

Podcast 102: Comfort Zones - Their 'Nope' Might Be Your Tuesday

{INTRO:

CLAIRE: but a thought has just popped into my head of something else that I've been doing that's been breaking a comfort bubble and that is recording for these podcasts because I'm sure you remember my first recording for you was all over the place, I was listening to it thinking god this girl sounds like she's uncomfortable talking to a microphone, which you know I completely am but I think they're slowly getting better the recordings I'm sending you are less like incoherence babbles and me going ah what no what which is basically what you are getting the first few times so thanks to you I'm getting much more comfortable talking to my microphone. I'm not sure that's a skill I wanted but hey I guess it's one I'm getting thanks to you}

{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 :)

Those of you who are observant may have noticed that my last episode has changed slightly. I really was not happy with the sound quality on the recording, and given the subject matter, I wanted it to be as good a showcase as possible, so I re-recorded it. The old version was recorded when I was very tired, and it very much showed. Despite my dropping of a few paragraphs, it's come out at about four minutes longer, which ... when I'm tired I tend to rush my speaking and slur my words slightly, so that's actually a good sign.

I'm still not happy with the sound quality of it, in fact, but for a completely different reason now and not one I can easily fix. It's what happens when you record with a bedsheet over your head in an enclosed space.

Anyway. Traditionally I open my episodes with housekeeping, a summary of what I've been up to recently, but what's interesting about this podcast episode is that it's on 'Comfort Zones' and two of the things I've done in the past month fit in very well with that concept, although neither involve travel directly.

So, a couple of Mondays ago I went to the AGM of the British Guild of Travel Writers. I've been a member of them since the summer of 2021 but for one reason or another I've never managed to get to any of their events, or indeed make use of much of their resources. I say "one reason or another": let's be honest, it's mostly a main course of imposter syndrome, with a starter of 'Glasgow is a long way from London' (and even Calderdale isn't the easiest place to venture from). But I'd flown back to Heathrow from Maldives the night before, and the AGM was (unusually) scheduled for London the very next day, so it made sense to pop along. Even if AGMs in general are not noted for their excitement.

I don't need to go into detail about what was discussed, or things like that, but what I do want to say is something about how my mind processed it. I'm in a small room with some of the most prolific travel writers and journalists in the UK, including those who've been doing what they do for upwards of 40 years. There are people there who get more commissions for work in a month than I have pints of beer, for publications like The Telegraph and National Geographic. And I'm sat there thinking '.... I once had a story published in a Bradt Guides anthology, aside from that I just have a blog that no-one reads and a podcast that no-one listens to. I don't belong here'.

But then two things the Guild's Board said resonated with me; both things I knew but which I'd forgotten about. Firstly, the number of members of the Guild isn't anywhere near as large as you might imagine. Secondly, they 'vet' entry; potential members need to go through two rounds of assessment in order to be granted membership. And this means, me, sitting right here, little me, with my blog and my podcast and my 10,000 followers on a rapidly-disintegrating social media platform that no-one cares about any more, is considered 'worthy' and 'a peer' to all those long-standing journalists and award-winning photographers. And I just think that's quite affirming, you know?

This aligns with comfort zones in several ways; firstly it's rare that I make the effort to go to events on my own in the first place, so even being there was quite a step forward for me. Secondly, I even spoke; I asked more than one question, which means all the focus was on me for just a few seconds and that's really unnerving, especially in a room full of people who don't know you. But thirdly, and possibly most importantly, it challenged by imposter syndrome and even my ADHD by allowing me to believe that, yes I can do these things, and no they're not completely unobtainable. I am entitled to take advantage of the resources available, and see if anyone in the wider world wants to hear more about what I have to say. And that's quite a big step forward in my mindset.

Of course I've not quite got round to writing any pitches yet, but that they're at the forefront of my mind and I'm working on them at all is definitely an achievement. It's also why I fast-tracked my blog posts and why the previous episode of my podcast was on 'Travelling Maldives on a Budget' - if nothing else, I feel that's a subject many will be interested in. It might even make my next trip to World Travel Market more fun and useful - now that absolutely would be a breaking of my comfort zone.

Similarly, but in a completely non-travel-related way, earlier this month I broke my comfort zone by performing live on stage. I was reading out extracts from my teenage diaries in front of a live audience. You might have seen the pics on my Instagram feed. It was not as cringey as you might imagine.

It was at an event called Queer Diary. A few years back there was an event called Dear Diary, that encouraged anyone to stand up and read their old diaries; I never got a chance to attend any, for one reason or another. But a spin-off was created, with a much more specific Queer vibe. That's not to say the readings had to be specifically Queer-coded, just that the audience and event are much more LGBTQIA+ in outlook. Now, you might well wonder, what could I, who was brought up believing they were cis-het-allo, and who never had an inkling that they were actually none of these things, possibly read from my diaries? Especially given at the time I seemed to be predominantly obsessed with having crushes on some people I barely knew. One or two of whom might be listening, for the record. Hello Sarah.

But for me, the point wasn't about what I wrote about being Queer; it was more about what I *didn't* write about. There's quite a few interesting entries where, with hindsight, my asexuality and even my aromanticism makes an appearance, and it's definitely very clear the normal things teenagers talk about are notable for their absence - in the entirety of the diaries, covering maybe a year and a half, there is precisely one kiss, and even that was already written at the time as a bad idea. I suspect speaking even to my therapist about Louise would be beyond my comfort zone, even after all these years.

Anyway. Compared with other readings - diss poetry, tales of 'coming out', and dubious fan-fiction - my snippets of embryonic aroace-ness felt quite mild. But it resonated; I had three separate people come up to me afterwards to thank me for my readings and that it was really lovely to hear from someone who'd had the same thoughts as them, and that it meant they no longer felt quite as alone.

We can all make a difference, no matter how small it feels.

That I had good feedback is only part of the story here of course; that I felt comfortable to go on stage at all in the first place is also worth noting. But BB, you might think, what with all your travelling and your podcasting, surely you're more than comfortable being on a stage? And the answer is ... it depends. Like, sure, I'm more than happy to give 20-minute PowerPoint presentations, but generally only on subjects I know well. I'm much less comfortable when I have neither a complete working knowledge of something, nor a script to work from. I end up getting all flustered and lose my train-wreck of thought. Doing something like this, when all eyes are on me, is very much outside my comfort zone of being the centre of attention and be the one being listened to *in person* - at least with a podcast I don't need to worry about anyone listening. This is why I don't check my listener stats, by the way; that's another comfort zone boundary I have. While knowledge is power, sometimes ignorance is indeed bliss. To be fair it did help it was in a quite casual environment; an audience made up mostly of people who, while they may not have all had the same issues as a teen, could certainly relate, and it wasn't like anything I said was going to shock or challenge them. And an audience who weren't going to judge me on the way I presented myself, so I was able to wear and be at my most comfortable (purple-haired barefoot enbies wearing daisy dungaree shorts aren't exactly unusual), and that definitely helped my mindset.

In fact, it did get me thinking later about other kinds of performance. Like, I've done karaoke, but generally only when everyone else is drunk so it doesn't matter how bad I am (and it helps to sing karaoke songs that

match my register, which in my case seems to be country-oriented songs from the 1980s). I'm not sure how I feel about acting. Part of me is too self-aware to lose myself in the storyline; it's always in the back of my mind that it's all fake and therefore I can't easily convince myself that I can be convincing to an audience that it's not. Conversely when I've dabbled at it before, almost entirely at school, it felt quite natural and not at all as angsty as it feels in my head. Now that said, almost everything I've taken part in has had a degree of fourth-wall-breaking, which helps. You'd not catch me playing Willy Loman or anything of that ilk.

I'm also not sure how I'd feel about comedy, either stand-up or comedic performance – indeed the first performer on that night was a local stand-up comedian. And tbh, you may be unsurprised to hear the idea of the former scares the life out of me – like, people laughed when I read the humorous bits of my diary, or the angsty bits in a humorous way, and I know my writing style in my podcasts especially raises a few chuckles – but what if in general I'm actually not funny, but just think I am? As for other sorts of performance; like I used to write poetry and I've been known to stand on a stage and read it out – there was a group in Nottingham some 10-15 years ago that was a forum for exactly that. It always made me nervous doing it, and yet it always turned out fine. But I don't know it will be when I start, and as I say later in the pod, just because it was fine once doesn't mean it'll be fine again. There's a certain amount of bravery to put yourself on a stage and have people listen as you open your soul, which is what both poets and comedians do, in a sense; a kind of 'this is me, please like me'. And one of my comfort zones seems to involve a reluctance to put myself out there and be judged on my merits – again this is why I tend to not pitch travel stories, or put myself forward for promotions at work, etc. But that I've done these things in the past month, that my brain seems to be thinking 'yeh, I'm not as bad as I thought', maybe this is a comfort zone boundary I'm starting to shift.

Anyway. The only other thing ongoing is that the time until I attempt the Ultramarathon is rapidly decreasing; it's at the end of *this month*, so I'm very aware of it and yes, it scares me just as much as you'd imagine. Though, thinking about it, I guess that's *also* my breaking a 'comfort zone', in a way.

My takeout from this, my TL;DR, is that it's very easy to break a comfort zone, and we do it every day, perhaps without thinking. That's it, that's the pod, you can stop listening now – that you've downloaded it or listened this far means you're already counted in my audience stats.

But no. That would make me sad, if you did.

{section separation jingle}

So, this podcast is all about comfort zones, primarily but not exclusively, in travel. But I think first it might help to define what a comfort zone is, or rather, what the term means. Instinctively you know this, but based on first principles: Wiktionary (other dictionaries are available but for some reason I rather like it) defines a comfort zone in two ways: Firstly, the original, "The range of temperature, humidity, and other environmental factors that people or other organisms require in order to be physiologically unstressed.", and secondly, the idiomatic extension "The range of circumstances in which a person feels relaxed or able to cope.". And while we tend to think more about the second, more generic, definition, even in travel, environmental factors define our comfort zones. I know people who say "oh, I couldn't go on holiday there; it's too hot". And, let's be honest, I do look at when rainy season is before I think about going somewhere, because honestly it's not comfortable walking around taking pictures when you're just getting damp, and travelling around is much more tricky with road closures and fewer transport options, and businesses and hotels and restaurants tend to be more likely to be closed. I've been to the British seaside in February, and it's not an appealing place.

In terms of travel specifically though, I think, regardless of what someone's comfort zone *is*, and I'll talk more about that very shortly, there's definitely some common themes and identifiers. People will often talk about it in terms of something they're used to, what you might call a 'cosy bubble of familiarity'. That's to say, when people travel, they'll often go the same places, either the exact same destinations or at least something approximating to it. They might even stay in the same hotels. And when they're there, they might do the same things on their trips, eat the same foods, take the same kind of tours, etc. In a sense a kind of routine. I've spoken before about my old British friends who went to Germany for a week and ate McDonalds nearly every night because they weren't comfortable eating the German sausages. I've also spoken before about my old work colleague who tries to visit one of the Disney resorts at least once a year because it provides her with a way to 'switch off' from her daily life – her comfort zone being the travel equivalent of a childhood blanket that she knows really well and brings her warmth and joy.

And none of that is a bad thing, absolutely not. And indeed pretty much everyone does it to a greater or lesser extent. Everyone has a comfort zone. And they're deeply personal and universally relatable. They could be physical, emotional, or mental - for some, it's eating food that isn't from a familiar chain, while others will think nothing of nibbling down on a deep-fried locust. Yet their limit is something fairly mainstream in budget travel circles, like a shared bathroom. I'd say travel is a way to easily find yours and see where those boundaries lie. And as I'll come onto later, it's an easy way to test them, to poke them, as hard as necessary.

Amanda Kendle, from the 'Thoughtful Travel Pod', talks about that very point here, and about how travel *became* her comfort zone.

{AMANDA: So the funny thing is I can actually identify the first moment I began thinking about the idea of travel, stretching your comfort zone. I can absolutely picture where I was. It was the late 1990s, maybe 2000. I was catching up with my high school friend Claire in a lunch break from my uni job. We were sitting outside on the grass. It was a beautiful day. Anyway, Claire was telling me about her plans to take a year off. She was in the middle of a six-year medical degree and wanted a break. And she was explaining to me that the main reason was that she wanted to stretch her comfort zone, and she thought that travel would be a good way to do that. And funnily enough, she actually ended up coming home and switching to be an engineer instead. So, you know, travel has an impact. But it's just really funny because I have really held on to that concept forever ever since then. It wasn't something... Well, at the time I hadn't really articulated it, but I had always been trying to do it and it was only a year or so later that I moved overseas myself.

So I'm a big fan of travel as a really, I don't know, an easy way to shift your comfort zone or to stretch it. When I say easy, I mean there's lots of opportunities to do it. I think these days I'm really aware of what the boundaries of my comfort zone are and I'm much more intentional about trying to expand it or not}

But first let's go back to defining them, and, well, let's take hotels for instance. When I travel within the UK, I'll tend to always check the locations and prices of the nearby Premier Inn hotels. This is because they're a chain I know well, I know what I'm going to get when I stay there, they all more-or-less look and feel the same, it'll be comfortable (my flatmate was amazed to find you can buy their mattresses), it'll probably be convenient, and I appreciate the midday checkout especially on Saturdays if I'm doing a Parkrun. Just because I'm happy to sleep on a random someone's couch in small-town Ghana doesn't mean I'm going to the same in Grantham. I do possibly travel differently domestically than I do internationally, but that's perhaps a subject for a far-future podcast.

Does that make the Premier Inn my comfort zone? I guess so. Does it mean I won't go to a hotel a little more challenging? Of course not; in this case it's just a preference for something, but it ultimately doesn't really matter; it's unlikely my trip is going to be in any way changed by staying in a Travelodge. Or a 9-cubicle dorm above a pub. Or the Ritz, if we're going in the opposite direction. Dinner jacket for lunch. I don't know if I've ever worn a dinner jacket in my life. And I haven't owned a tie or sensible shoes since about 2007. My comfort zone is being unrestricted by formality; funky dungarees, flowing skirts, hippie shirts, and bare feet - it's blindingly obvious that I look and feel uncomfortable when forced into a suit or ballgown.

And actually, if we're talking about types of comfort zone like that, there is very much a psychological element to them. People like to feel calm - it's part of who we are, after all -, and it's the rare person that actively breaks this. That is to say, there's a kind of inverse relationship sometimes between comfort zones and, I guess, adrenaline. So activities like travelling to a new place, where you maybe have everything in a different language, or a different character script even, where there are different mores and social/cultural norms, or even where the look and layout of the streets and the shops and the environment is different, and where you can't find your familiar comfort food, that all breaks it; your brain goes on alert mode and there's so much more your brain is taking in. It can be overwhelming at times. It certainly means your first couple of days won't feel calm, quite the opposite in fact, and that's sometimes quite hard to get used to or appreciate. And sometimes it's a deal-breaker - there have been occasions when I've found it too overwhelming that I've come home, or at least moved on to somewhere different. I'll talk later about an early trip I did to Italy where this exact thing happened, but it's not the only one by any means - on previous podcasts I've mentioned a trip I did to Ethiopia in 2015, which I refer to as the £800 mistake (I did a blog post on it), where it was very much a case of 'right place wrong time', in that I definitely appreciated that I'd gone there, but I absolutely shouldn't have gone when I did, because with hindsight it was so far out of what my comfort zone was at that specific moment in time that I simply bluescreened. Entirely in my head. As these things are.

Amanda Kendle shares one of her comfort zone limits, which, honestly, I can definitely relate to.

{AMANDA: I still get worried about speaking to strangers in a new place, worried in the sense of I'm shy about that. But I know that the benefits are huge. I've done it many times and had really wonderful experiences, either really interesting conversations where I've learned a lot or I've made friends or whatever. So I push past that, you know, that edge of my comfort zone and try much harder to speak to strangers. So that's one thing.

Similarly, actually with speaking foreign languages. So I don't do this enough and I still try to push myself. It's a comfort zone I really want to stretch because I know the benefits of practising a language are amazing. Plus, of course, you know, see above really speaking to strangers. So in German, now I'm, you know, much more fluent and super comfortable. So I'll speak to anyone in German. But what I would really like to do is speak to more people in Japanese, even though I'm nowhere near as competent or fluent, but it's, you know, enough. And I hope to practice that later this year. So that's a comfort zone that I really do want to try and stretch further.}

This was part of what happened in Ethiopia, and absolutely a major aspect of my early Italy trip. I've spoken before on my podcast about travelling with social anxiety, about how I find it very difficult to speak to people, especially if that conversation needs to take place in a language I don't know. My comfort zone for communication is very shallow, much more so than other things, and it's one of the things I'm very conscious of.

Related to language, in a sense, but for some people, part of their comfort zone may be related inherently to their own culture. By that I mean, we know what we're comfortable with, in the sense that it's all around us every day and we're familiar with it and we know what to expect, so the idea of going to a new culture where some of none of these familiar things may apply, is quite scary. Hand gestures that are innate to you might mean something completely different elsewhere. Do you cross a road if there's no traffic coming but your lights are on red? Do you know how a café works – do you go to the counter, do you sit down first, when do you pay? If you don't know, and no-one tells you, and there are no signs, or they're in a language you don't understand, you might feel fearful and out-of-your-depth. And also, the way we're brought up might influence our view on comfort, and on your attitude to risk. So, for example, if your parents, your peers, haven't and don't ever leave your hometown, why would you? If there's no precedent and if by doing so you'll leave yourself open to being seen as 'the weird one'. And that answer could go one of two ways – you don't, because it's your comfort zone, or you do, because it's boring.

There might also be a sense of 'identity' when it comes to comfort zones and travel, that's related to the 'familiar', to the 'comfortable'. By that I mean you might always only do the same kinds of travel, and make it a part of who you are. Kind of what happens when you niche down so much that you become your niche. "I'm a cruise person" or "I only hike". You do one thing, which may have been out your comfort zone when you start, but you've got so used to it that you couldn't imagine doing things any other way now. Don't get me wrong, that's absolutely not a bad thing – indeed it can be quite rewarding as you're the subject matter expert and that's how people know you, and of course by that point you truly enjoy what you do, but while you might not think of it as a comfort zone, it very much is. A couple of years ago, I had a conversation with one of my online travel buddies (she blogs under the name of Becky The Owlet) who *is* an avid cruiser, and we suggested that it might be fun, and by which I mean, it would make fabulous content, if we 'swapped'; she'd drag me on a short cruise and I'd drag her backpacking around Bosnia. Neither of us have any history with or thoughts of each other's type of travel, so we would both be very much out of our comfort zones. As of yet, we haven't committed to doing it, but ... we've both been very busy?

And this of course helps to explain why people stay in their Comfort Zones; the combination of feelings of 'I did this before and had a great time, why change a winning formula', with a fear of the unknown, a feeling that new places can feel *too* risky or overwhelming. A feeling that travelling to a place or in a way that someone's not familiar with means you'd have to learn too much in a short time, either over-arching things like language, or simply things like mealtimes, what shops sell paracetamol, or how to use a bus. Hence why people, even if they do travel, might tend to prefer to do so to places that are familiar, rather than pushing themselves. Although if you think about it, that's actually a great way *to* test your comfort zone boundaries, and I'll come onto that a bit later.

There is also a question of 'being in control'. I know I've blogged and podcasted about this aspect before; even within myself where on the one hand I'm a random ball of chaotic energy (ChatGPT described me as a "gloriously unhinged travel gremlin" which, let's be honest, would go in my social media bios if there was enough room in them), whereas on the other I get angsty if I'm travelling and I don't know where I am or what

time it is – I’m one of those people on long flights who’ll default to the map view on the in-seat screen – so even taking a minibus across Benin with no idea where I am or how long the journey will take was something I found quite hard to do. Those of you who know me well will know I’ve travelled in much more precarious positions when I’ve also not been able to look out the window, but that’s a tale for a completely different podcast – go look at my “Health & Safety While Travelling” Twitter Space Episode for more detail on that, that my mother never commented upon.

So in relation to comfort zones, definitely having some level of control over what happens and what you do on a trip is important to many people. Having no surprises that will derail you, and also that you can change things if you need to. Some people *do* always need to know how long things will take, that they’re on time if they’re travelling, or what their plans are for the day to the minute, so they take holidays and trips that reflect this. It’s why tour groups are popular – someone else is taking control, someone you trust, and you have a set plan/itinerary that’s easy to follow. And if something goes wrong, there’s someone easy to complain to.

On a related idea, it’s much more within your control if, even if you’re travelling independently, you’re following in the footsteps of someone else who’s done it before. This is where having modern technology definitely helps; you can stay within a comfort zone even in a new place by following lists and guidelines from travel influencers, or looking at Google Maps and especially Streetview to see what a place looks like before you get there, so you know how to get around and where you need to change direction. It’s watching videos of people having stayed in a hotel before and seeing what the reception, the rooms, the breakfast look like. It’s chatting with other travellers and reading reviews and getting recommendations of places to eat, places to see, and, importantly, what to expect when you get there – easy to find out how much things cost, whether you need to book in advance, whether that café takes card payment or only cash. In a way, comfort zones be ‘created’ by others; if enough influencers or people you know go to a place, it becomes ‘familiar’ by proxy, and you get ‘used’ to the idea of it. It makes a new place feel more ‘approachable’, as opposed to going in without a plan at all. Or a map. Or, you know, shoes. But for example, so many people these days have posted images and videos of Sri Lanka that it’s become, well, a family destination, if my most recent trip is anything to go off. One of those places that used to be seen as ‘oh wow, you’re going there, I could never’, and now is, well, it’s very ‘Tuesday’.

Let me finish this section by bringing in my friend Claire, who blogs at Curious Claire. You heard her in the introduction pondering that recording for my podcast is slightly beyond her comfort zone, but I appreciate her breaking her boundaries in order to give my podcast more flavour. Here though she talks about how she’s experienced finding the limits of her comfort zones in her early travels.

{CLAIRE: So for me it wouldn't have been possible to start travelling without leaving my comfort zone. I am a very shy introverted girl and I was worse than I am now, I still am a little bit but I was way worse back when I first started travelling because this was a long time ago now and I was a shift worker and realised that the only way to start travelling was to do it by myself which did terrify me a lot. That first trip had so many little things, I actually wrote a whole blog post about all the little things that went wrong, like nothing major but just stupid things that I could have avoided if I actually knew what I was doing.

So for example, this was a long time ago before we had easy access data and Wi-Fi on our phones so I had printed out a paper map of how to get from the train station to the hostel which was literally just around the corner, I'd picked it by how close it was and I went out the wrong exit and then essentially made myself lost because I wasn't on my paper map and rather than thinking logically of why don't I go back inside, find the right exit and start again, no I just decided to freak out and I was in a country where they won't speak your language to them if you don't try and speak their language to them first so every time I tried to stop someone for help they were just like no no don't understand go away. So I had a little bit of freak out, I was so close to actually getting back on the train and going home and the only reason I didn't was because I had to pay for another trip home if I did that and I was like no it would cost you money to go home you're gonna stay here. I eventually found my hostel and it was all good but yeah that was just the start of the trip.

but even though that was the trip for me to test out solo travel, to test out coming out my comfort zone, by the end of the trip I wasn't actually leaving my comfort zone that much because I actually bumped into someone I knew and we spent the rest of the time together which was great, we had fun but I was supposed to be there to see what it was like you know travelling by myself making new friends which I was not used to I was not comfortable with and the girls in my room just ignoring me didn't help my panic of you know meeting strangers so when I saw him I was like yay I have a friend here and it just went to like you know being in my comfort zone which was not the point of the trip}

{section separation jingle}

Me: Hello :) It's time for a mid-episode break. Half time. Seventh Innings Stretch. That sort of thing. Put the kettle on. Grab a snack. Get comfortable. I'm just here to remind you ways in which you can get in touch and help this podcast out. You probably know this already, but in case you don't:

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I'm a big fan of promoting fellow content creators and podcasters. If you've got a podcast or vlog trailer you'd like to hear featured in this spot, drop it to me and get yourself heard across the world.

Now, on with the show.

{section separation jingle}

Now that we know what a comfort zone is, and why you'd have one, it's time to start thinking beyond its boundaries, about how you can push the edges of it, expand it, or you know, dismantle it completely. I don't actually recommend doing that as a first step; I mean sure there are people at the age of 18 who go 'you know what, I'm just going to take a backpack and travel around SE Asia barefoot for four months before I go to University or get a job'. The difference is, in a way, they're not actually breaking their comfort zone. In reality they're still finding what their comfort zone *is*, and it might be that travelling around SE Asia for four days is their comfort zone's limit. Conversely they might still be there now, probably in Chiang Mai, posting video selfies on their yoga mat to their 236,000 followers on Instagram. Probably without a work visa. Because it turns out doing legal admin work is beyond their comfort zone. To be fair though, admin is generally beyond mine.

Obviously there's a few simple and easy ways you can break a travel comfort zone, but obviously it depends on your starting point. One that's often cited is nothing more travelling to new destinations that you might otherwise haven't thought of. And yes, this sounds really simple, in the same way that telling someone with ADHD 'oh, just write things down and make a plan' sounds really simple. So let's break this down a bit to see how you can actually do it.

I think everyone develops their limits over time, and so, more importantly, expanding them while still feeling comfortable takes a bit more time to do successfully than simply buying a one-way ticket to Vietnam and hoping for the best. If you do things too quickly, you're more likely to hate every moment of it because you haven't prepared yourself for it - proper preparation prevents, and all that.

So. The first step is wanting to do it. This is probably, no, certainly, the most important. If you're only doing it because you feel you should, or because everyone else is doing it and you have some kind of misplaced FOMO, then maybe you need to sit down and think about what it is you *do* want to do that you can push yourself towards, whilst still hopefully enjoying it. Travel influencers are very good at making things like perfect. They are not perfect. Probably about 30% of my travel time is waiting for something to happen - a plane to leave, a restaurant to open, bedtime to be appropriate, that sort of thing. It's considerably more boring than it looks. Many people worry about things going wrong as being outside their travel comfort zone, but honestly, it's more in those moments of sheer boredom in a draughty and overly -luminescent bus station hearing the same announcements on endless repeat through a badly-tuned tannoy system that drive people to think 'actually, maybe working in the civil service isn't that bad really'.

But. Assuming you want to travel, but also assuming you've never left your hometown or equivalent and you're wary about it. The technique would be to build up slowly. So, take a few overnight trips in your home country,

a place you know well culturally, and which doesn't require learning anything new, or changing money. Where you know you can still get a Greggs Chicken Pasty, it just requires finding it. Once you've got used to familiar things being in a slightly different order, then you can get used to slightly different things – take a long weekend trip to a neighbouring country – much easier for British and European listeners than American ones, but honestly, Canada counts, but also, the Caribbean is Right There and definitely more familiar and convenient than not. Australian listeners at this point might want to invest in a startup researching teleportation devices.

Once you've got that far, that's when you might want to key in to things like group tours, cruises, and resort holidays. Visiting places that you're much less familiar and comfortable with, but in a setting or surrounding that makes things as simple and as hassle-free as possible. Indeed even I, a notoriously independent budget traveller and backpacker, have places that I'd be incredibly reluctant to visit on my own, for one reason or another. China, for instance; being somewhere like Guangzhou on my own would be quite far outside my comfort zone, especially if I had to then make my own way to Beijing on a train.

As you try more and more things, you'll get a feel as to what you find comfortable and what you don't, and if you push in gentle ways, getting further each time, it won't feel too stressful. Or shouldn't, anyway. My friend in Belgrade was once hosting one of her penpals, from Australia, and you'd've thought, you know, this is a place I don't know well, and I don't speak the language, but I'm with a friend who'll be with me so I can explore the city and the country from a local's point of view and it'll be really interesting. Anyway, a couple of days after she got there, the whole city marched on the presidential palace to overthrow Slobodan Milosevic. I guess those were the days when “do what the locals do” really meant something.

This leads into another comfort zone people might have when travelling – the whole ‘travel solo or travel with someone’ thing. Usually the barrier is travelling solo; it's something many people haven't done before and they're worried about being overwhelmed with no-one to help out, or having no-one around to beat the boredom of endless bus stations, or simply to provide a kind of accountability. I've been kind of lucky in a sense that in my early years of travelling, many of my trips were often to visit penpals, so all I had to do was get there.

Obviously, as you know, sometimes my comfort zone is the opposite – I'm more than happy to be solo, but the idea of travelling *with* someone can get me quite angsty. What if we don't get along? What if we don't want to do the same things? What if we have clashing travel styles? In my experience, sure there have been times when there's been snappy clashes, but for the most part I've only travelled with people I consider good friends anyway, so we already know we'll get along. The idea of tour group travel irks me partly because I have no idea who I'll end up travelling with and therefore if we'd all get on. I've only done it properly once, and that was to China, where the comfort zone of travelling with people was seen as easier to break than the comfort zone of travelling to a country of difficult admin and a completely foreign language and script. Sometimes you have to compromise. One well-noted example here is Laura likes to book flights as far in advance as possible. I've booked international flights on the day I've travelled. It's a very big difference in style.

There's of course many other ways to push your boundaries, especially small-scale. Eating weird foods – “Meat” versus “Named Meat” on menus, that kind of thing. Being around irksome critters – sometimes you do need to share your bedroom with a lizard. Challenging your senses – noise, especially; if you're used to living in quiet suburbia then a central hotel in a country like Morocco is definitely going to be a bit of a culture shock and put you out of your familiar environment. There's even accommodation itself – try a backpacker hostel or even camp in a tent, rather than 4* hotels. Or versa of course. Even if just for one night. Or there's hobbies and activities – do the day trip, visit the market, take the bus, attend the cooking workshop. See if your accommodation has any recommendations, and even join a group who are going but need an extra person to make it cheaper. Make the friendship bracelets, take the moment and taste it. You've got no reason to be afraid. Or something.

Now, it could go either way of course: either you'll try something and go 'I really liked that, let's do it more', or it could be you go 'I tried bungee once, it wasn't for me'. Food is an interesting example with that – like, I've eaten fish eyes. It was awful. Not doing it again. But I did it once. And similarly, there's the Central Asian obsession with horse milk. They make a sweet, like a gobstopper. It's got the texture of a neutron star and tastes like someone's left a yoghurt out in the midsummer heat. I have no wish to try it again. Conversely I like deep-fried locust. Tastes like the dregs of a KFC bargain bucket. The only snag is when the antennae get stuck in your teeth. But it is interesting and rewarding to break your comfort zones. It's useful to see what your soft and hard limits are, and what you've built up in your head to be too hard, as compared to what is genuinely beyond your abilities. You don't know unless you try.

Also, and I think it is going to sound a little odd, but something like having a bucket list can help. You all know how I deride bucket lists, but this is something I only really thought about when I was writing this pod. See, it goes back to a desire to be in control. If you think about it, a bucket list, when plotted methodically, can be a way to help foster that sense of being in control over what you do. In its simplest terms it's merely a list of things, usually quite easy-to-write short snippets of desire, like 'go on safari, climb that mountain, see that palace' and the like. But once you start planning, you get more knowledge about how you, even you, you too can go about Achieving This Personal Goal In Ten Easy Steps, or something. But also, having it on your bucket list gives you accountability, it gives you a *reason* for doing it, rather than just the fear of FOMO. As it were. And with travelling - a safari is a great example since a proper genuine safari will be beyond your familiarity zone if you live in Basingstoke and you've never travelled beyond the A40. So you have to learn about your destination, how safaris work, how to get there, how much it costs, etc etc, and all the time you're learning, it's becoming more familiar, you can more easily visualise it, you're not just going in blind. You start to think 'yep I can do that'. It's likely a bucket list item isn't truly 'beyond your comfort zone' even if it feels like it at the time, and the knowledge you learn gives a sense of safety in the structure, even if the location itself is beyond your ken.

I've kind of done that myself. As you know, I hiked across Great Britain in 2019, and that was a bucket-list item, insofar as I had an idea one day that it would be cool to do, and never quite managed to get my brain to dump that idea as being silly and unobtainable. And while hiking 952 miles is probably beyond most people's comfort zones, while I was on the hike I made sure I never pushed any one thing too far beyond my comfort zone to make me quit. So, for instance, I could have bivvied rather than stayed in a tent, which would have made my pack much lighter and easier to carry. It crossed my mind; I chose not to because I realised I'd be more comfortable overall with a defined roof and a space free of slugs and midges. Indeed I could have camped overnight more than I did, but the nights were I stayed under a solid roof were because at that point in time, I felt I needed to for the sake of my mental health, if nothing else. I could have eaten differently, used my camping stove in more ingenious ways, but I kept mainly to couscous because it was easy to cook, easy to carry, and I knew how to make it work. So travel beyond a comfort zone in general, but with guardrails or stabilisers, in a sense.

And, related, as the song goes, you gotta know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em. It would be irresponsible for me to push you to breaking limits; comfort zones exist for a reason. And I am absolutely not a role model. By which I mean, I do these things to show you that comfort zones can be broken. You don't have to follow in my footsteps. Indeed, you probably shouldn't. What you should do though is blaze your own trail. You don't even have to get out of your comfort zone to do that, that's your choice. I just want to show you the possibilities. Even when it goes wrong for me.

I've mentioned in passing about my Italy trip in 2002, and I was going to talk more in detail about it on this pod. However it turns out I didn't keep any kind of travel diary on it, there's no extant notes on my computer relating to it, and the only evidence that it even happened are a couple of photos (undigitised, and in a box in Kirkby-in-Ashfield) and a copy of one penpal letter I sent, in the days when I typed them rather than hand-wrote them. It's possible I've subconsciously removed that trip from my memory.

At the time I was living in Birmingham, in a house that was supposed to have been The Family Home, but I'd recently split from my long-term partner (Laure, or as some people know her, 'the French one') and indeed she'd formally moved back to France the week before. So I was already in a somewhat precarious mental state. My reaction seems to have been 'I need to go on holiday to get out of this place, to provide a break with the past for a bit and define a new future', which ... doesn't always work, let's be honest, despite it being a mainstay of Hallmark-type movies. I popped along to the local branch of STA travel and, after a bit of a natter, got myself an Italy rail pass. I'd never been to Italy before, always felt like I should, so why not.

Listener, going to a place where you don't know the language, don't know the culture, when you're an introvert, travelling solo, while under an entire mental vibe of '... but I shouldn't be solo, she should be here', is probably a series of good reasons why not.

I'd planned ahead, booking places online (it was the early days of the Internet, for sure, but it was certainly becoming more popular), and had a rough itinerary worked out. I'd start in Trieste, head down the east coast a bit, make it to Rome, go visit Pompeii, then come back up to The North, apparently Milan, and then head home. Two weeks, it would be.

I managed one. And even that was a slog. I guess I just felt lonely and bored. I wrote in the penpal letter that “my days were spent endlessly walking round in hot weather (as hot as an English summer, which in March isn't really what you expect) looking at piles of old stones, and there's only so much of that you can take without going spare.”. That's quite a damning indictment of over 2,000 years of history but I'd suggest if your heart's not in it to begin with, you find it hard to see the joy and excitement in anything much. Everywhere Is Interesting, but you have to want to be interested by it, I guess. It also didn't help that I was finding it difficult to understand and be understood (which, you know, that's on me, but still), and because everyday things were unfamiliar, my mental state made this less of a curious learning situation and more of a full-on comfort zone breach of panic. Even simple things like 'how cafes worked' - should I sit down first, should I go to the counter first, I don't want to look like a tourist who doesn't know what they're doing, oh my god I'm so embarrassed, it's just easier if I don't go into another one ever again'. I didn't eat a lot on that trip, and that probably didn't help my mood either.

I made it as far as Naples. I didn't even get to Pompeii; I just reached the city, went to the backpacker hostel, collapsed on my bed, and cried. I made the decision there and then that for the sake of my mental health, I should just cut my losses and go back home. I could visit Italy another time, when I was much more ready for those comfort zone challenges. It was another example of 'right place, wrong time' - I really should have ventured somewhere I was either more familiar with personally, or at least more familiar with culturally. It's very interesting that my next few trips abroad were to China on a tour group trip (so, unfamiliar place but seen in a very comfortable and safe environment), to the USA, and then to Australia (both culturally similar places to the UK). I went back to Italy several years after, when I finally did make it to Pompeii, but that was with my friend Sarah; I didn't do another solo trip to somewhere significantly 'different' for another ten years - when I visited South-East Asia in a much more solid peace of mind.

Not gonna lie though; that I came back early from that Italy trip really heightened my sense of failure and it took me a long time to get over that.

One thing this does go some way to showing though is that comfort zones make interesting, personal, and relatable stories, especially when you break them, and even more especially, when they break you, as happened to me in Italy. In general, people like tales where things go wrong (for other people), or where there's tension and emotion - in a sense, it's talking about something outwith most people's comfort zones, but acts as a form of escapism. Like, idk, crime fiction. It allows people to live, travel, vicariously through others from the safety of their own home. But also (cf Instagram v Reality) people don't want as much curated, they want real, gritty, experiences. If people hear you had a fabulous trip to somewhere luxurious, they're going to think you're a bit full of yourself. Tell them you nearly lost your luggage and shoes at a random international border in West Africa, and they go 'oh, I could never do that, tell me more!'. (As an aside, ChatGPT suggested that that story is the perfect metaphor - I crossed the border, lost all my comfort, and had to face the liminal zone (physically and metaphorically) between Benin and Togo all the while veering between “this is fine” and “I may never see my stuff again.” And then poof, chaos resolves, driver returns, shoes reunited - the world rights itself. Sadly it was less stressful than I make it sound - I knew he had to come back; I hadn't paid him yet.)

Conversely, looking at the wider concept of travel blogging, it's noticeable the travel space is absolutely awash with “look at this aesthetic latte” and “here's how to be brave in Bali” content, all of which is very popular, and with good reason, because this is catering to an audience who actively want to experience those things. Stories about breaking comfort zones are more memorable, but possibly less ... and I'm sure this is the wrong word but, 'useful'. Tales of unfiltered, unsanitised, offbeat exploration, with a wink and a shrug and maybe a dash of fermented horse milk are more interesting, but fall very much in the “I go to these places so you don't have to” field; escapism, yes, but not necessarily things viewers are going to bookmark and come back to time and again. And, for every thousand people looking for a cute café in Lisbon, there might only be one person thinking, “What happens if I get stuck at a border with no shoes?”. That's probably an overestimate by several orders of magnitude, let's be honest, even in my Instagram bubble.

There's also the thought that, if you are in a position where you find you're well outside your comfort zone, and you might not be terribly happy about it, you're less likely to record your feelings at the time, because your primary thought is to resolve the issues and get back into your comfort zone. There are no selfies of me stuck at the border with no shoes. There are very few pictures of anything of my time in Ethiopia. There's almost no record at all from my first trip to Italy. The misadventures are more interesting, for sure, but also less likely to be documented.

Of course, some people go out of their way to challenge their comfort zones - actively travelling in order to break barriers (and possibly yourself). They'll purposely go to places that are hard (it's not uncommon for me to see, even given the world in 2025, people casually posting from trips to places like Afghanistan and Eritrea), or purposely dispense with technology ('let's pretend it's 1995 again, and see how I manage'). It doesn't need to be that extreme of course; people travelling and purposely not booking hotels in advance, or purposely even reducing luggage and forcing themselves to manage on a limited resource. As an aside, when I travel solo I tend to back enough clothes for five days, regardless of the trip length, on the grounds that's all I can realistically carry in hand luggage, and if I'm going to have to wash clothes once, it doesn't then matter how often I have to wash them. Other people find this odd; maybe going to laundrettes or arranging laundry with hotels is beyond people's comfort zones?

Thing is though, that makes it possible to go 'too far' the other way. Remember I said earlier that one reason to break a comfort zone might be because of the adrenaline boost it brings? Well, it's very possible to become what you might call an 'adrenaline bore'. People get too caught up in the idea that if they do something wild once, they have to keep doing it to "prove" something. Or you end up pushing yourself too hard in order to prove a point and that's when it gets dangerous to your own self. It's doubly dangerous when you add in peer pressure to the mix. Like, "oh they bungeed off the Sydney Harbour Bridge, I need to bungee off the Golden Gate Bridge" or "they went around the world with a 10kg backpack; I'm only taking 6kg" or "their budget was \$30/night, I'm making mine \$20 and I'm going to sleep with the cockroaches and eat them too". No-one likes a one-upper. Be authentic, not performative.

Now, people do look at me as if I've gone mad when I tell them I've solo backpacked barefoot around West Africa without a plan and ended up getting stuck in all manner of scrapes more than once (not recommended, not a role model), but in my case I wasn't doing it to be 'more' than anyone else (one might argue the very act of visiting Burkina Faso itself would be enough to trigger those thoughts, regardless of anything else), I was just being my genuine authentic chaos gremlin self. That said, my mother literally saying to me once "please don't start a coup" is inherently funny. She thought I was going too far in my deep travels around the world, but as I've said before, she still thinks it's 1983 and therefore everywhere I go is dangerous; this is why she sometimes called me 'Che Guevara'. Hmmm, "Please Don't Start a Coup: One Enby's Journey Through Borders, Bureaucracy, and Bad Decisions." Instant bestseller.

I do have some hard limits. As you know, my things I would not do (travel edition) includes bungee, rollercoasters, parachutes, and a lot of water-based stuff. For some, they're all just fun and average Tuesday activities, but for me they're absolute no-nos. And, going further, there are people who do things like, you know, free-climb 400m cliff faces. I will not be doing that. For self-evident reasons.

Nor would Amanda Kendle.

{AMANDA: Another comfort zone area is kind of the physical comfort zone. So for example, I'm not a thrill seeker adventurer type. I will never jump out of a plane and I'm totally okay with that. It's fun for some people. It's not fun for me. I just feel that that's a comfort zone I don't necessarily feel the need to push and, you know, I'm just that kind of person. I get my thrills in other ways, I suppose. But that kind of adrenaline junkie kind of physical comfort zone, I have never enjoyed that stuff and I don't feel the need to do it.}

Apparently I would do beach resorts. Here the issue was less about abject terror and pushing myself beyond what I felt safe in, and more to do with my intense dislike of being bored, of being stuck somewhere with nothing to do but hang around. But as you heard in my last episode, I didn't object too much to being on a sun lounger for the best part of three days doing nothing but staring out to sea. I don't think I could handle a week of that, mind, but then I didn't think I'd manage three hours, and yet here we are. That said, one important thing with regard to me and comfort zones is related to my social anxiety, and is very much 'just because I've done it once doesn't mean I can do it again, at will, easily'. I again talked about that in my episode on social anxiety, but it's why the scariest part of my trips are always the last ten minutes before I reach a new place. And not just because 53% of all aircrashes take place on landing (stats from IATA, covering 2005-2023). Just because I've walked into a café one day and asked the person behind the counter for a samosa and a hot chocolate in Bangladesh doesn't mean I can do the same in Paraguay. Or even do the same the next day in Bangladesh. Each event is a stand-alone process and has no bearing on what's gone before. A bit like a coin being flipped doesn't know what it landed on last time it was flipped.

One holistic thing to mention about me specifically, is that despite being a ball of chaos, I don't know how far I'd go with travelling without a plan at all - like, turning up to an airport with debit card in hand and go "welp,

where's the next flight to that has seats?" Or be like an old TV series called *The Dice Man* who rolled dice to decide what to do next. I know there's a whole "Secret Destinations" thing that's really popular, where you don't know where you're going until you get to the airport. I don't know how I feel about that; for me it's taking away choice which I don't feel comfortable with except under very specialist circumstances that usually involve rope. I'm sure there's scope for a travel adventure blog for someone to be shoved in a bag into the back of a van and driven somewhere random around the world to start a new adventure in an unplanned and unexpected place. I'm not saying I wouldn't be up for that, just the admin would be a nightmare. But, I guess, that wouldn't be my problem.

Obviously though I'm well noted for waking up in the morning and not knowing which country I'll be in that night; I like that sense of freedom and structured chaos (in that I'd plotted out potential alternatives, it was just a case of life showing me which one I'd take) - though as I'm sure I've said before, I once asked Twitter 'should I go North or South' before I went to bed; on awaking I noticed the poll was exactly 50-50. Some help they were!

This does of course lead to a potential miniseries: "No luggage, no shoes, no plan. Just me, an internet connection, and a debit card. What could possibly go right?".

{The Barefoot Backpacker. No luggage, no shoes, no plan. What could possibly go right?}

ME: It's 4pm, it's raining, and I don't know where I am! Sadly, nor does the tuk-tuk driver ...}

Imagine if Anthony Bourdain and Kyle Pilkington had a feral love child who never packed socks but always had stories. Our host, the delightfully chaotic Barefoot Backpacker, hits the road with literally nothing but a debit card, a passport and vibes to show what happens when you ditch the itinerary, go beyond the brochure and trust the journey.

TANNOY: "We are sorry that the 13:47 service to London Euston has been cancelled.

ME: Oh for forstar's sake

Every episode is a new place, a new challenge and a new brush with mild disaster. After all, they go to these places so you don't have to.

{wind}

ME: Well, as views go, this isn't one of them.

Comfort zones are obliterated. Real people, real places, real moments, not travel brochure fluff, with personal storytelling at the heart.

ME: What the ... it's locked! {banging on door} Locked! {goat noise} There's a goat, there's a freakin' goat! Have you swallowed the key? Have you? {goat noise, scared} {rustling}

One enby, no shoes, no luggage, just pure chaos.

Join the Barefoot Backpacker as they explore the world without a plan and somehow lives to tell the tale.}

{end pod jingle}

Well, that's about all for this episode. Join me next time for another adventure *Beyond The Brochure*. Until then, remember that everything you want in the world is just right outside your comfort zone, unless it's in your fridge, and even then you might be too comfortable on the sofa to get it, 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.

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Show-notes are available on my website: barefoot-backpacker.com.

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