Podcast 107: 100 Countries in 50 Years

{INTRO:
V: If I asked you all the questions that I had come up with over the last two weeks we would be here until a week Tuesday and I think that would be a bit long for a pod.}

{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 getting a bit chilly again here; definitely autumnal vibes. I'm not at the stage where I need to put the heating on, of course, but we are in 'I need to wear a jacket when I go outside' territory. At least for a bit. Then the humidity kicks in and I get all sweaty. Have I ever told you how much I dislike the UK's dank Autumn days?!

The weather almost behaved itself for the ultramarathon I mentioned in my last episode. Almost being the operative word. I'm not going to go into too much detail about the run overall, as I think it might be part of an upcoming storytelling vignette; all I'll say about it is compared with my last attempt, this one felt much easier and I didn't take anywhere near as long to recover – though I was a bit achy and slow on the Sunday morning, I was definitely mobile and not suffering too much. That it was only 50km and relatively flat probably helped.

As for the weather, well the forecast changed several times over the week before and at one point it looked like it was going to be heavy rain all day, but fortunately we just got coastal drizzle and a bit of wind; not ideal conditions but not entirely unpleasant, tho it did get slowly worse over the day. And previous days' rain meant the mud in parts was unwelcome. One of my friends was doing the 100km version and she got harder rain as the evening drew in; she didn't finish her run, very damp, till I was long asleep, much drier.

Not a spoiler by the way, but I did complete this one, and felt pretty comfortable, or at least 'didn't go through existential angst', for probably the first 43km. A better nutrition pattern definitely helped, and I have Things To Say about electrolyte energy gels and their effect on my body and performance. Would I do it again? Probably, though I was definitely right to only do the 50km and that's something to bear in mind for the future.

I managed to come home with a bit of a sniffle, so I've not done much outside since then apart from a few ambles to the supermarket. Our big news is that we put our Christmas Tree up last week (23rd September). Well, Laura did, it's her tree, not mine. I generally ignore Christmas. It's never been a day I think about tbh. But Laura, well, she loves Christmas. It's her favourite season. She has a tendency to be able to concentrate better when listening to Christmas music. But at the end of this month, she's moving to a very small apartment in London – my therapist is already aware – and she won't have room for her tree. Plus she's away on holiday this year at Christmas anyway, so even if she could take her tree, she wouldn't be around it at the opportune moment anyway. So she wanted to celebrate/enjoy the Christmas season, with a tree, when she was able to, so she still had the vibes this year even if not at the right time! Given it's her tree, and given my general inaction in everyday life, it's likely that tree will now stay up and in place until Laura comes back up to visit me in, I don't know, mid-February maybe? It's kinda nice to have a bit of light and sparkly joy, especially now we've passed the Equinox so the darkness is longer than the daylight.

When I posted about this on my Instagram Stories, the most common question wasn't the one you'd think. In fact, it was referencing the fact we've gone straight to Christmas and completely passed over Halloween. The thing is, she's very much a Halloween Girlie, but was brought up in a culture that really acknowledges it. She hates that the UK doesn't really celebrate it anywhere near as much – otherwise that tree would be laden with Halloweeny decorations, for sure. So yes, in spirit we're acknowledging it, but in practice, we've just gone

straight to the Big One.

{section separation jingle}

So, 100 countries in 50 years. It's the sort of thing that gets you an article in the Metro. I'm working on that. But in lieu of something with more Reach (PLC), I'm doing a podcast about it instead.

I don't know what 8-year-old me would have thought if you'd told him that when he was older, he'd have been to over half the world. Honestly I think he'd have just been disgusted to realise that he was old. And not a he. But I'd like to think he'd've been proud of me; he would spend so much time reading atlases and encyclopaedias, learning about what the world is, and memorising things like capital cities and countries. But strangely not the flags.

As you know, the first country I set foot in outside my own was Denmark, slightly unusual I think for a 1980s Brit of my demographic who'd've probably been more likely to have gone to France, Ireland, or Spain. It never crossed my mind that nearly 40 years later it would have been the first of that many – though as I've noted before, at the time there were far fewer countries and half of them were inaccessible to a Brit anyway, so I guess 'visiting every country' and the like simply wasn't an achievable goal so no proto-influencers were doing it.

I never counted countries until recently, even when I first started to dabble in social media and speaking with other travel bloggers, who very much did. People would ask me 'so how many countries have you been to', and I'd have to answer vaguely, along the lines of 'I don't know? About 60 maybe?'. I did occasionally check but I always ended up forgetting the answer pretty quickly afterwards. I guess it wasn't really that important; like age, it was just a number. Indeed the only reason it was ever that high in the first place was because I have always preferred visiting new places over revisiting old ones, though I will speak about that later with a little more nuance. In fact the only reason I definitively started counting was precisely because I knew I was getting close to the round 100 figure and I was interested to know when and where I'd reach it. Well, that, and, I was closing in on my 50th birthday, and my flatmate and travel-companion Laura was keen for me to have hit 100 before then, just because it would be a cool thing for me to say I'd done.

This is why it seems like I've done some weird and intensive trips in the last couple of years to places that I otherwise wouldn't have visited. When you only get short trips available because you work full-time, you need to travel to places with a large number of countries in a small area. And I'd already visited the whole of Europe.

Well, almost. There was one country in Europe I'd yet to visit, one of the nearest to where I live indeed, and it seems kind of appropriate that if I started this adventure in Denmark, my 100th country should have been Norway. And I'll be doing a specific episode or two on that trip later in the year.

Of course, being truly on-brand, if you know me and my adventures over the last decade, you'll know it really should have been Bolivia. I'm sure I can find an appropriate time to visit. Possibly my 200th country. There might well be 200 countries by then.

To acknowledge these milestones, I felt it made sense to do a podcast episode reflecting on the journey. But rather than just me talking about all 100 countries and giving a brief synopsis of my vibes, I decided to get my friend V to ask me questions about it; V's a great interviewer for this partly because she is absolutely not a world traveller so therefore finds it easier to ask the simple questions that I just take for granted. Our conversation was recorded on video, on Zoom, and later this month an edited version will be available on our respective YouTube channels. The full audio version I'm also going to make available on my Patreon page; for the purposes of this podcast I'm just going to take some selected questions and then give a bit of context. I hope you find it interesting.

{section separation jingle}

It was around 1999 when I looked at a map and set myself two targets to achieve before I died, both around travel. One was to visit every county and comparable second-tier admin areas in the UK, a task made all the more difficult by successive governments changing what they were. I do not keep a track of this. That would be a full-time job. The other was to visit every capital city in Europe. Not just every country, every capital. Which

you would have thought would be much easier to track and complete, as unlike counties, country capitals don't tend to change very often.

As of recording this podcast, I am between one and five short, depending on your definition of capital, visit, and Europe – I have never been to Helsinki, my experience of Podgorica was a transfer for the best part of an hour in the bus station, and given some definitions of capital, I've only been through Den Haag on a train. In addition, I've been to neither Astana nor Ankara, neither of which are in Europe even if a small part of their respective countries is. But then Europe is merely a peninsula of Asia anyway.

If I'm having this much trouble with something as simple as European capitals, imagine how I feel about counting countries. And this was V's first question to me, because, well, when you say you've been to 100 countries, you kinda have to justify it.

{V: It would make sense I think, to start off by saying, for the purposes of you saying you've visited 100 countries in 50 years, what counts as a country and what counts as a visit?
B: Visits easy. I'm taking the view that a visit is pretty much I have set foot in the country, I have been stamped into the country, and I have done something in that country. So for instance, for a long period of time, I didn't count that I'd been to Germany, despite that I've been through it for several hours, twice on a coach, because all I'd done was literally transited it and been to a motorway service station. And I didn't count that as a visit, because I hadn't really been there. But equally, and also obviously I don't count airport layovers because you haven't been in the country, you've just been in the airport. And most countries, if you're transiting the airport, you don't even get stamped into the country. So there's a couple of countries that I've been to who's been and is a bit dubious. So for example, I've been to Turkey, but my trip to Turkey was basically a 13-hour layover in Istanbul. So I've been to Istanbul. I have been to a lot of the museums in Istanbul. I have eaten in Istanbul, but my entire time in Turkey has been just 13 hours in Istanbul. So I've been there, but I haven't really been there.
V: So do you count that one?
B: Oh yeah, obviously. The most ludicrous is the eight hours I had in Thailand between the Laos border and the Cambodian border. And I was sort of going through it. One coach, too many buses, and the back of a motorbike. So I set foot in the place. I got stamped into the place. I ate in the place. I had a wander in the place. I didn't see anything particularly much in Thailand, but I'm counting it because I physically set foot in the place and I did things in the place and I bought things in the place. I will, however, for the avoidance of doubt, at some point go back to Thailand.
V: I can't imagine you in a motorbike.
B: I did fall off within the first 100 meters.
V: That is very on brand.
B: It was a heavy backpack. But yeah, that's what I'm counting as a visit. I'm counting a visit as I've been stamped in and I've done something in that country.
V: It doesn't count if you've just been in the airport but if you've left the airport eating something, having a wander around that counts.
B: Yes. And it doesn't count if I've transited through on a bus or a train. There have been in the past countries, I've done that. I've not set foot in the place, I'm not counting that. As for what counts as a country, that's a dubious issue. We all have our own definitions of country. For me, it is, strictly for this. I'm basically going by independent sovereign states. Even that's a bit dubious. I am counting Kosovo because it's got its own entry and exit requirements. And if you go into Kosovo, that doesn't mean you haven't, that doesn't mean you've got been to Serbia because you still have to cross the Kosovo-Serbian border and the Serbians don't like you doing that. So I'm counting Kosovo because it is a standalone entity. There's two aspects to this. There's de facto and de jure. De jure is what the law says about what is a country and who owns a particular country. De facto is what happens on the ground. I don't really care about the de jure situation. All I care about is, in practical terms, do I need to do anything different?
V: As in a 'Does it cause you any admin' kind of way?
B: Yes. That works either way because there are certain countries that I haven't been to that, there are breakaway states in where the admin is easier for the breakaway state or traditionally was like Kurdistan was easier to get into than the rest of Iraq and things like that.
V: Is that just because Kurdistan was quite chaotic at the time and nobody really knew who was in charge of border control?
B: No, it's the opposite. Somaliland is another one which is on my list of visit because Somaliland is more coherent than the rest of Somalia. But no one else recognizes those independent countries. It's like Transnistria. Transnistria is one I have been to that I'm not counting as a country. Even though technically I

probably should based on my own criteria, but I'm trying to keep it to just the sovereign states. So Kosovo is one of the two that are a little bit dubious. I'm counting Kosovo, but I'm not counting Palestine.
V: Why?
B: Because one of the aspects, one of the criteria that I've got for is it a sovereign independent country is - can it act alone without pursuant to a foreign power? And with the greatest will in the world, Palestine can't do a lot unless Israel tell it to. So while it's technically an independent country and while it's technically a member of the UN, in practical terms, it's not as independent as I would like it for the purposes of my counting countries.
V: OK. So based on that same sort of criteria, you wouldn't count Scotland as a separate country.
B: No, because it isn't.
V: Yeah, but it's got like... It's not its own currency, but it's got its own money, it's got its own language, it's got its own cultural norms.
B: Yes.
V: And a lot of the people in Scotland see themselves as being a separate country.
B: Yes.
V: It might have been easier to use Barcelona as an example there, actually, with Catalonia.
B: To be fair, there's no real difference between Scotland and Catalonia. And while we're at it, there's no real difference between Scotland and Catalonia and somewhere like Alabama. The American states have a lot of independent power, but there's a lot of stuff that they don't control. So I'm counting... Scotland is not a country in the same way that, you know, Minnesota is not a country. Where it gets dubious is Gibraltar.
V: Yes.
B: And territories like that that are...
V: And it's going to say it's a bit muddy in the middle there, because I would say that, like, even though it can't act independently, and I'm sure that I'll upset that some people by saying this, Palestine to me is more of a country than Scotland is.
B: Yes, Palestine is more of a country than Scotland. I would say Gibraltar is more of a country than Palestine. What Gibraltar is ...
V: Is Gibraltar British? We don't know?
B: That's the problem. I don't know why Gibraltar, the Isle of Man, Guernsey, Jersey, the Falkland Islands, the Cook Islands, Niue, aren't counted as independent countries. But they're not 'not' independent countries.
V: Right.
B: And I genuinely don't understand... This is the problem with counting countries. This is the problem with defining what a country is, working out the edge cases. I'm not counting Gibraltar, others would.
V: You've been to Gibraltar.
B: I've been to Gibraltar.
V: And you've been to Palestine and Scotland and a lot of the other places that we've just spoken about.
B: On my list is a visit to Guernsey and Jersey, which I'm hopefully going to do in December. So, yes. It's all very... Other people have different criteria than me. The criteria that I'm using might not even be consistent, but at least it's consistently consistent in my head.
V: Yes.
B: The other complicated bit is if countries become independent or not independent, it's like, do I count the fact that I visit to them when they weren't? And things like that.
V: Yeah. That is an interesting one.
B: So, at some point, I will count Palestine. I just don't quite know when that is.}

I've mentioned it before in an early podcast, but the concept of counting countries falls down when the countries themselves change. My task to visit all European Capitals also means I need at some point to visit Namur and Banja Luka, just in case Future Europe sees both Belgium and Bosnia break apart (a distinct possibility); the question of 'have I visited a country if it didn't exist when I visited it' is one for Future Me to ponder. At least when I visited Yugoslavia, the only country I've been to that no longer exists, I only visited Belgrade on that trip and I've been there since. That said, my 100 countries doesn't include all three of Yugoslavia, the "State Union of Serbia and Montenegro", and Serbia. That would absolutely be cheating.

Related: it would be amusing to plot how many countries and equivalent I've been to historically; you know, like, Mercia, Austria-Hungary, Ashanti, Babylonia, and Neutral Moresnet. I'm sure some German travel blogger would have made it their niche to have visited all the states that made up the Holy Roman Empire; that combination of 'the past v the present, what's changed versus what's stayed the same' would make a really interesting series of posts actually.

Regardless, I still don't know what to do about Gibraltar, and similar places. They're not independent countries but they're not *not* independent countries; they're not part of the UK and their citizens need a visa / work permit to work in the UK, yet de-facto they're seen as extensions of the UK – within my lifetime we fought a war over one of them – and they don't have sovereignty. Whatever that even means in the global world we live in these days. Anyway, I'm not counting Gibraltar, but it does mean if it ever does become independent, hey I can add one to my country count without lifting a finger!

In my conversation with V, this led to my usual rants about borders.

{V: Why have we gone to 100? Do you need to set out to go to 100 countries, or do you just like travelling? And it happened that way? Like, what's the why behind your travel?
B: The first time I counted countries, I realised that I was in the late 70s, in terms of countries. I didn't really think of it because it's not that important to me. The only reason why I was counting to 100 was just because I wanted to get to 100 and wanted to see where my 100th would be. But I wasn't that mythered about it because, as you all may well know, I always have this historical thing about borders and borders being a bit arbitrary and man-made and largely irrelevant. Not irrelevant, but...
V: A social construct.
B: Yes. So ... I don't really consider countries to, exist is the wrong word because we are dealing with a de facto situation and they do and borders exist and that's very annoying. But also great for your passport. But I don't think about that side. I think of things in regions. So I went around parts of West Africa for five weeks and went to four countries, but it was basically two or three regions and cultural experiences rather than four countries based on the history and the culture of the area. Would I, for instance... This is going to get me into trouble.
V: Yay.
B: Is there an appreciatively enough difference between Germany and Austria? Or rather, there is a difference between German culture and Austrian culture, but is that culture at the border or is that culture halfway up Bavaria? Is there a difference between French culture and Belgian culture and Dutch culture? There is. Where is that border? Is that border at the border of Belgium? Is that border in Belgium between Wallonia and Flanders? You know, it's these sorts of things. Like... Have you been to France if you've not been to Paris? Have you been to France if you've not been to Toulouse? Have you been to France if you've not been to Paris, Toulouse and Strasbourg? Is Strasbourg the same as Toulouse or is Strasbourg close to the German city of Cologne in terms of culture? This is how I feel about countries and country counting, and everywhere is interesting and everywhere is different, but that 'everywhere is interesting' isn't defined by its border. It's defined by its culture, it's defined by what is there, what is in that place, who lives in that place, who they are, what they eat, what the history of that place is. Like, France is a big country and Strasbourg has a very different history and culture than Toulouse does. They're both French, but are they?}

I mean, again, wars have been fought over what and where Strasbourg is, but that's a tale for someone else's podcast. And yes, what does it mean to be French? Especially given that Breton, Basque, Corsican, Occitan, Burgundian, etc, are all cultures and concepts that did, and still do, exist. Are nation states simply an imposition by one small culture on a much wider area than their original influence covered? Or are they a combination and blending of all the different cultures contained within their sphere of influence? Can a country even be seen to legitimately exist, conceptually, without the use of coercion, either overt (you will recite our tagline every morning before you start work or school, here have a flag, don't like it? Here's the barrel of a gun for you) or covert (yeh, this side of the river you pay us taxes and we make the place clean and functional, that side of the river, we don't collect the bins, we don't repair the roads, not our problem). Sometimes it feels that countries only exist because a small number of men get off on having a large amount of power and wealth, and are able to manipulate people to serve their needs by giving them just enough to not be too angsty about it. And then ensuring they blame someone else (likely another country or culture, or at least from another country or culture) rather than them.

But what do I know? I'm just a travel blogger.

{section separation jingle}

In the previous section I just spoke about countries and borders, and power and money. In my chat with V, she asked me one of the most interesting and, honestly, hardest questions I've been asked. It'd've been a bit easier if I'd've had a bit of time to ponder it, but I wanted to go in to the chat completely fresh. As such, I

could have answered it a bit better, but these were my first thoughts.

{V: You've spoken before about colonialism, colonial history, the damage that is done by colonialism. Right? What is the functional difference between you and somebody say 200 years ago that's travelling all around the world and whatnot?
B: I mean, functionally, the main difference is I'm not going in with Bibles. Yeah, I often think about this. Obviously, there's a difference between the explorers and the later actual colonialists who tended to wander in, be British, have a big house and just go, I don't know what's going on around here. I'm just going to stay in my resort and not talk to the local people and not eat the local food and, you know, I don't know how anyone that does that. But I... It's quite interesting, some of those early colonialists, the early colonial explorers who were just sort of visiting parts of the world that we in the West did not know much about and just chatting with the locals and getting lots of information about it so that we could then go in and destroy the place afterwards. We've already destroyed the place. There's nothing left for me to do.
V: There's nothing left to loot.
B: There's nothing left to loot. Like the old joke, why the pyramids in Egypt, because we couldn't take them back to the British Museum because they were too big. We tried. But there is a very... There's a couple of aspects to this and I'm not going to say I do this perfectly because clearly I do not. Obviously there's a whole feeling about I'm going to a place that's very much been dominated by people like me, and I have to be a little respectful about who I am and what I say when I visit these places. But that's not... I'm not thinking of what I say when I'm there. It's all... It's things like, you can't compare so you can't go into somewhere and go, oh, this is a bit shit.
V: You're all right to say that about your own home country but it's rude to say it about someone else. That's where you're a guest.
B: Yeah, a lot of it is economic some of it is political as well. It's very much a case of the baselines are different. We shouldn't be comparing our culture with their culture. We shouldn't be comparing our development with their development. They do things differently and that doesn't mean that we are always going to be superior. I have been on buses in West Africa. It is an experience. It is not something that would work in Kirkby-in-Ashfield. I'm not saying that Kirkby-in-Ashfield is worse. It's just different. They're a different breed down there.
V: Again, you're allowed to say that, you're from there.
B: I mean, I say bad things about Luton all the time. I'm not from Luton.
V: That is true. But to be fair...
B: So does everybody else.
V: ...what else do you say about Luton?
B: It doesn't have a tourist board. So yes. I am very conscious when I go to some of these places that I... I mean, I stand out, let's be honest. Tall white enby, purple hair, painted toenails. I am hairy as well. I am distinctive. And it is very obvious where I'm from. And it is very obvious who I am. And technically, it is very obvious what I represent. And I have to make sure that my behaviours and my attitudes do not reflect that. Because it would be very easy to go into a place and go, oh, for example, it's like affluence. It's like, you know, travel privilege is a thing. And obviously, it is a lot easier for me to visit places like Burkina Faso than it is for people from Burkina Faso to visit Britain. And I'm also conscious that I'm more affluent than the average Burkinabe. So what would be not good is for me to go into Ouagadougou and go, I've got all this money. Let's just throw it about. Because that would, you know, not be good.
V: It would be very crass.
B: It would be very crass. It would be very insensitive. And there's also the question of what I talk about when I talk about places like that, what I show, what I take pictures of, what I choose not to take pictures of.
V: have you ever been visiting somewhere and you've had a sort of sudden horrible realisation of oh shit I'm doing a poverty tourism right now?
B: There were certainly places in Lomé, in Togo, that I actively chose not to take pictures in. Because I did not think it was appropriate for me to be in there. I was kind of wandering around the city and went, hang on a minute this is not, I don't belong here and this is not the sort of thing that I really should be, I'm not a journalist. I am a journalist. But I'm not that sort of journalist. I'm not going into these places with the specific remit to discuss the problems of life there. I've seen some things that don't need to be talked about for that very reason. I am not the right person to be having those conversations. I am not the right person to be talking about these sorts of things. I'm just a travel blogger who is exploring the world one intersection at a time and sometimes I have to be careful about how I report and how I say and what I say and how I say things, but objectively some places are going to be less aesthetic as in others some places are going to be some places are going to be run down, some places are going to be not great, and I certainly have a duty to give my thoughts

and my experiences and my feelings about a place, but I've got to be very aware that my feelings should not be influenced by the fact that I live in England. I need to be more practical.
V: Being a British citizen you are probably one of the, I'm not saying that you're one of the elite super rich but, living in the UK, even those of us that are quite poor are probably in the top 5% of people that earn in the world. Do you ever feel sort of guilty when you're visiting a place that is a lot poorer than you're used to at home, or not guilty but, do you ever struggle with your own privilege in that way, is probably what I'm asking you
B: Probably less than I should, but I have a tendency to kind of try and switch off and just oh I'm in a new place let's see what this new place is like, without kind of thinking about things, so I just go well this is what it's like. Essentially I suppose what I'm trying to do is not compare. I'm trying to not compare things I'm trying to not compare places so I'm going into somewhere and I'm going this is unlike anything I've been before, and that's the end of my thought process. I then just see that place for what it is rather than for what it isn't in that respect, and there are things that take some getting used to, but they're very much everyday things that if you're not used to something then they're going to be tricky to get used to things like you know how to take a bus if something as simple as that how buses work, how shops work, that sort of thing. Just because it's different doesn't mean it's worse or better}

I've been thinking about this, and I'm still not sure what my answer is. There's definitely a whole vibe in travel literature to slightly demean and underplay places that aren't like home, and much of that *would* be rooted in an undercurrent of cultural superiority, which is hard to counteract if you're not used to challenging yourself. Even something as simple as budget. Saying somewhere is 'cheap' might well be factual, but needs to be treated with nuance lest it's perceived as you being derogatory – what's cheap for you might not be cheap for people who live and work there, and that's especially true as a tourist who might not be buying the same things as the residents. This is also the problem with all those 'most expensive places to live' (and especially 'immigrate to') lists; they may not factor in things like relative average wage, or where certain specific costs like accommodation are affected by local factors (like rent caps) while other costs are allowed to roam free. Ultimately each destination needs to be seen on its own merits, and comparison is the thief of manners.

I will say though that the very act of travel makes these easier conversations to have. Fundamentally, it's far too easy to dismiss as stupid or even scary something you've never seen, never experienced, and don't understand. But the best way to experience that is on your own terms; by forcing people to face what they don't understand and only have hearsay knowledge of, you might in fact end up validating their perceived fears. Whereas by getting people to experience it at their own pace, in an environment they've chosen but also one which is natural, it's much easier to go 'oh yeh, this makes a bit more sense' and they come to, I mean no-one *likes* the traffic in Dhaka, Bangladesh but going there and seeing it makes you appreciate the base behind the impressions people have and give.

And these are true domestically as much as internationally – the entire concept of, for example, England's "north-south divide" is one that, on many levels, is the basis for a lot of sneering and 'othering', from both sides I must add. And while much of it is done humourously, it can't be denied there is an undercurrent of genuine dislike and resentment. And this amongst two groups of people who, looking externally, are almost exactly the same. And if you take this and extend it logically, you realise if people from Grimsby don't like people from Guildford, imagine what they think of people from Ghana.

Not everywhere is great, and yes I've been to places that I've actively disliked, but as I say I tend to not talk about them, or at least those bits of them, for these very reasons. That said, it would be remiss of me to say that every travel I've done has been to lovely, pretty, comfortable places, and I'll briefly come onto 'places I've visited and actively disliked' at the end of this pod. I am also fully aware of my ongoing disregard of Luton, and one might argue 'but surely if you're not going to talk derogatorily about Lomé, how do you feel allowed to about Luton' and I guess my only defence is, having lived in the likes of Coventry and Kirkby-in-Ashfield, and spending considerable time in less salubrious parts of cities like Sheffield, Birmingham, and Glasgow, I don't feel that dissing Luton is in any way me 'punching down' onto a more deprived place, rather I'm just more 'sideswiping' at places that are 'the same but different'. If I'd've been from the Luton area, I'd've probably ended up saying exactly the same things about Mansfield, for exactly the same reasons.

Some places are shit, but they're my shit.

{section separation jingle}

V's next question led on from that, and was about cultural norms and manners. Because while respecting your destination is an important aspect of travel, it doesn't start and stop with what you say, but also what you do, and how you're seen. And it would be very colonial to wander into somewhere and assume you can just act the way you do at home.

{V: obviously there are different cultural norms of food around the world, and there are different cultural norms of manners around the world. I know from a recent trip of yours that you will eat the things the locals eat even if they're not things that you would maybe normally eat in the UK, do your cultural behaviours and the things that you will or won't do or will or won't eat or whatever, change depending on the place that you are - do you try and fit into the manners and the food taste and things of the local people, or are there certain things that you're like it doesn't matter where I am this is just how I do that or it doesn't matter where I am I just wouldn't eat that?
B: I remember a conversation I had with my friend Leila back in 2006, when we were in Mongolia at the time as you do, and we were just having a conversation and we were trying to reel off all of the cultural norms in our respective countries because she's French, brought up in Tunisia but French, and we were just discussing all of the cultural norms in our respective countries and going well that's a bit shit isn't it why do we do that it's a bit weird, so I'm not the best person to look about cultural norms for because I try and avoid them in Britain. There are so many things that we do culturally in Britain and I just go why are we doing that what is the purpose of that what is the point of that; elbows on tables I have no problems with putting elbows on tables because that's what tables are for, that's what elbows are for. My understanding of that one is because back in the olden days it was seen as aggressive behaviour, you know when you're sort of sitting around a table and everyone's got a knife or an axe so it prevented fights amongst Vikings
V: I think a lot of the table manners are just there to stop you being hit by flying bits of other people's cabbage or whatever and that's fine and I don't mind adapting them to wherever I happen to be at the time, but I do think for me personally there are certain things that I wouldn't eat even if it was the most eaten thing in that area or there's certain ways that I might not behave even if it was at the norm there, for example you just mentioned France there and it's my understanding which may be completely incorrect that topless beaches are a big thing in France right but if I was in France I probably wouldn't get topless on the beach because that would feel weird for me personally. Have you had any things like that where you're like oh everybody's doing this thing but that's really not something that I want or feel comfortable doing?
B: I ... no I don't think so or at least I've never noticed because I'm kind of you know oblivious to all these things because I don't pay any attention whatsoever.
V: It might be a drawback in being a travel blogger that's not a travel blogger
B: I have far fewer conversations with people than travel bloggers really ought to do, which is annoying when you're trying to tell stories because people make stories. There are certainly ... some cultural norms are explicit clothing requirements in temples; there's not really any way of getting around those, you wouldn't want to get around those anyway because that would be disrespectful. there's a whole host of lesser-attested cultural norms that you should be aware of especially things like you know you shouldn't turn your back on the Buddha and things like that, which is easier said than done when it's a small alcove, a small temple, a narrow door but be respectful, do what you can, and I think as long as you do what you can and that you're seen to be doing what you can to meet those norms, no one's going to expect to know everything, I don't know everything about British cultural norms, I genuinely don't but I'm taking the view the ones that I don't know about probably aren't relevant
V: Neurodiversity
B: Logic and practicality is more important than weird, ridiculous social norms that mean nothing, we just do them
V: it has to make sense to you
B: It has to make sense to me. Mmm, 'tism.
V: I'm just saying nothing
B: I yeah, but in Britain it's my place to have those conversations. it's not my place to have those conversations in a foreign country. I can't, no-one can look up what every single cultural norm is, you just have to be aware of the normal ones and hopefully there are things that if I don't know and I do something, someone would actually point it out. I didn't know that. You know like certain hand signals mean different things in different countries
V: if you got that wrong in Britain we would just tut at you no one's going to tell you just going to tut.
B: just because a beach is topless doesn't mean you have to be topless
V: yeah I couldn't think of a decent example actually

B: no one needs to see me topless, absolutely nobody}

Yeh, I'm quite boring. I've never climbed up a sacred mountain and danced naked on it. I've never made out on an Arabian beach. I've never paddled in an Italian fountain.

And yes, while a lot of social manners and norms are quite silly, when you think about them, ultimately some others are rooted in either common sense or in historical culture. You take your shoes off in Svalbard restaurants because when it was a coal-mining area, everything was covered in black dust so it ensured inside places didn't get too dirty. There are no coal mines in Svalbard any more, but people still do it anyway. You don't talk with your mouth full because, well for one it makes it less clear what you say, and two, objectively, watching someone eat isn't terribly aesthetic. And you don't dance naked atop sacred mountains for reasons too numerous to list here and if you don't realise at least some of them, you really have no business travelling.

As a follow-up topic, V then asked me about food, partly because food itself can be a cultural minefield.

{V: I know you've eaten some fairly outlandish things in your travel times
B: the weirdest thing I've ever eaten was probably the deep-fried chicken's feet in Laos
V: that doesn't seem weird to me people eat chicken here so that's
B: yeah but not chickens feet because they're basically cartilage they're not, there's not a lot of meat on them it is just very chewy
V: all food that comes from poor origins is always the bits of meat that the rich people didn't want to eat though, and some cultures can make some really good food out of that
B: have you ever had tripe
V: I have had tripe before I was vegetarian and it may have been part of my decision making process to become vegetarian
B: are you saying the north of England is a deprived location actually don't answer that
V: have you ever eaten anything where you thought they definitely only give this to tourists to see if they can make us eat it, there is no way that people actually eat this for fun, or for purpose
B: I once had a fish eye which was one of the most disgusting things I've ever had in my life
V: I can imagine texturally that would not be pleasant. I guess it's probably got quite high levels of protein and stuff in it but
B: I don't know and I'm not going to find out again. that was, I had a huge fish in Tunisia, one of those restaurants where there is nothing on the menu it's just whatever we catch today, so there were like four of us and we all had this huge dourade, and allegedly fish eye is a delicacy. I have my doubts. Most of the things that I've eaten have been culturally appropriate for the location, if slightly unusual to the tastes of a refined British girl, like you. for example in Central Asia I had an awful lot of, or at least more than I wanted, things made with horse milk and horse milk is as milks go it's one of them.
V: Is it gamey? I feel like it would be gamey?
B: the milk is just milk and it's, we had horse milk yogurt which was not, I did not like that and we had these sweets made of horse milk that resembled gobstoppers and had the, they basically had the texture of a small neutron star, they took a lot of, they took a lot of sucking and I've sucked a lot of things and I was not impressed and I will not be trying that again, and I know you're desperate for me to talk about my food in Norway.
V: No, I wasn't going to say a word about the disgusting things you ate in Norway.
B: Whale was not disgusting, it tasted like venison, and the seal, the seal steak that I had was a bit like pork and had the texture of a chocolate cake and I would have it again, It was lush.
V: was it very fatty? I feel like seal and whale would both be very very fatty.
B: yes they are and that's quite a good thing because nothing grows up there so you have to have the energy
V: is there anything that you would say no I'm absolutely not going to eat that, like primate or anything
B: there are things that I do not like, and I've put a lot of disgusting things in my mouth, there are things that I do not like. I don't like carrot. I don't like dandelion and burdock. I don't like tequila. I don't like orange
V: I'm surprised you don't like tequila. I can imagine you doing tequila shots. You like your booze.
B: I'm not a spirit-y person. I'll do whisky, but only because I feel contractually obliged to do whiskey. I'm 63% Scottish by descent, so I kind of feel.
V: that's very precise 63% did you get a DNA test or something, or did you literally work that out for yourself that you were 63%
B: 5 eighths of my great grandparents
V: that would have maths I couldn't do

B: that so yeah there are things that but at least when you're going to a lot of places there is a choice about what to have, there are certain parts of the world where you don't, you just walk into a small family-run cafe and you just dump things on your table and you just eat them but usually it's quite benign. in south-east Asia a lot of that is noodle based, in West Africa, a lot of it is rice-based or strange things involving pounded yam or cassava which has the texture of mashed potato, well it has the look of mashed potato it's slightly spongier and thicker than that and you use it like bread. So you sort of scoop it up and it's very nice. it takes a bit of getting used to
V: I might struggle with that texturally because I'm very texture-averse with things so that's what would worry me about trying all the new foods is not knowing what to expect from the texture
B: yes I mean I go in and don't expect anything really. I've never had that before that would be interesting, ooh I like the flavours of that, that sounds nice.
V: so having been to 100 countries in your lifetime so far is there anything that you could point to as being a sort of universal human behaviour but is there something where wherever you go in the world people are going to be doing that
B: deep frying pastry. everywhere has a sausage roll, everywhere has a samosa, everywhere has an empanada, everywhere has a small hand-held foodstuff that is basically deep fried or deep baked bread filled with something. it is the archetypal snack food
V: I know like Cornish pasties were invented to give the miners something to eat and they throw the crusts away because that's what they've been holding with their dirty hands. it's small, it's transportable, it stays warm. Has every culture got that for the same sort of reason?
B: I don't know if they got it for the same sort of reason, they've certainly got the same hand-held easily portable very energetic snack
V: So a universal human experience is the humble sausage roll
B: The universal humble experience is something akin to the humble sausage roll or some places do it better
V: Greggs
B: Except France. There is always an empanada, there is always a samosa, there is always and what they put into it and the flavours they put into it are obviously very different and very regional but there is always something that you can eat on the move, on the go quick, easy, simple, tasty
V: Have you ever been somewhere where you think, oh, this place does a different country's food really well? Because you've been to China. Chinese food in China is nothing like Chinese food in the UK. Have you ever been somewhere and gone, oh, this culture actually does this cuisine better than they do? Or, you know, as good as?
B: I always said that the best country to go to food is the United States. Because they generally have the second best food of any culture in the world. So if you want the best Italian food you go to Italy, if you want the second best Italian food you go to the USA, if you want the best Chinese food you go to the China, if you want the second best Chinese food, you go to the USA. If you want the best Mexican food, you go to Mexico. If you want the second best Mexican food, you go to the USA. There are, like, Mexican food in Britain is not good. Obviously, we go back to colonialism. There is a certain colonialist aspect to it. So for example, obviously the UK does some relatively good Indian food. But. And this is the thing with the USA as well. Where you've got a historically large group of immigrant population that have then settled in a country for a number of generations, what you end up with is a hybrid fusion type food. So Indian...
V: like Tikka Masala.
B: Yes, which famously invented in Glasgow, that highly Indian city. So you end up with food that it... Pardon?
V: I thought it was invented in Bradford.
B: No, it was Glasgow.
V: But I don't. I might be thinking of a different curry-ish dish.
B: Possibly. I mean, Balti is a particularly Birmingham dish, for instance. Neither of them are particularly Indian. So what you end up with is this, sort of like almost like a third cuisine style that's ubiquitous and famous, but it's its own thing. It's like Italian pizza is different from New York pizza, which is different from Chicago pizza. Obviously Mexican food is different in Mexico than say, for example, Tex-Mex food is different, which is different from whatever the shit we have over here is.}

When I come to do my podcasts on Norway and Svalbard I'll talk a bit more about the ethics and morality about eating things like seal and whale, as they'll make more sense in that context, but ultimately I'm comfortable with the moral and ethical choices I made – they're not endangered (apparently) and they're at least locally-sourced. Not much else is on Svalbard, because it's hard to have an agriculture sector at 78°N when your town is built on permafrost.

There's also a question of respect here in regards of 'eat what and where the locals eat' rather than assuming

everywhere's going to have a Greggs and a Starbucks and going there constantly during your trip, but, and I've mentioned this before, it falls down a bit when you look at your own country and culture and, well, if you were a tourist coming to the UK and you ate where then locals ate here, you'd just as likely be going to Wetherspoons and getting a Chinese takeaway than anything else. Which, I guess is culturally representative of the UK, but in places like Sutton-in-Ashfield it's not going to be exactly the high point of your culinary experience of the country.

I couldn't tell you which country I've been to that has the best food – I will always speak highly of the Eastern Mediterranean and their love of things like hummus and kebabs, but of course I'll not hear a word against a thick curry or a very flavourful stir-fry in a sauce I'd love to replicate, or a slow-cooked barbecue, or a spicy peanut stew ... every food is great in the context it's eaten in. And this even goes for the street food – the greasy burgers, the deep-fried locusts, the dehydrated and very chewy slugs, or the fatty fries with a choice of 30 sauces. Have I had any bad food? For sure, but the squid in Cambodia was my own fault, and the kumis in the ex-Soviet Union is a popular taste I didn't grow up with and therefore one I've not acquired.

I have never had lutefisk though. Sometimes you know what you're getting yourself into.

{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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Now, on with the show}

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My chat with V generally revolved around more in-depth, intellectual, or interesting questions that required thought, but there is an obvious elephant in the room that I feel it's time to address – the most obvious of obvious questions that someone who's been to 100 countries is probably obliged to answer.

{V: I know that you said earlier that you don't like to sort of categorise places and you don't want to sort of go somewhere and then go, oh, that was rubbish, but I have to ask you, be remiss not to, what your best and worst countries were that you have visited.
B: That's a very cheesy question. Very cheesy question that everybody asks.
V: That's why I've got to ask you, really? I'd feel like I'd forgotten something if I didn't.
B: Best countries, I mean, I would always say Benin, I would always say Albania, I'd always say Belgium, I'd always say Kyrgyzstan.
V: Why?
B: Because they're interesting, they're cultural, they're, some of them are quite pretty, none of that applies to Belgium. But, yeah, Benin is very cultural, very historic and very interesting. Kyrgyzstan is just very beautiful, very eco-touristy and they're very pleased to see tourists go there. Albania is just very nice, very sort of compact, there's a lot to do in Albania. And Belgium just makes absolutely no sense whatsoever, but they have really good beer.
V: Is that where you went to the beer spa?
B: No, that was the Czech Republic. That was in the mountains in the Czech Republic, that was where I drank an awful lot of beer.

V: So those were the best. Are you avoiding the worst? We can avoid it if you want to.
B: I'm not avoiding the worst. And everywhere is interesting and everywhere has a reason to be and everywhere is cultural and we shouldn't be dismissing a place just because it doesn't meet our expectations. We shouldn't be dissing a place because even though we go there, we don't have a enjoyable time. And there are certainly quite a few countries that I've been to where I haven't enjoyed my time there, but most of the time that's been because of me, not because of the country. So I had an absolutely dreadful time in Ethiopia, but that wasn't because of Ethiopia. Ethiopia was a fantastic country, I just wasn't up with it at the time. And I had other things going on in my mind, I was getting very socially anxious and stuff. Similarly, Indonesia, which is one of the best countries I've been to, but also I only had four days there because I panicked and then went home. For reasons that I've discussed many times on my pods. Italy is a country that I've not really clicked with ever and yet seem to go there about, like it's my third most visited country, do I know? Possibly. But every single time I've been there, I've gone, this is a bit weird for me. I'm not sure I like this. And then I still go back because that's a me issue, not an Italy issue. So there are very few places in the world where I've been and I've gone, actually, this is a bit shit. For the record.
V: Have you ever expected... Sorry.
B: Have I ever expected what?
V: Have you ever expected somewhere to be, not your sort of style of place, but when you've got there, you've had a real good time?
B: I mean, most places I go to, I think, are like that. In a sense, the Caribbean. I quite like my time in the Caribbean. But you know, Maldives, small hot islands in the middle of nowhere, are on my, generally, I do not go to these places. Listen, there's a reason why I don't go to them.
V: You did a blog post a while ago called your fuck-it list with places that you would rather die before you go. And I'm pretty sure the Maldives was on there, but you've since been.
B: I think the Maldives may have been on there. Mauritius, I think, was the one I actually highlighted. Maldives may have been on there. Philippines was on the original one. I've been to the Philippines now. Japan is on there. And I think Japan is on there. South Korea is on there. And yet, at some point, I will probably visit both Japan and South Korea.
V: Sounds like you need to update that list.
B: That's what life is. Life is about exploring and expanding your comfort zones. I did a podcast on comfort zones. Life is about expanding your comfort zones and taking on new information, developing it and rolling with it. Because nowhere is, nowhere, even Luton, nowhere is decrepit enough, dismal enough to be completely dismissed out of hand. In answer to your question, though, North Macedonia is the country, I think, of all of the places I've been to has been the one that I have been least taken with. Because I found it to be quite dour, quite miserable, quite unassuming, and even the pretty bits.
V: Does that not make you feel at home?
B: Well, no, because if I wanted to feel at home, I'd move to Seattle. It was raining, actually, to be fair, almost my entire time in North Macedonia. It was raining, and it was October, so it was quite grey. So I did kind of go there at the wrong time. But equally, Skopje is not a pretty city. And there's not... It's one of those places where it's got things in it where the surrounding countries have the same but better. So, yes. If anyone's listening from North Macedonia, try and convince me otherwise. Or maybe it's a Luton situation where even the people from Luton go yeah, I wouldn't go to Luton.
V: Where's next on the list? Or are you done now? Are you I've done a hundred, that's it.
B: In the run-up to getting a hundred countries, me and my friend Laura were desperately, or Laura was desperately, planning to do trips that encompassed trying to get as many countries as possible, which is why we ended up in the Caribbean, because we managed to nick off three countries quite quickly. It's also why we went to Maldives, because they were just there, and that's another country off the list. So I have done quite a lot of countries in the last year and a half. I no longer need to do that. So, I'm not planning things. I mean, obviously Laura is planning things for our trips, but not every trip I do is with her. We don't know where we're going next, because we're still sorting that out, surprisingly. But it might be Guyana and Suriname, or it might be Thailand and Cambodia, we don't know yet. Obviously, I've never been to Guyana or Suriname. I have been to Cambodia, and I 'have' been to Thailand.
V: Can you imagine a situation where you stop travelling?
B: Yeah, when I die.
V: So, is your plan to just keep going and see as many... Are you trying to complete the list?
B: No.
V: Visit everywhere?
B: No, because there are some countries that I absolutely... It's not that I won't go to, but there's no point in going to, and there's no desire to go to, and I'd rather go back to other places and see. Because if you think

about what I said at the very start, and that's that borders are arbitrary, that means that I've been to 100 countries, but in most of those countries, there's places I haven't been that seem interesting. So, now I've hit the 100 barrier, there's no reason for me not to go back to certain countries and visit different parts of ones I've been to, because some of those countries are quite big. For example, Brazil. I have been to Brazil.
V: But you've only seen a little of it.
B: I've seen literally a very small corner of Brazil, because I went to the Iguazu Falls on the Brazil side for a day trip. That's the entirety of Brazil. I didn't even get stamped into the country just for the record, because of the...
V: You look really annoyed by that.
B: I find it amusing, where I was technically in three different countries at the same time. I've been to Brazil. I'm counting Brazil. I have done things in Brazil. I have spent money in Brazil. I have seen Brazil. But I have seen one waterfall in one corner of a very big country. So, you know, there's a whole host of...
V: You've sketched everything out, and now you want to go and colour it in.
B: There are certain countries I probably won't ever go back to, because I've seen all I've wanted to do, like Paraguay, Monaco, but when I give my... If I ever give a list of countries that I have no desire, like least favourite countries, Monaco would probably be high on that list.
V: I can imagine it doesn't really fit with your whole vibe.
B: I only went there as a tick-off exercise. Interestingly, it rained for the entire time I was there. There's a theme here.
V: It seems to follow you around.
B: I'm British. Of course, it follows me around. I'm just grateful to be in a country where it doesn't rain. But, no, I have no desire to visit every country.}

I've certainly spoken before about countries I do intend to visit, not just Bolivia but also places like Pakistan and Kiribati, but having hit 100 countries I no longer feel the need to make weirdly-illogicalistic trips to fit them in with surrounding nations, I can just dedicate myself more to one-country trips and, yes, I guess, spend longer in them, visiting them in more detail so I can see the place as much as it deserves to be rather than just getting a taster and knowing I might come back one day in the future.

I don't know how many countries I'll end up on. I don't imagine it'll be more than 120, to be honest. There's a couple more multi-country trips I want to do – Central America and the bits of West Africa I couldn't do in 2014 – but for the most part I'm pretty happy just knocking one or two off every so often. I'm not pressured, and because I have actively no desire to visit them all, it doesn't matter so much if I find out I never get a chance to visit, I don't know, Myanmar or Mozambique. The world is too large to do everything, and I'm comfortable with that.

One day, probably next year now, I'll do a podcast episode on my experiences in the Balkans, and I'll talk then more about both North Macedonia and Albania (and Kosovo, reeling back to earlier in this pod), and why my experiences in them were all different, but here's something to ponder: while it might have been dour and grey, North Macedonia does hold one personal record for me and the way I travel. See if you can imagine what it is. [And if you listen to the full recording on Patreon, I tell you!]

{section separation jingle}

When we were arranging this chat, V asked around for ideas for questions to ask someone who's been to 100 countries. She has teenagers. We finished up our chat with a couple of questions that could absolutely only come out of the mouths of 14-year-olds.

{V: Should we move on to some sillier questions now we've done all the heavy ones, yeah?
B: We do like our silly questions.
V: One of the other most common questions that I got was about toilets and it was about what is the best toilets in the world, what is the worst toilets in the world, have you ever been in a toilet where you just wish you'd taken a crap outside instead
B: Sadly I was in a toilet in, you know we were discussing earlier about colonialism and not wanting to diss a country because of stereotypes, because there are certain countries that have certain stereotypes and we do not want to go into those. The worst toilet I've ever been to was China. it was a block, kind of just off the highway and it looked for all the world like an abandoned building. it was a hole in the ground there was no toilet paper. The only reason I went into it was because I had no choice about when to go. it was not pleasant. I had to wipe my arse on newspaper

V: I mean at least you had newspaper
B: I didn't - it was in the cubicle. God knows what else was.
V: All good for your immune system.
B: for the record I've had some very good toilets in China, and also for the record I was on a train in India this year and you know all the stereotypes we have about Indian trains? this particular train had a toilet that was one of the cleanest I've ever seen and it had a phone number that you could dial to speak to someone on the train whose job it would be to fix the toilet if it broke
V: oh that's fantastic
B: yes this Indian train toilet was actually better than you'd find on, you know, Avanti west coast, this one actually worked. I have been to toilets in Dominica and Australia that have had small slots of windows where you just look out and go oh my god that's a good view. The one in Australia was actually called the loo with a view it's on a beach in Maroochydore I think, on the Sunshine Coast
V: great in the daytime but a bit scary at night
B: so yeah that had a view of the beach in Maroochydore, the one in Dominica had a view of the rainforest because it was basically most of what Dominica is, it's a rainforest and this was at a restaurant up in the hills so you just got a view out over the rainforest hills, and it was great, it was fantastic, and that was good in the dark so I've had some very good views from toilets. the worst toilets I've encountered have generally been in British pubs or British sports stadiums, both of which because you know what men are like, and also I don't know how much I don't know how often you've been to a men's toilet but in old fashioned sports stadia you don't have individual urinals you have like the long metal tray, so you've got like 7, 8, 9 of you stood on along the tray and just pissing into this
V: I will always find urinals deeply strange I don't know why men have accepted that they've just got piss in front of each other
B: very gay}

Even the Pope shits once a day, I guess. In fairness it's one of those questions that is kinda important, because travel isn't just about posing in sundresses by seafronts, or taking videos of vistas from the tops of hills. Some of your travels will be spent doing everyday things like waiting for buses, shopping for tweezers, or going to the toilet. And I'm not saying you can judge a country by the quality of its toilets, but certainly they do leave more of a lasting impression on you than you might imagine.

I actually don't like squat toilets, unless there's a handrail to hold on to, partly for reasons of balance, partly for reasons of sheer spatial awareness, and partly because I don't have a strong enough core to maintain the position for long enough. However when they're shiny metal or ceramic, with a powerful bidet shower and a thorough flush mechanism, they're probably cleaner and more practical than a western toilet with the stained and cracked seat and the hard-to-reach places under the rim are evidently too hard-to-reach for the average pub landlord. I'm sure I've raved about the hand-held bidet showers before, or the 'bum gun' as a few people here in the UK have called them. So much better than using endless sheets of toilet paper, especially if you, er, need a bit of a thorough clean after a piece of dodgy squid from a market stall in 30°C Cambodia. And my first usage of one, in Dubai airport, made me finally understand why the left hand is taboo in Arabic culture, because of course up until then I was a toilet paper person and I'm right-handed, so that was the logical hand to use. Whereas with a bum gun, I'm holding *that* in my dominant hand which leads my left hand to, as they say, do all the work.

If you think it couldn't get weirder than toilets, think again.

{V: This is a purely hypothetical one. I'm not taking notes. If you had to choose one of your 100 countries to survive a zombie apocalypse in, and I know you're probably going to ask me what sort of zombies are all sorts of caveats now, but which country do you feel like you could easily survive, well not easily, but most easily survive a zombie apocalypse?
B: You would need somewhere that's relatively remote, but also quite well equipped. So by the time the zombies got to you, half of them would be dead anyway. So on that basis, Mongolia would win. Because if there's one thing that the Mongolians are, it's well equipped for an invasion, because historically they've been used to it.
V: I'd've thought Svalbard is as well though?
B: Yes, yes, because it's awkward to get to.
V: A greater population is armed.
B: Yes, because everyone is armed, because you have to be, because polar bears are not good to meet on a

dark street, unless you're carrying a gun, and even if you are carrying a gun. The other option would be remote islands.
V: You can get the balance though between having people to help you to produce the things that you need, because one human alone can't generally do all of that themselves. But also a small enough population that you're not going to have infection run through really quickly.
B: I mean, the cynic of me would also argue somewhere where no one would notice.
V: Like...
B: New York.
V: No one would notice a zombie apocalypse in New York?
B: Have you been to New York?
V: I mean, I haven't. And to be fair, I did see a news article a few years ago that made me think that it was potential zombie apocalypse happening, where somebody was on, I think it was bath salts, and they were naked on a bridge and trying to eat someone, even after they were shot several times and stuff like that. But I'd imagine that you can overlook one or two of those incidents, but when it's happening everywhere, that would be quite difficult to ignore.
B: It was something you told me once. I was worrying about how I came across with my own foibles and presentations.
V: Oh, yeah, and I said no one's paying any attention.
B: You said no one's paying any attention to me. And also, specifically London, I would not be the weirdest thing they'd seen that morning.
V: Oh, yeah, definitely.
B: A very populated, busy, vibrant, highly mixed, urban environment where people wouldn't notice, and people wouldn't care as long as, you know, they paid for that sausage roll.
V: We can ignore you eating people, but we cannot ignore you not tipping the waitress.
B: There's a meme that I saw on Tumblr. Well, I didn't see it on Tumblr because I'm not on Tumblr. I don't know why. Tumblr is my environment. I saw it on Instagram, but it was about a story about New Orleans taxi drivers. Didn't go to certain parts of New Orleans because of ghosts. The problem wasn't that there were ghosts. The problem was that they were called out to places and then didn't get paid for it.
V: It feels like if that's happening often enough in some area, we should all be paying a tax while we're alive for free cab rides after we're dead.
B: Yeah, I mean, that's just an extension of the whole stick coins in your mouth to pay the ferryman. These days, it's, you know, stick a debit card in your mouth to pay the Uber driver.
V: I fully intend to be buried with some dog treats just in case I do meet Cerberus.}

The Tumblr screenshot specifically says “taxi companies have reoccurring problems of picking up ghosts in those areas who are not aware that they are dead, and then disappearing from the cab before reaching the destination and therefore stiffing the driver on the fare”. Which is a somewhat niche problem that probably doesn’t come up in driver training.

I can’t help but feel someone has probably already made a movie about a zombie apocalypse in New York failing because, well, it’s New York. That said, every time I hear the phrase "zombie apocalypse", my default is ‘Shaun of the Dead’, set in the London suburb of Crouch End, but as you heard us discuss, similar vibes.

The final question asked has a similar irreverent vibe.

{V: So you're wandering through the countryside, minding your business as you do, and aliens appear. And they say, Nel, we've been looking for you. We need a representative for Earth. We need you to pick a country to represent Earth at the, I don't know, space games. Who are you picking and why?
B: I wouldn't pick a country.
V: All right.
B: I would pick a city.
V: Okay.
B: There is only one city in the world that is diverse enough to encompass the entirety of human existence. One city that is wild enough that has everything. It has all of the food. It has all of the culture. It has all of the symbolism. You can basically, all of the political opinions, one of those places where you can just walk down the street and just know that you can find any hobby, at least in theory, any, no one's going to be climbing mountains. You could have any hobby, any pastime, any political persuasion will all exist. You know where the city is?

V: I mean, from that description, I'm thinking you're going to say New York again.
B: I am indeed going to say New York again. If you're going to invite aliens to go, this is the pinnacle of, this is humanity in a nutshell, then I don't think there is anywhere on the planet that encompasses humanity in all of its diverse forms, in all of its diverse ways, in all of its habits, in all of its hobbies, in all of its cultures, in all of its opinions, in all of its food than New York does.
V: I mean, I might advise the aliens to stay off the subway in New York.
B: Oh, no, absolutely not. Absolutely not.
V: There's a definite part of the human experience.
B: It's a very definite part of the human experience. If you want to know what humans are like, pretty much everything. It's not everything in the world, but it's of all the places in the world. It's probably the one that encompasses most of it. And that includes the subway. Everything is in New York. Everyone is in New York, in representative of the world. It's like, you can probably find a native citizen of every country in the world there. Someone tried it with London and I think they missed out on like three or four countries, but I think you can probably find some representative of every country in the world there. You can probably find some representative of more languages in the world there than anywhere else, of its size in the world.
V: Probably also all genders, sexualities, various different disabilities, like all that sort of thing you could probably find in New York as well.
B: Yes, absolutely. There's a reason why New York has so many scenes because it's got so many people to have scenes. Yes, New York is one of those places where, Laura derided me with that. I've not spent very long there. I've been there a few times, but only for like, passing through one nighters essentially. So I've had quite a few days there, but not in any coherent form.
V: As places go, it's never been somewhere that really appeals to me, because I feel like it's a bigger, busier London and I've already find London too big and too busy.
B: You have to like cities. It helps if you like people, but I don't necessarily think that's as important as appreciating the fact that people exist.
V: Yeah, I don't mind people in smaller doses, but I don't like big crowds of people. I don't like the feeling that you've got to keep moving. In London, I feel like you're not allowed to stop and look around you at any point, because you've just got to keep going with this big sort of herd of people. And that's the direction you're going now. And you don't have time to sort of stand and be lost for a minute or anything like that because you've got to move. And I feel like New York would be very like that, you know?
B: Yes.
V: Because I'm a wanderer. I like to mosey. I like to stare into space and notice things. And that just isn't very conducive to traversing London.
B: I currently live in a village of a couple of thousand people max. So ...}

{section separation jingle}

So what have we learned this episode?

I've been to 100 countries but no-one's quite sure what a country is, so maybe I've been to 101, or 105, or some other number depending on your criteria. Visiting that much of the world makes you more reflective and more respectful, but you still have to work at it and treat every place as a new lesson in humility and world politics. Almost everything is edible, but some things probably shouldn't be, but if you need to, there's always a toilet to visit that might be better than your expectations.

And New York is the best place to hang out during a zombie apocalypse or an alien invasion. And in either case, give it a few months, and they'll have opened their own restaurant on West 84th Street.

{end pod jingle}

Well that's about all for this pod. Tune in next time for another adventure beyond the brochure. Until then, consider this quote of Mozart: "A man of ordinary talent will always be ordinary, whether he travels or not: but a man of superior talent (which I cannot deny myself to be without being impious) will go to pieces if he remains forever in the same place". Mozart was very full of himself. 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.

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

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