

Podcast 110: Travel Blogging – Ethics, Aesthetics, and Social Culture

{INTRO:

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{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}

Earlier this month I went to WTM, the World Travel market, in London. I've spoken at length about this event before; I've been to it many times over the years, mostly to indifference. But I'm mentioning it here to highlight something different – the politics inherent in travel content creation, and indeed in travel itself. And some of that plays out in the simple act of the layout of WTM itself.

Imagine, if you will, a huge building, similar in shape to a warehouse or aircraft hangar, and long enough to bridge the gap between two stations on the Docklands Light Railway. There's a central aisle where you can walk along, past seating areas and concession stalls, with the stalls themselves in two long rooms, either side of the walkway. And each part of the venue is divided by business and location – companies like travel software management companies and car hire are together at one end of one side, the rest of the venue filled with tourist boards, venues, and destination management companies, all divided into world regions so each represented country would be in the same area as similar countries – Europe, Middle East, North America, South America, Asia, you get the idea.

Except that it's not as simple as that. The very act of placing a stall in a particular location is loaded with political diplomacy, privilege, power, and money, in several different ways, some of which are blatant, some of which are subtle. And of course each stall itself is a representation and display of that power and privilege, or lack thereof.

Europe's section was towards one end of one side, ending in the Media Centre, where those of us who had applied for entry as 'media' could have their own space to sit down, work comfortably at a table, have snacks, hold meetings, and generally network. However beyond the media centre was one final country with a reasonable sized setup. Marketing themselves as “The Land of Creation”, but located geographically nearest Greece, was the contingent from Israel. Present, large, but very much out-of-the-way; you had to want to go there to go there, as it were; it wasn't a place you could pass idly by. And people did. Though not as many as they might have hoped, albeit more than you, dear listeners, might have expected.

Also next to Israel, oddly, was Morocco, stuck nowhere near either Spain, nor the other countries in Middle East / North Africa, and in fact also at the wrong end of the venue to the rest of Africa. Almost as if Morocco didn't get along with their neighbours; who'd've thought it.

Palestine, conversely, was represented, by three small tables and a handful of reps from tour companies; a much smaller presence than its bigger geographical adversary. And this is where money and power come to play in this environment. Obviously the more money you have, the more you can spend on publicity, especially if you have something to sell. And the disparity is very evident. Most of the countries of the Middle East had huge presences that occupied a couple of blocks, with the latest tech (do some dune-bashing in the Arabian desert in the comfort of WTM through the use of VR) and huge displays that almost reached the ceiling. Egypt came bearing exhibits from their new National Museum in Cairo, providing a mini-exhibition on all things Tutankhamun. And of course all the gulf airlines had a large display; displays of their cabin seating alone covered a larger area than some entire countries' stalls.

And therein lies one of the discrepancies. Politics gets everywhere in the travel industry, even down to stalls in a travel exhibition. For every Qatar there's a dozen Palestines occupying the same footprint. Each of Spain's regions had their own stalls – many bigger than the combined stall for parts of the Caribbean. And of course

some places weren't represented at all, either because they don't have a tourist board, or because it's very difficult for them to get entry into the UK to exhibit themselves in the first place, because of visa and finance issues. Obviously some countries and tour companies might decide it's not worth their while catering to a mostly-British audience [I didn't see Lesotho have a presence, for instance, nor Vanuatu; both have sizeable tourist markets elsewhere], but only half of Africa was there at all, and nowhere in Oceania outwith Australia & New Zealand, and I'm 100% sure places like Fiji and Tonga are on many British bucket lists.

Presence isn't the only political aspect in play either. In many cases, countries focussed on their tourist side ignoring the baggage they come with. PR machines smoothing over rough edges of the national situations. I don't just mean Israel, though they were the country that prompted the idea for this podcast. Rwanda having a really nice display including a climate-conditioned closet you could walk into and be confronted with a gorilla in the jungle, all very 'this is what we do', which is exactly what you'd expect to be honest; I'm not expecting them to mention what they're doing in DR Congo and Burundi, but it would be a naïve travel blogger to turn up at their stall without having that in the back of their mind. Tanzania, too, had a reasonable presence despite at the time of WTM having closed off and shut down their entire country, with no flights in or out, no domestic transport, no banking system in operation, and barely any businesses open, as a result of reaction to their recent General Election. And of course all the money thrown at WTM by the Gulf States, by the United States, makes no mention of human rights issues in those respective countries that again, we as media need to be mindful of.

Of course, travel itself is never neutral; it's propaganda-adjacent whether we intend it to be or not. Ethically-pure travel blogging is pretty much a fantasy, a mythical utopia that many of us hold a bit too dear to our hearts and minds. And I've said before that it's virtually impossible as so many places have ethical issues that pretty much the only way to stay pure is to blog about your own residence. That said, of course the choices we, as travel content creators, make about places to visit, places to work with, give impressions of us that are hard to shake off. And while it's really hard to be entirely pure, you can certainly nail your colours to a mast, even if accidentally. One of my good travel content creator friends, a couple of years ago, hiked the entirety of the Israel National Trail. This is a stupendous achievement and they created lots of content around it. But at the moment they don't talk about it, lest it give a certain impression of them to the wider industry.

There's very definitely a question of defining a realistic expectation versus a kind of purity test, but there's one aspect to this in terms of content creation that I think we, as content creators in an industry surrounded by people just like us, possibly overthink. Like, even me, there's very few countries I *wouldn't* go to, but there are a whole list of countries I'd visit but not necessarily shout about in the same way as others. But in the back of my mind lies one fundamental question.

Who cares?

What I mean by this is, let's take an example of a country with a mild human-rights problem, but which has enough reason to visit, for history, scenery, culture, food ... somewhere like China. Now, no-one's going to say China's in any way even ethically-neutral, and for a travel writer/content creator to take a press-trip there might raise a few eyebrows amongst a certain set of the travel blogger community. However, would anyone outside that community really give a monkeys? If you're a noted influencer, and you promote somewhere with a bit of baggage, is the backlash worth it considering more people would go 'woah, cool'. Just who are our audience? If we're aiming for the average consumer who's simply looking for travel inspiration, or even just to hear tales of somewhere they may never likely go, does it actually matter what our peers think? I'm a very Queer, trans-adjacent non-heterosexual agnostic who is the antithesis of everything somewhere like Saudi Arabia culturally stands for. But if they give me two grand to produce content about the lesser-known historical sites in the country, and wax lyrical about the northern desert region, an area not really promoted even by the Saudi Tourist Board themselves, and then have that published in the likes of the Daily Telegraph, a few content creators might raise an eyebrow and I'd be two grand richer with a commission to my name. Now granted my target audience probably aren't Daily Telegraph readers, but that's a different, and much more internalised, conversation. The fact is, outwith the content creator community, no-one would really care that I went, or even know why it would be a problem. Some might say that lack of knowledge itself is a problem, but that's a different question. Is the main backlash going to come only from inside the community, and if so, how much does that matter in the wider industry.

I guess what I'm wondering is, is there a way to travel blog ethically, given the realities of the world, and is it up

to us to uphold those ethics as much as we can, or is it a case that we have to do what we can do in order to thrive, survive even, and accept that sometimes we can't be as ethical as we'd like, and sometimes that involves making decisions we'd rather not. And those lines are different for everyone; some people wouldn't touch Tanzania, others would stretch to El Salvador, and then others would take the Shekel and run with it. And ultimately, does it matter what we do, if the wider audience worry less about it than we do? That these countries even have a presence at WTM suggests that, in fact, it doesn't.

{section separation jingle}

Someone I follow on Instagram, Paulina_on_the_Road, wrote a post recently about travel blogger aesthetics. She said: *"People love to say aesthetics are shallow. You know sometimes I catch myself wondering if loving beauty and travel aesthetics that much makes me less of an 'authentic' traveller. But honestly, I don't think so. For me, capturing beauty is how I slow down. It's how I connect - with a place, a moment, even with myself. It's how I want to bring awareness to a place, a culture, and write a (new) story. Because travel isn't just about seeing landscapes. It's about feeling them, and sometimes, the only way I know how is through creating something beautiful. Maybe aesthetics aren't shallow after all. Maybe they're just another language for awe, gratitude, and presence."*

Traditionally, of course, Travel Bloggers do have an aesthetic. You know the vibe. Sundresses on mountains, looking at the camera centre-stage with the scenery around them feeling a bit like wallpaper. Lying upright on a low-height wall, one foot flat, with the ground dropping behind them so all you see is sky, making it look for all the world they're going to fall off to their death. That sort of thing. It's generally considered very them-centred, putting themselves at the front rather than the place they're in, like some kind of cheesy 1970s holiday snap. And sometimes Instagram feels just like looking at someone else's travel photos. Or possibly fashion model shoots - the same poses repeated but in a different colour dress and hat. The location becomes less important than the person who's there.

And yet. The Instagram Feed posts that get the most likes for me are ones which I'm in. Which used to irk and confuse me. Because me. I'm getting over that. But if I post a picture of what I imagine people perceive as a nice tropical island paradise, it'll get maybe half the traction as if I post a picture of myself looking unkempt and pensive in a shelter on a grey day about to start an ultra-marathon. I'm not an allonormatively-attractive 20-something solo female traveller in a sundress, I'm a gangly 50-year-old enby in dungarees. And yet, even I see an uplift in engagement with selfies. And while I'd love it to be reflective of an interesting and thoughtful caption, I'm not naïve enough to think that's the vibe here - my IG captions are microblogs for my benefit as a framework to later write blogs and podcasts around, not for my audiences' benefit for what is basically glorified alt-text.

It is, of course, that people like people. People buy from people. People like to see other people in images as it seems to make them more 'connected', more 'believing it's real', and absolutely more 'I can picture myself there'. You can post all the technically best pictures of the most aesthetic places in the world but if your audience can't visualise there's a real person behind those shots, behind the stories, then there's always going to be a bit of a cold disconnect. You become less of a travel blogger, less of a human, and much more of 'one of those identikit corporate accounts that posts pictures'. And corporate accounts are, in general, more boring, more functional, and more the sort of thing you might 'like' a post of in passing but rarely engage with.

Travel Bloggers know this, and create an aesthetic accordingly. Now, some might well argue that all the aesthetics look the same - and I remember well the phase of seeing reels of travel bloggers skipping or jogging away from a fixed camera point barefoot in a flowy dress, that pretty much everyone seemed to do constantly. There was also the period where, and this was popular for beach holidays, the travel blogger would be holding the camera person's hand and pulling them forward so it looked like you, the viewer, were being dragged into the sea. In fairness, that was slightly unusual, for a reason I'll come onto in a moment. But with regards to aesthetics, there are things that work, people have degrees in psychology and related practical applications thereof (like advertising) and can tell you far more about *why* they work than me, and Travel Bloggers of course use them to create their aesthetics. Think of pastel shades, muted autumn vibes, hand placements, even mild photo editing. They're designed to pull you in and make you think 'oh, here's a real person, I could be them', or 'oh here's a real person, I really like their content, let's speak to them'. Showing yourself isn't shallow, it's connection.

I'm sure purists don't like the person-centric approach to travel blogger photography but, I don't know, give the people what they appear to want, or at least resonate with. And if the average travel blogger has an aim to at least make it a side-hustle, people knowing who you are, and engaging with that, definitely helps.

One question this does bring up though is, is the travel blogger aesthetic a real Thing? Like, is it reflective of who they are as a person, is it a consistent personal style they take with them throughout all their adventures, is it showing that person's authentic self? Or are they just acting a role like someone in an advertisement, with a checklist telling them what to wear, how to stand, where to pose, etc? It would be lovely to believe that someone genuinely feels how they portray themselves, but Taylor Swift, one of the most talented and 'human' musicians of my lifetime, has 12 albums and a different aesthetic and personality on each of them, so maybe it doesn't matter? ["Red", by the way, is the album I'd say that has the most Travel Blogger aesthetic, visually].

What is *my* aesthetic, and am I consistent with it? And does my aesthetic change depending on where I am, what I'm doing, and who I'm with? Am *I* authentic with it? Listen, I brand myself as The Barefoot Backpacker. Am I barefoot all the time? Clearly not. Do I take selfies where I take off my sandals and purposely hide them out of shot, just for the aesthetic? Obviously. Is that me lying about my aesthetic? Probably. Do I care? Not really. "The Naked Pastor Wears Clothes" as one of my friends said to me over ten years ago when I mused with her about that very issue. Is that me being authentic? Is that shallow and just touting for 'likes' rather than being true to myself?

That said, as I've mentioned several times before, when I'm barefoot I feel more comfortable, I feel more focussed, and I feel more 'real', I feel like I'm definitely more located in that place, be that place a ruined castle, a wild moorland, a city street, or an average suburban parkland. I feel somewhat more like I'm *there*, in that place, properly, rather than just passing through. I'm going to launch a whole series of 'Barefoot Freedom' posts in the new year about this very concept, once I work out the best way of doing it.

It's also become a 'brand aesthetic', in a way. People *expect* me to be barefoot (and are vaguely surprised when I turn up to events like WTM and even the tourist boards are surprised that I'm not), but what it does mean is that it's very clear who I am on my pictures, and people recognise me when they see me. Having a travel blogger aesthetic that serves as brand recognition definitely helps; such as someone I know online always wears the same type of hat, so everyone knows when they see a picture of him in the hat, they know it's definitely him.

Authenticism is an interesting thought when it comes to travel blogger aesthetics in general, to be honest. Like, the stereotypical images of travel bloggers, up mountains in sundresses and themselves often barefoot, for reasons I'll talk about later; you know, you just know, they didn't walk up that mountain like that, they hiked up in cargo pants and boots and got changed right at the top. I mean, I did. Because I travel as light as possible and it's cold and muddy on the moors and I don't want to get changed up there! And still, you don't want to spend too long up there barefoot in a flowy dress because the Yorkshire Moors don't care about your aesthetic; I live 10 miles from Wuthering Heights and Exposure Is A Real Thing, you know. But still. Their aesthetic is very often: I'm this vibrant, rugged, interesting, pretty travel blogger and you all want to be me. Freedom (from a patriarchal and capitalistic lifestyle), softness (because femininity sells), achievement (you too can find yourself). And most of all, they're doing it solo, they're doing it their own way, they don't need men, they don't need rules, they don't need shoes; or at least that's the story they might be trying to tell through their aesthetic. Maybe I'm doing the same, in my own way; 'sticking it to the man', and then I remember how I pay my bills, and it all comes crashing down to Earth.

But how authentic is this story? How many travel bloggers give the impression they're solo travellers taking on the world, and even if they don't specifically mention it either way, it's very much the impression that counts here, not the reality, but then never mention who is taking their pictures and then think about why they are never mentioned? I know it's hard to take the perfectly-posed and angled selfie, and a couple of friends of mine have shared rants about the difficulty of taking pictures while travelling solo. And yes you could travel everywhere with a tripod (and I recently saw someone on a platform of the Sheffield Supertram doing just that - Burley Moor Road isn't the most aesthetic of stops either), but even then you still have to set it up while the wind blows it down again. Very often the perfect aesthetic relies on invisible labour - the derogatorily-termed 'instagram husband' - who rarely gets mentioned and is largely invisible, but whose presence changes the whole story that's being told. If your aesthetic relies on giving an impression you're a certain type of person, does it make you any less real or authentic if you're not. Especially since there's a huge difference between solo travel

and couples travel, and if your brand aesthetic is strongly-geared towards the former, and that's what your audience is keyed-in to, it's hard to maintain that persona when it comes to practical details and advice. And if you want to be seen and treated as 'real' and 'authentic', you ought to really be able to back up your aesthetic with practical tips. Everyone's needs and desires are different and if you give the impression you're 'someone like me' it's easily to feel slightly betrayed when it turns out you're not.

This is partly why I really appreciate 'behind the scenes' content, not from an aesthetic stance but from a 'oh that's how she does it' stance. Someone I follow on Instagram (Georgia Rose Hardy) does some wonderful imagery and selfies that feel out-of-this-world, and then she posts whole carousels on the editing and design process and you realise that just because the photo is staged doesn't make it any less 'authentic'; indeed it shows how much work goes into creating that particular aesthetic.

Maybe authenticity for some is 'showing everything, warts and all', and maybe for others it's not about 'showing everything' but rather showing the parts that feel the most 'truthful' of themselves, even if they're curated, even if they're telling a particular specific facet of the whole story.

Of course it helps if the aesthetic is attainable, especially if you're trying to 'sell' yourself as a concept to your followers. But this also applies to the 'end' aesthetic you create, the holistic summary. I've spoken before about how it's possible to overedit a picture to make it look completely unlike reality, but conversely there's the old phrase 'every picture tells a story'. And as travel bloggers, vloggers, even podcasters, with every picture we take, we're very much telling a story, even if it's just to ourselves.

Our followers might not need to see entire IG carousels of pretty buildings fronted by overflowing dustbins, for instance, or beachfront huts and trees with a beach covered in plastic, but maybe we do, just to remind ourselves what we saw with our own eyes, Even if we decide to not tell that side of the story. But what if we do - if the story we want to tell is more focussed on the anti-aesthetic, even? There's a whole question about how much we need to tell, how much we should tell, to drive the story, and a lot of that is prompted by the aesthetic. Think about the trash, for instance. If you say "I saw a pretty building framed by overflowing bins — but did I photograph it that way, or did I step two metres to the left?", which version of the truth is that? They both are real, but they tell very different stories, give very different impressions, and make for a very different aesthetic. One might even ponder if we even owe the "ugly truth" to our audience; just as we might curate our own authenticity, we also curate our own travel blogging adventures, and does that drive the same questions of authenticity and ethics? Are you connecting with a place the same way if you capture its essence in different ways - would you have different associations of a place if you look back at the pictures you took, the stories you told, and found they concentrated on only a handful of aspects. Conversely is it realistic to show everything about a place anyway? Is it realistic to show everything about yourself and how you interacted with a town, a country, a culture? Again though, if everything we do is a curated and edited story anyway, and if most people are interested in the fact 'this human has visited this place, and I'm invested in it' as long as we do visit that place, does it matter to our audience?

Now, Paulina says that, for her, travel is more about 'feeling' a location, and by creating an aesthetic, it makes the place feel more real for her. One of my old penpals, Jelena in Belgrade, who has appeared on this pod before, once had a chat with me about aesthetics, and about boredom, oddly, and it's her who first had the vibe of 'everything is interesting'; she didn't feel that anywhere was 'boring' or 'dismissible' and that there as beauty and aesthetic in everywhere. Some might cynically argue that when you grew up in a concrete communist city, everywhere is more aesthetic than what you're used to (though to be clear, she absolutely doesn't feel that), but in any case that's another aspect to 'aesthetic'.

From Hometown Travel to the vibe of 'this is very unlike anywhere I've been before', everywhere has an aesthetic, and people come from all over the world to see it. What even *is* an 'aesthetic'? And if aesthetics help someone feel present, is 'feeling' a location and creating that aesthetic, in her own mind, on paper, or through visual media, that's much more 'internal', any less valid than a more direct documentary-style approach that tells you what's in a place and shows you what it looks like, without the personal sensory elements? And does your aesthetic change the longer you're somewhere? Do you become more 'localised' and go with the flow? And does that help you see a different kind of beauty in a place, one that's maybe more real and authentic? Sure the Alhambra Palace is nice, but what about the wall tiles in the corner of the café three blocks away? Something you wouldn't notice if you didn't 'feel' the location but which makes for a whole different aesthetic and way of being in a place.

Does a place feel more 'real' for me if I create an aesthetic? I don't know. I don't even know how to create an aesthetic? No, that's not true. I mean, I take a lot of pictures when I travel. Not as many as some, but still, 175-200 a day is one of the reasons I don't like blogging or posting to Instagram, because way too much choice and I don't know what the best pics are and then I get indecision paralysis, plus of course the sheer act of editing all those photos, even if I *can* choose which ones (and what normally happens is I don't choose, I end up editing about 6x more than I need to, and then get overwhelmed). I take so many photos because in part I never know what's important, in part so I have something to remember because my memory has never been terribly good, and in part because you never know what you might have missed and if I never go back to somewhere, I'll never get the chance to take that picture again; and even if I do, the weather will be different, the buildings may have changed, that moment won't ever be found again. Photos are a physical reminder of places I have been, aesthetics I remember, and emotions I have felt. Looking at them makes me think about where I was, what I was doing, what I was feeling, and what was going on in my life and the world at the time. It's also interesting to see how the world has changed; how I have changed within the world, and the journey I've been on to get where I am today.

Maybe what we call an aesthetic is just the visual trail of how we move through the world.

{section separation jingle}

Travel Blogging is, by its very nature, a social-driven industry. When we talk about the 'social side' of travel blogging, we usually imagine community – group chats, shared tips, collaborations, that sort of thing. But the reality is... it's bigger and much more complicated than that.

But I want to start with how I started in the travel blogger community. As you know I'd been writing travel diaries for nearly two decades by that point; some of them even made it online. But as far as I was aware, there wasn't any kind of 'community' as such in those early days – it was still largely just random people going to random places and maybe, if they were lucky, their travelogues would make it into book form. The idea of chatting to these people outside of a backpacker hostel was kind of weird.

But of course the internet developed; online forums and then social media arrived, and it was much easier to talk about travel experiences, travel plans, thoughts and shared interests with other travellers. From dedicated places like Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree board, to side-chats through TripAdvisor, a kind of proto-community developed and if you needed to find the best place to grab a beer in Ulaanbaatar, you were no longer reliant on a 5-year-old guidebook, you could just post a message and you might get an answer within a day or three.

My Barefoot Backpacker identity was created in preparation for a year's career break travel in Spring 2014; that break was neither a full year nor a fully barefoot one, but if you aim high, you might achieve things you didn't know were possible regardless. I'd been on Twitter under my personal identity for four years by that point, so it was a social media site I knew and was familiar with, and once BB got themselves there, they really took full advantage of the fledgling community that existed. For the next, I'd say five years or so, most of my evenings were spent occasionally chatting travel with people all over the world. There were travel chats most nights; at one point Thursdays saw four of them. They used hashtags to create a community, and weekly they'd all get together, create questions for the community, and we'd all chip in with answers, recommendations, suggestions, experiences, photos ... they'd be themed chats and themed hashtags, covering all bases. Examples included #CultureTrav that looked at all things cultural, like food, street art, etc; #PTTTravel that talked about aspects of travel focussed on part-time travellers (as opposed to full-time digital nomads); #TravelIST that was a general travel chat but hosted and run by Indian travellers whose timezone often didn't align with UK or USA based hashtags; and #TRLT, which stands for 'The Road Less Travelled', and talked about topics with travel bloggers who tended to favour travel to places, shall we say, 'beyond the brochure'.

But at the start of this decade, those communities kind of faded out. To be fair, it wasn't *just* the pandemic; the chats had started to slowly become less popular anyway, but certainly the lack of ability to travel meant, while people were more able to talk about it, fewer people seemed interested in doing that. Many travel bloggers quit, and others just switched into new enterprises and genres – some concentrated more on developing a brand on Instagram, others turned to video and spent their time building a YouTube presence – and when people started travelling again, and new Travel Bloggers came onto the scene, they'd never had that history with travel chats nor with Twitter, so never went there. Of all the travel chats that once existed, pretty

much the only one left is #TRLT, and even they who used to have over 1,000 tweets per chat now struggle to get 100, and that includes the questions. That community is pretty much dead now.

Given that no-one really uses forums and the like either, it's hard to know where the community *is*. Facebook groups are popular, they always have been, but I've always found two problems with Facebook – firstly that it's not designed to be a forum-type site so 'community' pages always feel a little 'clunky', especially ones which have several posts a day; it's very easy to get horrendously lost and not be able to keep up with the chat in them. The other problem is, out of all the sites I've wandered through, Facebook always seems to be the one with the most vitriol, the most bitter, the most argumentative. Sure you got some damning people on Twitter but in the days of Travel Chats the character length was 140 characters and since someone calculated the average working life of a tweet was 12 minutes, it was really easy to ignore and move on. Conversely, forum and discussion type places do exist, but the problem with places like Discord is the chats are very 'insular' and 'cliquey' by design – on a site like Twitter, absolutely anyone could see your tweet and join in, especially with the hashtag, and indeed we promoted that side of the culture. When you have a specific server it's much harder to attract passing people.

Obviously there is also Traverse, an organisation I came across via Twitter, who host blogger conferences, aid industry meetups, and run the Creator Awards. They have a visible online presence and have recently set up their own website – Traverse Connect – where there's a place to create profiles for your online platforms, and a forum you can use to chat to and ask questions of, other travel bloggers, but this is just one platform, run by one organisation, that you really have to have already known, or come across somehow through your everyday content creation; it's a community but nowhere near as encompassing as a public site. Plus they're quite niche in and of themselves; they're very much focussed on traditional travel content creators rather than the mix-and-match that people like me are. And I haven't yet found an equivalent in, say, Queer Travel or Lifestyle Blogger spaces. I'm sure they exist. Maybe.

However the Travel Blogger community has never really been coherently collective anyway. One of my first realisations of this was in discussions about collaborative culture. You would have thought that people in the same community might be building each other up and promoting each other, by default, because the more we work together, the more wider known we become. And yet. There was always a huge but very quiet mutual dislike between people who create small groups whose role is to boost up each other via likes, comments, etc, and those who think such activity is forced and creates only fake engagement. On the one hand you have people going 'the only way to be seen is for people to see us, and drive momentum', while on the other you have people going 'you're a clique, a closed shop, engagement should be natural and authentic, you're not being real'. I never got involved in engagement pods because it always felt like too much admin, especially if there were like 40 or 50 of you, and they always felt quite ... action-driven, in that you *had* to post comments on, like, 70% of people's blogs or whatever within a day of them being published, or else they kicked you out the pod. But in fairness, it definitely ensured engagement. And neither side is 'wrong' per se, they're just playing the game in different ways.

But while whether this engagement was 'fake' or 'genuine' was one of the criticisms of the pods, there's a much wider issue that affects travel bloggers and the community in the same way. Regardless of whether or not your engagement is pre-planned, the vast majority of travel bloggers' audience *is* other travel bloggers anyway. It's very easy to follow people you know, but if the end goal for the majority of travel bloggers is to get the perks of collaborations etc, how much of their audience is actually 'genuine' anyway (in terms of 'target marketing' for tourist boards etc, rather than people who aren't influenceable because they're already doing the same things for the same boards, or potentially want to), regardless of directed engagement, might affect things. You may have 50,000 followers on Instagram but if 40,000 of them are simply other people who either are, or want to be, people like you, rather than being the general public, that's absolutely going to affect how companies are going to see you and whether they want to work with you or not. When companies look at whether audience numbers actually represent influence, and whether there's enough Return On Investment when working with you, it's very important to know how much of your reach is outside other travel influencers. There's also a question of, if your audience is predominantly other travel bloggers, how much of what you create is geared towards that market, and how much is, to coin a phrase, accessible to the layperson who doesn't know, understand, or even care, about the travel industry and the people within it. If you assume knowledge about your audience, you're in danger of putting off the very people who you're trying to attract.

Of course, there's the question of 'can you choose your audience?'. If you're a travel blogger, you can niche

down in certain ways, you can talk mostly about travel around your home region, in which case your audience will largely be people who live, have lived, or want to live there, and people who are interested in going there. I know quite a few vanlifers, people who mostly live and work and travel out of cars, vans, canal boats, people always on the move, and their audiences, by and large, will be other vanlifers, people interested in that lifestyle, and people who use travel content as a form of escapism, to live vicariously through a life they couldn't or wouldn't. And then there's lifestyle and identity bloggers, queer travel bloggers, disabled travel bloggers, Black (with a capital B) travel bloggers, each of whom has a specific audience in addition to those who are genuinely interested in the places they go.

There are also accidental audiences, unexpected communities you end up in by virtue of a couple of posts or tweets that click the right buttons for people. Sometimes this is a Good Thing; given that I post daily YouTube Shorts, only most of which are about my travels, it's interesting that my most popular is one of about half a minute that is simply two trains slowly connecting at Manchester Piccadilly Railway Station. As such, my train-oriented Shorts often prove more popular than most of my other genres; I seem to have accidentally connected with the Trains side of YouTube, and that's fine, I can work with that. Sometimes of course this is a Bad Thing, as many female travel bloggers are uncomfortably aware; when comments on, for example, their YouTube videos are legion but quite predatory it looks like there's lots of engagement, which makes the platform show their content in similar people's feeds, thus perpetuating the issue.

The other problem with accidental audiences is, of course, if it's the wrong audience they're not going to be engaged enough with the majority of content that you might want to develop and monetise. It's no good having an online identity as a lifestyle hippie witchy type if the one video that brought you followers is of delivery robots in Milton Keynes, or some kind of video trend that brings in a load of teens. Especially if you play up to it. Like, sure, posing at the top of a mountain barefoot in a sundress is going to get you lots of likes, and sure if you make a habit of it those likes are going to be repeated, you have a captive audience who like your content, and sure you might gain a whole lot of followers out of it, but in the end they're not liking it for reasons you need them to. An entire community of people going 'nice toes, can I suck them' isn't going to help you sell more hats, or encourage more people to visit El Hierro, and sooner or later those travel brands and corporations are going to notice the lack of concrete engagement, of community, and ultimately, of productive clickthroughs.

Yes I have a small audience of gay male foot fetishists, based on my name alone. Occasionally they message me, almost exclusively on Facebook. "Hi".

So what of the future? I'll be honest, I don't know. Communities do still exist, but it's much more fragmented than it was, and people find their circles in smaller and more specific ways – it feels as awkward now to find genuine travel content creators in, say, Kenya, as it was in 2010, because if you don't know they exist, you can't as easily find them, whereas when you had a quick central vibe where you knew pretty much everyone was, it was much easier to come across people accidentally. And even when you do, it just feels like social interactions are driven more by strategy than by a genuine desire for a community-type relationship. Honestly, travel blogging used to feel like a neighbourhood. Now it feels more like a shopping mall – lots of people, but with less of a sense of belonging, more a sense of function, a sense that everything is transactional rather than transformational. There are still moments that feel real, but the community itself doesn't feel it.

{end pod jingle}

Well that's about all for this episode. Tune in next time for another adventure beyond the brochure. Until then, keep travel blogging, and if you're feeling off-colour, keep on getting better.

{Outro voiceover:

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

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

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

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

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