitous bit of planning on my part as it meant I ended up with a free evening meal. And two glasses of wine which took as long to drink as the flight lasted in total – it's not a very long way. It wasn't a terribly interesting flight and again on a plane where free food and marginally more legroom was the only on-board difference between business and standard class. In fact I'd only booked business class because I had hold luggage, I don't remember why I had hold luggage given all I was doing was going to London for a couple of nights, but there we go, and looking at the prices of flights back, the cost of economy plus the cost of checking hold luggage (because BA are a budget airline these days with a budget airline mindset; they should have more class than that, but they do not) was about the same as a business class ticket that had free hold luggage and free food. And better seating. And the only reason I was flying anyway is because everything was timed badly and my journey home coincided with a planned rail strike and I didn't want to take an overnight Megabus. Because, frankly, who does. Anyway I don't really count that trip as 'luxury travel' given it was, well, not luxurious.

Anyway. They weren't the only times I've taken a business-class flight; I'd done it once before, back in 2018. I'd been wanting to talk about my flight on Emirates for several years and never had a logical way to frame it, so it made sense to include it alongside my more recent journeys. Hence the \*actual\* reason for doing this pod on this subject at this time.

So, picture the scene. I was sat in the foyer of my hostel in Colombo, Sri Lanka, two days before my flight back home to the UK, and I was checking-in online. On the website it said 'You can upgrade to Business Class - only £152 for your flight from Colombo to Dubai'. I raised an eyebrow - for a 6-7 hour flight that didn't seem particularly expensive. Obviously it would be weird to only upgrade for one of the two legs, so I checked the other leg back to Birmingham; only a couple of hundred quid extra itself, so why not. I figured it was a pretty nice treat having spent 11 weeks in Vanuatu, Australia, and Sri Lanka backpacking barefoot - pretty much literally in the latter case, where I wore footwear three times; once on the way in, once on the way out, and once one morning on a road covered in gravel. I'd had about 11 days in the country and wasn't barefoot for about 8 hours of them. But that's probably a tale for a different episode. I'd also been metaphorically barefoot of course, travelling on a fairly tight budget to some places where 'luxury' wasn't an option - it's hard to hike for three days across two volcanoes in the rainforest in any way luxuriously. In addition, I was flying on a pretty decent airline, so I knew that spending that extra bit of cash would almost certainly be value-for-money.

It being my first time ever flying Business Class, I was noticing the differences at every sandalled step (even I have my limits!). I'm sure you all know some of the immediate benefits even on arrival - the ability to avoid queues at check-in (if you need to visit check-in, at least) and at the gate, for instance. Being able to board when you like once the plane is ready, rather than being beholden to the whims of the gate crew or boarding pass, is quite relaxing. And it's exciting to turn left when you get through the door - it's almost like you're entering a weird forbidden area and it makes you feel like 'the chosen one'.

On that first plane (a Boeing 777-300), the seating was in standard rows, in a 2-3-2 pattern, so they took up as much width as maybe one and a half economy seats - I was in one of the middle aisle seats. Obviously though there was considerably more room in front of you so you don't have to worry about the person in front reclining into you. The in-seat screens were also larger to match the seat size, so it had more of a personal-cinema type vibe. And my pictures reveal that outside the toilet was a huge purple flower planted from a tube set into the wall of the vestibule. Which is a weird word to use for a plane, but there we go.

Conversely on the second plane (an Airbus A380-800), the seating in business class was made up of individual booths; every seat was an aisle seat but the amount of space you have in those booths means you don't need to spread out into the aisle at all. Though of course the main advantage is not having to step over anyone every time you want to stand up and move around - again not that you even need to do that often because if you want to stretch your legs you could just, you know, stretch your legs. I was in the centre of the plane, so not at a window seat, but the person sat next to me was the other side of a huge table with ... I dunno, 'stuff' on it (and slightly off-kilter) so you never saw them if you didn't actively peer around and look. There's certainly no fighting for the armrest, and it feels like a very individual experience.

Now, food and drink. Before we even took off on the first flight, I was offered a drink, an alcoholic drink even. In-flight we were offered free choice from a 4-course menu - I mean there were only 3 options for each course, but still that's a huge step up from the 'chicken or vegetable, oh wait, we've ran out of vegetable' foil-covered plastic container that you get in economy that may, may, have once seen a food laboratory. Drinks are covered too, with what amounts to a wine list that some restaurants might feel excessive. It looks from the few pictures that I took on board that on the first flight I had a chicken curry with rice, that came with a salad starter and a selection of pastries as dessert. I don't have any details on the food offerings on the second flight, but to my right was a small minibar that was full of soft drinks (water, 7-up, Pepsi, etc).

While the meals were served at a specific time, I could choose bits of the menu, and any drink, at any time I liked, with no time restrictions. Not long before landing in Dubai on my first flight, I have a picture of me with two bars of very posh dark chocolate on my lap. In addition, on my second flight, at the back of the section, where the toilets and crew area would be in economy class, was a small lounge with semi-circular cocktail bar where you could get drinks and canapés. The cabin crew were more than happy to take pictures of me standing inside it and drinking.

None of this was chargeable by the way; it was all included in the price of the ticket. You all know that. I knew that. But I was still surprised and impressed at experiencing it.

There's no difference in the entertainment system between Business and Economy classes on Emirates, but it's just more fun to break trivia game points records while sipping a glass of wine than while pressing your knee into the back of the seat in front so it can't recline and crush you.

In all it was a very pleasant couple of flights, with a simple two-hour stopover in Dubai Airport that was made easier by having a business class ticket and being able to waltz through the mid-point security without having to demonstrate my laptop wasn't any kind of explosive device. I landed in Birmingham around 8pm feeling quite sated.

Now, it is interesting to note that all these trips were for the homebound leg and not the outbound one. I think this makes sense; I feel like I'd appreciate, or, more likely need, the extra luxury and pampering when I was tired after a long backpacking trip, and returning to my normal life, rather than on my way to somewhere interesting and exciting when I'd be too busy with my mind full of expectations (but, also, honestly, some level of travel and social anxiety about whether it'd all go well or not, which a more pampered journey might help relieve).

While the flights all varied in their level of comfort, they were all more comfortable and appealing than economy class, even if in a couple of cases that was more because of the service than the seating. And if I'm thinking about my experiences and deciding if it's worth the money, I'd probably say it is, but only for longer-haul flights; it seems a bit overkill to travel in such luxuriousness for a flight from, say, Birmingham to Paris, although of course for these short flights it's worth checking the prices as it might not be significantly more expensive anyway. Although if it is, I wouldn't bother. Plus, if I do it again, I'd save it for a big airline (like Emirates, where the additional quality and service is very self-evident) and live with economy flights on cheaper and less-attested airlines.

As an aside, all three of my Business Class flights were ones I'd paid for. I've never been upgraded through the whims of the check-in staff - although obviously checking-in online and never visiting the desks does largely take away any opportunity for that anyway. I would say 'it's a myth and it doesn't happen in the real world', but I know it does - there's many an article telling you how to maximise your chances: look smart, be polite, be confident, be solo, don't have much luggage. Amanda Kendle, however, had an upgrade for a somewhat more random reason.

*{AMANDA: Only one time in my life I've ever been upgraded from economy to business on a plane, was a flight from Osaka in Japan to Seoul in South Korea. So a pretty short flight, and I'm pretty sure that we were only upgraded because my then Australian boyfriend was relatively tall, and I think we were the only non-Japanese or non-Koreans on the flight. So I think that his height got us an upgrade for that very short flight.}*

Sadly, this has never happened to me. But then I've never been to that part of Asia.

Conversely, Curious Claire has flown Business Class quite a few times. Because she's posh and middle-class and bought a flat in the leafy suburbs of SW London. But in fairness, she talks here about one of the ways she does it for less than you'd expect.

*{CLAIRE: So my first experience of flying business class was actually thanks to my mum. I went to New York with my mum and stepdad, and my mum happened to know someone who worked at the airline, and she was there when we went to check in, and she gave us a cheeky free upgrade. So that was my first experience of business class, and I loved it from that start. I was like, yeah, I could get used to this. It was, yeah, you know, you can have your legs rest in, you can have nice food, comfortable, not worry about squeezing next to people, and I can see why people will want to do it every time. I am one of those people that want to do it every time. Sadly, I don't, but I want to.}*

*Just like me, my mum got a taste of business class life as well from that trip, and it wasn't long after actually, we went to Australia, the three of us again flew out, and this time they actually paid for the business class tickets, and they actually signed me up for a BA membership as well. So without paying anything, I got the points that you get from London to Sydney, BA business class. So if you don't know, you get more points for the higher tier that you fly with. So I got a lot of points for free basically, and that was obviously a return flight, so that was a lot of points, and then suddenly I had a chance to see what loyalty points can get you, and then I flew business class a few more times after that.}*

There's a whole blogger industry dedicated to points, and credit cards, and all that jazz. I'm not allowed a credit card, and anyway in the UK that whole credit card affinity points concept is much less of a Thing, so it's never been something I've paid attention to. In any case, I'm a bit of an airline-whore; I tend to always go for the cheapest flights, and in any case I go to such varied destinations that it's rare to fly the same airline twice. And Ryanair doesn't have a business class. I've no idea what it'd look like even if it did. I dread to think.

Claire also talks about something else Business Class tickets get you that I've equally never taken advantage of.

*{CLAIRE: So actually, my first abroad job was flying me to South Korea, and I was flying out with a colleague and I went straight to the lounge because that's another great thing about business class is you get access to the lounges, and the BA ones, are lovely, you get food, you get booze, you get comfort, you get quiet, you get seats, it's great, and when I went to the gate my colleague was like where the hell have you been, and I was like oh I've been in the lounge, you went oh did you pay for a lounge, I went oh no I upgraded my flight, and he just looked at me like what, so I went back to the plane where he was in economy, and he was like complaining about the food, and I was showing him pictures of like my three course meal, and like you get proper plates and everything in business, and he was just like I hate you so much, I'm like well you could have done the same thing, but you didn't want to, he had a family, he couldn't afford to waste money like that, whereas I was like it's not a waste, I'm taking it.}*

I've heard people talk about these lounges but they've never been high on my hit-list - partly because I want to spend as little time in airports as possible so at the start of the flight I arrive as late as logistically possible (tho no later than about 15 mins before check-in closes - I don't want to cause undue hassle in the security queue!), and partly because if I've got a stopover I simply never think of it as an option. In fact on my most recent flight I forgot lounges existed.

So, Business Class flights - all well and good? Alas no. The issue with travelling metaphorically 'barefoot' is that you've experience of both sides of the coin and it's just so easy to see beyond the obvious differences and into concepts with more political and social awareness. And I'm ... shall we say, a little bit irked.

See, the difference between Economy and Business is vast. Now, economy classes for a long period of time felt like it was getting cheaper and cheaper. For the most part, as a frequent traveller, I see this as a good thing, as the less I spend on travel, the more I can travel, the more I can do when I get there. Plus I make the compromise that 7 hours of hell in economy class is worth it if I get to spend 2-3 weeks exploring somewhere I'd never previously have dreamed of going to. I am aware by the way I take more than my fair share of flights - as a member of the Green Party this is a weird juxtaposition and may smell a little of hypocrisy, but I'm sure you know me well enough to know I feel that individual sacrifice is worth a big fat zero when compared to changes that could be made by corporations and governments. Indeed I did a couple of podcasts on that very topic back in 2022 (one was even called "How To Save The World").

But there's a correlation between cost and facilities. Economy travel is becoming more no-frills, more basic. The cheaper it is the less you get. There's less space between seats to fit more seats on a plane, which lowers cost overall since they can fit more people on for the same profit margin, but doesn't help me personally because I'm about 1m90 and I get uncomfortable in cramped seats. In addition, budget airlines tend make you pay for every add-on (food, baggage, seat, etc). This suits me fine personally as I never pay for these things but I'm a single traveller with hand luggage, rather than a family of four on a large holiday.

Maybe it's our fault for accepting the cost and what it entails, but, I don't know, it just feels like airline economy class is getting worse and worse, and even if business class doesn't change, it just makes the difference more obvious. And in general fewer people are going to be able to afford to fly anything other than economy, when they can fly at all, that is. Meanwhile, Business Class, at least on long-haul, feels a little over-exuberant? Like, better food and a free drink is grand, and I love the space you get, but is it too much? You could fit more people into a business class area and still not feel cramped. You don't need a separate bar area - I know people like to drink bottles of wine on a plane but most people wouldn't do that on the 8:15 from Manchester (there's a niche reference!). And while people will complain about reducing any level of service in Business Class, I just feel any complaints about taking that sort thing away will come from rather entitled people who don't want to make any concessions lest they feel they're going to end up closer to the plebs. Oooh it was better in the old days when planes had silver service, listen Kevin in the old days your planes would crash because there was a Y in the month and the pilot was drunk.

What I long for, I guess, is something in the middle. Like you get on a train, maybe. Decent legroom, comfy ride, decent amount of cabin baggage space, no frills service. I don't need the free drinks, the virtually horizontal reclining seat, the fancy sandwiches. I just want a ride that doesn't have me squashed into a small space, where I can take a decent but not excessive bag on board. All I really want in an airline seat is legroom, to be honest. I just want something plain, ordinary, nice, casual, and comfortable.

And yes, I can get all this on a train. However, trains from, say, Birmingham to Paris work out far more expensive for even standard class than flights are, often even for business class flights. And if you're doing a trip from Madrid to London, not only do trains take far longer, but you'll also have at least a couple of awkward cross-city transfers. Madrid airport is fairly large and quite dull at 4am, but it's easier transferring between terminals and gates there than it

is to get from Paris Montparnasse to Paris Gare du Nord railway stations. Especially at 4am. And I've ranted about the costs of trains on those same Environmentalism podcast episodes.

Kate-Frankie, who used to be a travel blogger under the moniker This Could Lead To Anywhere, has similar vibes.

*{KATE-FRANKIE: I don't do first-class and I don't really believe in business class on planes. I know that I'm, I don't know, I'm probably gonna get backlash for that, but I do love a good train journey and I'll take an economy train journey as long as like they're efficient and clean and stuff. That's probably my definition of luxury when like something just works well and it's efficient and it's clean. I think that when I want to just kind of get from A to B, and I've got work to do, then I just need somewhere that I can, you know, that it's clean and easy and accessible and stuff.}*

But since this podcast is about luxury travel, not simply comfortable travel, what about luxury trains? Where do they fit in to this conversation? The answer may surprise you!

*{section separation jingle}*

They don't.

My experience of trains is that for the most part, standard class is comfortable enough for my needs and first class, as the premier class tends to be called, at least here in the UK, isn't much different. I've taken first class on UK trains quite a few times, usually because it's been cheaper than standard class, or at most only a couple of pounds extra, and I figured what you do get is worth the price of a beer. It's rarely like this, for sure, but that first class \*can\* be cheaper than standard class is due to the fragmented nature of British rail pricing which, frankly, is far too complicated to explain on a pod like this.

What does first class on a normal UK train get you? Well, specifics depend on the rail company, on the route, and on what train carriages the company decide to put on that route on that day, but in general it's a guaranteed table seat, some of which are individual so you're not sharing it with anyone opposite or next to you. The tables often also have their own lamps built in, rather than having to rely on an overhead light that isn't terribly bright or adjustable. The seats are ... I mean they're vaguely nicer, and you get a little more space and legroom. You also get free food, and by free food I mean, you get a free coffee, bottle of water, sandwich, and a small cake or muffin or packet of biscuits. Except on Sundays, where, at least on the services I've taken, complementary food is unavailable. So you're simply just paying for legroom and a quieter space.

Since sometimes first class can cost twice as much, and since rail prices in the UK are already relatively high relative to the length of the journey - a study by Euronews in collaboration with Vouchercloud found that standard fares bought within four weeks of travel showed the UK was the fourth most expensive country in Europe on a euro-cent-per-kilometre basis (behind Norway, Austria, and France), for return fares. Note though it's far more cost effective to buy returns than singles - for many journeys it's more-or-less the same price, maybe a pound or two more. This is an oddity of UK ticketing that the government is looking in to.

So, by travelling first class in the UK you're paying more than you should and getting, relatively speaking, not a lot for your buck.

I've not travelled in higher classes on trains much in other parts of the world, but when I have, it's been more-or-less the same - what you're paying extra for is a quieter and slightly larger space with fewer people, rather than any special facilities. They're not waiting for you on the platform of Budapest-Keleti with a glass of champagne, or anything. I've taken some overnight trains in China and the ex-Soviet Union where higher classes mean nothing more than fewer beds in a cabin and compartment doors you can close. I have travelled in first class on Eurostar twice, and it's definitely more comfortable and the food you get is better quality than on a UK train (and you do get champagne, or at least, I've had sparkling wine) while looking out the window at the flat plains of Hauts-de-France. Which is still more interesting than looking out of a plane window at 40,000 feet at endless unchanging flat cloud).

Someone else who's travelled first-class on Eurostar is Curious Claire.

*{CLAIRE: When we talk about luxury travel, you know, transportation, we mostly think about air flight, but actually obviously there's trains as well, and for this trip to Belgium for my boyfriend's 40th, we went by Eurostar, and maybe this is the time to splurge on Eurostar upgraded seats. The tickets aren't a lot more than the normal economy seats, at least they weren't for this trip, and you don't get a huge amount more, you get like, they felt comfier, they definitely were bigger, there was more leg room, and you get food as well, and actually it was around the time of Wimbledon,*

*and they'd actually made the dessert look like a tennis ball, so you know, they put effort into it, but that was just a nice like, okay let's end the trip on one little splurge, one little high, and let's get the Eurostar upgrade, and it was very nice, I'm glad that we did it.}*

Of course I haven't mentioned true luxury train travel, of the likes of the Orient Express and the higher classes in inter-state trains in Australia. I've never taken any, for similar reasons as to why I don't go to posh parties. I just feel they're a little \*too\* formal, and I wouldn't feel comfortable in that environment. That's not to say I wouldn't try it once, because I think it'd be quite the little experience, just that it wouldn't be something I'm actively looking at at this moment. And while I like trains, the times I've done long (overnight or multi-day) journeys, they've been generally at the cheaper ticket end, because ultimately I'm comfortable \*enough\* on a train that I feel spending more would be like my spending more on a hotel - it's something I don't \*need\* to do.

True 'barefoot backpackers' would do the whole journey on local buses. Sometimes it's tempting. They have the same likelihood of turning up as a British train, at least. Sadly, money and time are the same thing and I don't have enough of either to take endless versions of the 591 to Halifax via Todmorden. You know you can fly from London to Sydney entirely on budget airlines like EasyJet, IndiGo, and JetStar? Yeh, I wouldn't necessarily do that either. But it's tempting.

Amanda Kendle says something similar, but more eloquently.

*{AMANDA: When it comes to luxury travel experiences, I kind of have mixed feelings and not very much hands-on experience of luxury, I have to say. Mostly, I guess, the biggest reason is I don't want to spend the money that luxury demands I guess. I would rather use that money to travel for longer with less luxury. That's, you know, more important to me}*

This, added to what she said earlier, presumably makes Amanda Kendle a Barefoot Backpacker. Well, she is Australian, I guess.

*{section separation jingle}*

I asked a couple of my travel blogger friends if they'd stayed in posh hotels. This is what Kate-Frankie said:

*{KATE-FRANKIE: Yeah I do get to see some of the more luxurious side of travel when I do it for work, and that's mainly for the security side of it, for some of the places that I go to, and to stay healthy so it has to be like you know clean safe food all the rest of it because we've got appointments to get to and events to do and so it needs to be like good locations and all of the facilities that we need sometimes like business centres are helpful to us.}*

She is being quite vague about what she does, which is fair, but it does bring up something I often forget about - that business travel is, well, the clue's in the name. The majority of people on business class trains, certainly, are doing so for business trips, and the cost isn't important as their business paid for their ticket. Your mileage may vary on whether business travel counts as luxury travel, but regardless of the company you work for, it's unlikely you'll be put up in a backpacker hostel. Although Laura did once meet someone \*in\* a backpacker hostel in London who was cabin crew for an airline, overnighing between shifts. I'm not saying which airline, but be assured it wasn't Emirates.

As you may know, I started my podcast shortly after being made redundant from the company I'd worked at for 20 years. I had many roles in that company, but the majority of them were, in various ways, analysing call centre work, both in terms of what our call centre advisors (both customer service and telesales) were doing, and who they were doing it for and to. I was based in an office in Nottinghamshire, but our call centres were scattered all around the world and every so often I'd pop over and visit them, sit with the staff, make passive-aggressive comments to team managers, and drink beer in the hotel bar. I say "scattered all around the world"; the most distant one we had was Northern Ireland and I never went to it; most of them were within an easy day trip from Nottingham in places like Leicester, Rotherham, Hull, and the wonderfully-named Ashby-de-la-Zouch which sounds vaguely continental but is actually in that bit of western Leicestershire people never think about. Consequently most of my business travel was spent in the front seat of a work colleague's car.

We did have a couple further out though, one next to Bolton Wanderers football ground, and another in a weirdly-sited business park in a large residential council estate in North Lanarkshire, not far east of Glasgow. This tended to be my only experience of expense hotels, but sadly the company had agreements with preferred hotel chains. As such, one of my most exciting business hotel trips was to ... the Premier Inn in Bolton Arena. Sometimes there wouldn't be a conveniently-located preferred hotel so I'd end up with something of a similar budget - a standard

guesthouse/B&B or something. In a sense, my old company's hotel policy was very similar to my own hotel policy. Which is not what most people think of when someone says "business trip" to them.

Given what I said at the start about hotels, you may be unsurprised to know I'm hard-pushed to think about the most luxurious hotel I've stayed in. Nor can Amanda Kendle, although she does bring up a possibility, related to business travel, that I've also only limited experience of.

*{AMANDA: In terms of luxury stays, luxury accommodation, I have had some really lovely places to stay, on media trips especially. I don't mind occasionally booking something relatively nice for me but nothing super expensive for the aforementioned reason. But I have had some really nice days and I do appreciate that, and it is really enjoyable to stay somewhere that feels beautiful But I don't know much about it, you know, people talk about thread counts on sheets, I don't care, I'm not counting those threads.}*

The least budgety hotels (I'm not going to say 'luxurious' – I've very rarely knowingly stayed in anything above a three-star establishment, not that star ratings are particularly meaningful) I've stayed in have almost certainly been while attending something to do with travel. I'm thinking particularly of the Hotel Passage in Brno, where I ended up during the Traverse Conference in 2022; it was a last-minute change of booking as the guesthouse I was supposed to be in cancelled on me. It's a quite central and predominantly business-oriented hotel – indeed it was also the hotel where the conference was held at – so while not posh and I had no need to count the threads on the sheets, it was certainly geared up towards people who cared more about a hotel than I do.

And of course there's the all-inclusive resort I was at with Laura in 2023 in Cyprus, on a blogger press trip funded by Jet2. I guess you could call that a form of 'luxury travel', given all the amenities and the scope of what is included. Again it wasn't the Ritz, it didn't have doormen and valets outside, dressed like it was 1902, it didn't have restaurants with huge art-deco ceilings, it didn't have 19<sup>th</sup> century artwork in the bedrooms, but it's rated at four stars and has a score of 4.5 on TripAdvisor, while The Ritz only has a score of 4.6. It's not necessarily somewhere I'd have chosen to stay if left to my own devices, given my travel ethos tends to be a lot more 'let's go out and see the place I'm staying, eat locally, sleep briefly, and move on', and I guess that was largely the point of being offered that trip by Jet2, but I'm glad I went and it was interesting to see what a little more money gets you.

Tipsy on cocktails, that's what it gets you.

Having said which, it is on what amounts to my bucket-list to have afternoon tea at one of the posh London hotels. Afternoon tea itself is ... it's one of those things that people look at with a bit of a raised nose, it's often seen as a bit 'pretentious', but equally, a lot of places offer it, including many who are grateful simply if people don't turn up for it in a football shirt. It's usually jam and scones, a selection of sandwiches (think salmon, cucumber, or coronation chicken, rather than peanut butter or fried sausage), cakes and sweet pastries, and a selection of teas that don't come in teabags – the likes of Lapsang Souchong, Rooibos, or Camomile. Champagne an optional extra. I had it once at Chatsworth House in Derbyshire, the sort of place that is still straight out of a Jane Austen novel, and that felt quite apt. Partly it's the ambiance; having it on the top floor of a hotel-cum-restaurant in central Glasgow doesn't have quite the same effect. In the same way that travelling business class on Air Europa from Madrid to London isn't quite the same as travelling business class on Emirates from Dubai to London.

Of course luxury hotels doesn't have to be overly expensive; it's all quite relative, as Curious Claire describes:

*{CLAIRE: I think it was the second time I went to Bali, and I was there for a month, and I went to Chengu, I have friends who you know it's a very big travel blogger base, there's someone I know there, and you know I'm in my 30s now, I'm in my mid 30s, jetlag is starting to get to me, and I've realised I just need a couple days to recover, and I got there and I told my friends I've booked myself a nice little place, I will speak to you after I'm done there, that's when I'll be sociable, so I had two nights in this private villa where the doors opened up into its pool, it was all private, it was secluded, but this was a treat that was worth, it was needed, I just needed a couple days to get over my jetlag and style, and the friends who live out there will go there often were like what are you doing, it's Bali, it's Chengu, there's so many cheap accommodations here, why would you go there, and I'm just like because it was so affordable, a private villa with a pool you can get to like just from opening your bedroom door, and there was another way around as well, it had an outdoor bath, shower, like it was like a Bali dream villa, and I'm like yeah, it's only £99, £99 in England gets me very little, £99 in Bali gets me luxury, it was worth it.}*

As you probably would guess, I'm one of those people who wouldn't spend £99 on a night in Bali when I could get something considerably more luxurious than I'm used to for maybe a third of that. I spent 4 nights in Bali a few years back (although I was still older than Claire is now); two of those nights were spent on a mattress underneath a

mosquito net, on the open balcony of a backpacker hostel by the sea in Padangbai. It cost £1.50. I'd spent more on my evening meal. It wouldn't have been hard for me to find something considerably more luxurious for considerably less than £99.

The last time I spent more than £99 on a hotel, it was a Premier Inn in Cork. And I was irked that that was considered cheap.

*{end pod jingle}*

Well that's about all for this pod. Join me again next time for another adventure Beyond The Brochure. Until then, remember, even barefoot backpackers wear metaphorical shoes sometimes. And if you're feeling off-colour, keep on getting better.

*{Outro voiceover:*

*Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, tell your friends that I rocked your socks. If you wear socks when listening to my pod; that's your call not mine. And don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.*

*You can tweet me @rtwbarefoot, and I'm the same name on YouTube, BlueSky, and Pinterest, or you can find me as Barefoot Backpacker on Instagram, Discord, and Facebook. Don't forget to sign up for my newsletter, and if you really like what I do, you can slip me the cost of a beer through my Patreon, in return for access to rare extra content.*

*Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure was written, presented, edited, and produced by The Barefoot Backpacker. The theme music is "Walking Barefoot On Grass (Bonus)" by Kai Engel, which is available via the Free Music Archive, and used under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.*

*Show-notes are available on my website: [barefoot-backpacker.com](http://barefoot-backpacker.com).*

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

*{Post-Credits contribution from CLAIRE:*

*During my trips themselves, I don't really focus on anything too luxurious, I mean sometimes I'll treat myself to a spa day, and depending where you are, where you go, it's sometimes not a big splurge, I don't know how much you want to class that as luxury, but when I think of luxury tours, the thing that comes to my mind is helicopter tours, and I have done one of those, and it wasn't cheap, I think it was like seven, eight hundred pounds each; we were on a trip to Hawaii when the volcano erupted, and the hotel kept emailing us to ensure us, you know, we were the other side of the island, we were fine, we were safe, like please don't cancel on us basically, and was talking to one of the staff, and he mentioned it, and I was like, you can take a helicopter over the active volcano, yes I am in, do not care what this costs, you can't afford it, sod it, I will pay for us both, I've never been so excited for something, and I will class this as my most luxurious tour that I've ever done, and it was an incredible experience to like actually be in a helicopter and go over, like an active volcano, you could see the lava pouring down, you could see when it reached the water, like the sizzle, it was incredible, I'd always wanted to take a helicopter ride, it was always on my bucket list, but I wanted it to be special, because I was like, I don't know if I'll ever do more than one, so I need my one to be special, and this was it, so that was 100% worth it in my opinion.}*