Podcast 115 : Travel Through The Senses

{INTRO:
V: And all the world is biscuit-shaped / It's just for me to feed my face / And I can see, hear, smell, touch, taste / And I've got one, two, three, four, five ... {pause) ... six, seven ... hang on, how many are there?!}

{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 seems to finally be Spring-y here, which is nice because so far this year it's been pretty much entirely cold and damp. There's a number of outdoorsy activities I've been meaning to do, and the closeness of the wily windy moors makes that recent weather a huge disincentive.

I have returned from my two weeks away travelling around the southern part of the Caribbean, and there'll be a podcast about that adventure coming up in the near future, albeit concentrating on one aspect of the trip rather than the whole thing. I only got back on Saturday just gone so I've not had a chance to process and write it up yet, but it was definitely interesting.

Feedback on my last podcast and associated YouTube video (which is now live on my channel, go check it out) has been pretty much uniformly positive; I'm not saying I have a low-key side-hustle in stand-up comedy in my immediate future but certainly there's a lot of you out there who thought it absolutely slapped, so thank you :)

Sarah, who dragged me onto the course with her, now wants us to try improv. I'm not convinced,

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In a recent podcast episode, I talked about aesthetics a lot, and I occasionally touched on the idea of 'senses'. I figured it made sense therefore to do a full podcast on it, on how you, I, everyone uses their senses while travelling, and whether our senses affect how we travel, and the experiences we gain through them. Consider, too, how our memories of a place, of a trip, live in the senses, and we can easily be reminded of them if the same senses are activated in the same way after the event.

It might help to define what I mean my 'senses' first though. Obviously I'm including the traditional Famous Five – sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. I'm also including the sense of proprioception and its related sense of balance. I also felt it was interesting to look at the sense of timing, because a lot of travel revolves around time, both directly (in terms of travel time, waiting time, etc), and indirectly (how time seems to change depending on what you're doing – Einstein might have had something to say on that matter, but then Einstein to the best of my knowledge never took an overnight Flixbus through Austria).

And in travel, all the senses play a part. We generally talk about 'seeing the world' for instance, but it might be just as accurate to say we smell it, hear it, feel how it moves us and moves around us. Who can't say they only see a street market and not smell the food cooking on an open grill; see a volcano but not feel the heat it gives off; see a stone wall and not feel the moss on top, or the cracks between each stone. And what senses play a part when there's nothing interesting *to* see – the motion of a ship on a ride across open sea, the inside of an airport at 4am, or when lying in bed in a country cottage far from the city. Travel is, or can be, a whole chaotic sensory mess. A bit like my podcast episodes, let's be real.

Yes I mention backpacking barefoot. But not anywhere near as much as you might imagine.

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So let's start with the most obvious sense, that of sight. This is the one that is most apparent when it comes to travel bloggers, well not only travel bloggers but certainly a lot of content creation is geared towards creating content that's very much 'look at this'. And companies travel bloggers work with, like tour companies, tourist boards, hotels even, will tend to focus on sight as their main driver for influencing and marketing. They're fond of strong presence and following on sites like Instagram (originally a photo app) and TikTok (a video app). Sites where you see things, and interact based on what they look like, rather than how people describe them or talk about their experiences in them.

And also, as I mentioned in a previous podcast, content creators actively use both what somewhere looks like, and what they themselves look like, to create a story in the visual medium about a place and how they, as the most important person in their feed, interact with it.

But even in everyday speech, sight is generally the first sense that people default to. When you go on a trip, people ask you 'what did you see?', using it as a proxy for, and generally more frequently than, 'what did you do?'. Almost as if the important aspect of a trip is experiencing it through the eyes. “A picture paints a thousand words”, or, I guess these days, “a thousand characters of alt-text”. I'll come onto an issue with that shortly.

In terms of the sense of sight specifically though, one question that springs to mind is: 'what makes for a good sight?'. This is such a subjective question, since everyone defines aesthetic beauty in a different way. As mentioned in a recent pod, I live a few miles south of Wuthering Heights and that's an evocative and wide vista of open moorland that some people find gothic and wild, and others find, frankly, dull. And of course it matters what you're used to, where you're from, what you've had experience of. If you live in a small town, seeing a gaggle of 30-storey skyscrapers is going to be quite a contrast every time. If you live in the likes of London or New York, it's going to be barely worth a glance, never mind a picture. And there's much more nuance the deeper you go. City lights, reflections in puddles, places with swathes of colour compared with places uniformly Salford grey, and of course the people. Sometimes you don't notice how diverse somewhere isn't until you visit somewhere that is, and of course vice versa. And that very fact is one of the simplest ways to see how you're travelling, indeed even *that* you're travelling – if you look around and see that people look different, dress different, act different, that the shops you pass are set up differently, that the signage is in a different language or script, that the pavement and the roads are set up differently, even that you notice the traffic is driving on the opposite side of the road to how you're used to.

On my very early pod about Hometown Travel, and I've mentioned it a few times since, I talked about the need to look all around you. There might be something interesting to see above you, to your side, behind you, below your feet; your eyes are the window to the world and you can see the whole of it, but you have to remember to look. Let the light in from all directions and explore. Rainbows are particularly fond of appearing behind you, for instance. It helps to pay attention (my experiences in crossing roads is notorious amongst those who know me), and it's one area where having a travel companion helps, as you may be looking in different directions.

There's also aspects that photography itself brings up. You get a sense of how the light differs – I mean sure you can judge the different height and intensity of the sun, but it really becomes apparent on photographs, as the way a camera sees the world is different to how you see the world. There's a reason photographers love golden hour and blue hour, and even the timing and length of that changes as you travel. In addition, the camera is able to more easily pick out detail that we cannot – the best example here is the Northern Lights which to me, when I saw them in Iceland, were kind of grey, but the camera picked them up in vivid green. One might argue that travelling through a camera lens is a different sort of travel again to just travelling with your eyes, as the stories they tell are different, but when I'm looking at the pictures afterwards, I prefer to think of them as a trigger for remembering stories and events rather than being the definitive version of that story. And there's definitely many occasions where the camera falls short rather than excels – especially for me with wide open vistas and some city scenes, where I'm looking in 360 degrees and the camera can really only either take a narrow view, or a far less detailed one.

However, all this relies on being able to *see* in the first place. Disability is assumed to be a barrier when it

comes to travel, and one day I'll do an entire pod on that subject, but of course one of the most common disabilities is blindness. According to stats from the UK's RNIB (Royal National Institute for the Blind), two million people (out of about 68 million) in the UK have some kind of sight loss, about half of which, so one million, are classified as blind, partially-sighted, or living with a long-term, irreversible, eye condition (examples of the latter include glaucoma and diabetes-related eye disease). And of that million, 320,000 are registered as sight-impaired to a lesser or greater degree (what we might, in common parlance, consider 'effectively blind'). A quick calculation means that's just under 3% of people in the UK with some form of sight loss and not quite 0.5% of the population who are sight-impaired, or, in fact, there are more blind people than trans people. Just so we have a context and a baseline here. And if only people focussed more on that; it might be a more pleasant country. There is an overlap but that's beyond my pay grade to calculate.

Fortunately, there are lots of other ways to sense your travels.

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Sound is an interesting one, when it comes to sensation. And I don't know if we, as travellers, really think about noise expectations, and I think most of the time our thoughts and concerns about it are limited to 'can I sleep?', and, for certain types of traveller, a related 'is this a Party Party Hostel?'. And yet when we travel, sound is often something we very much notice, and very much affects our feelings of a place. So many Booking Dot Com reviews talk about how noisy a place was, and how it affected them. And it definitely does change how we think of a place, in part I think because sound affects how we 'think'; when it comes to overwhelm it's one of the strongest factors.

After all, we most of us know the feeling of being in a loud place, of hearing a myriad of different noises, some pleasant some dissonant, but also, for the average able-bodied traveller, the absence of sound is a very different feeling to the absence of sight. Close your eyes and you can concentrate on other senses, but you can't close your ears, outwith very specialist headphones, but if you're in an environment where there is genuinely no noise, or at least very little, it can be very disorienting.

Like, where I live now, when I lie in bed, it's very quiet. If I listen hard enough, I can occasionally hear cows. This is a very different environment to when I lived in Manchester and had a relatively important railway line right next door that handled local and regional trains, and some goods traffic, mainly going to and from Drax Power Station. Plus of course the building was basically at the junction of two of the country's major A-Roads just outside the very centre of the country's third most important metro area. It was quieter than you might expect, but then I was twelve floors up.

I mention this because when you travel, you do so with a baseline. If where you live is loud, travelling to a city won't faze you, but spending a week at a B&B (or even camping) with the idea to do some country hiking, will be quite a change that you'll notice more. And if you live in a village, taking a few days in a city break is going to really push your senses, especially that of sound, because there'll be a lot of noise coming from everywhere, and if you're not prepared for it, it could end up being too overwhelming and affect your enjoyment.

That change of sound isn't just an initial impression though, Take for example something like an old church or cathedral, of the kind often visited by city break enthusiasts. It could be on the noisiest square in the world, with horns, street markets, business people making phone calls, whatever. But once you enter that church and the door closes behind you, silence. It's as if the city is a several light years away. You might even get the same effect just turning a corner off the main drag into a side-street – and that change could be welcomed, or it could be jarring,

One question that comes to mind when I travel is: does what I hear accurately reflect a place? Or, conversely, is what I'm hearing what I expect to hear? Am I disappointed if I feel there's a disconnect between what I expect to hear and what I do hear? Are my expectations valid? When I was in Morocco and Tunisia, the overriding noises I remember were of the car horns and the Adhan, the call-to-prayer, and the city bustle and street sounds were what might be described as 'background radiation'. But that was exactly as I expected, and when I visit Algeria, probably in the next three years, I would fully expect it to sound the same, and indeed I'd be slightly disappointed if it doesn't. And yet, if I'd had the same soundscape in, say, Paraguay, I'd have been confused and pushed somewhat out-of-kilter, even though it's just an ordinary and standard soundscape. It's not like it's a completely alien sound. The same could be said for crickets and grasshoppers. That distinctive sound

at dusk in sultry tropical climes, it's practically a trope and if you're sitting outside at 8pm in the dark on a sultry evening it's practically obligatory, but do the same in Scotland and it really sounds weird.

But,going back, even the mundane can be different. Think of emergency vehicles; ambulances, fire engines, and the like. They're a more-or-less everyday phenomenon, and yet the sound the make varies across the world. In the UK they go nee-naa, nee-naa; in other countries they go whoop-whoop-whoop, and some cities have even experimented with white noise, I believe because it helps the brain to understand direction. And for such a ubiquitous event, hearing it can make you realise that yes, you are in an unfamiliar place, and even the most standard things can be different. My bestie Laura has lived on four continents and, you'll hear more about that in a future podcast episode but one of the things she notices is birdsong. Like, birds are everywhere, right, and if you're not paying attention you don't realise that actually, because the birds are different across the world, what they chirp is also different. And if you spend long enough abroad, or pay attention hard enough, you'll notice that the birdsong at home is different, very different, to the birdsong abroad, and it's one of those things that once you realise, you cant help but notice.

This opens the thought of: are there certain sounds that you hear and that immediately take you back to a place, either because they belonged there or because there's some specific association with that place? An example of the latter was when I travelled through China on a tour in 2002, we passed through the town of Yangshuo, in the karst country of Guilin Province in southern China, and at the time it was one of those towns that was both very touristy and yet with a very distinct divide between the tourist sector and everywhere else. But one of the things the locals did was corner the market in less-than-official CD albums. One of our tour group bought the recently-released “By The Way” album by Red Hot Chilli Peppers and that was the soundtrack to the rest of the tour. Even today, nearly 25 years later, I can't hear songs like 'Can't Stop' and not think of that China trip. It's quite out-of-place for China in principle, but for me, it's very much something that recalls a time and a place.

I think the biggest sounds though are voices; generic background noise of chatter, mostly indistinct, but when you listen in you can make out languages, accents, tone, all of which could be different. As I type this part of the podcast, I'm in a lively pub in Halifax, West Yorkshire, and next to me is a large group of locals. I can tell they're locals because they're speaking English with a very noticeable Yorkshire accent. Last month I was in London and I overnighted in a pub near Euston railway station; I was listening in to conversations on other tables and the most common language spoken was French. 36 hours later and I was drinking mulled wine in a Christmas Market in Freiburg, where again I was hearing French spoken far more than I might have expected. Listening to conversations when you travel is a really strong way to realise that you're somewhere else, somewhere out of your usual environment, possibly even outside your comfort zone. But conversely, it also makes you realise that you 'belong', that you're 'at home' in an international environment, and in a multicultural or touristy city, that you have as much right and reason to be there as everyone else you can hear, It's sometimes even quite fun and interesting to guess languages, and appreciate how global you are. On a train coming back from the Lake District a few months ago, me and Laura shared a table with two women who, it turned out, were Norwegian; before we chatted to them to confirm, it was interesting to hear them talk, hear their accents, knowing they probably weren't born and bred in Kendal. Sometimes its nice to imagine people thinking the same of me, hearing my voice, knowing I'm not local, and being curious where I'm from and what I'm doing there. Disappointingly it's very clear from my voice that I'm British. But as an introvert, it helps to encourage conversation as I'm much less likely to initiate it myself. It is, however, very, I don't know what the best word is, 'resetting', maybe, to know there's a whole world out there that doesn't know you and doesn't care what your backstory is, and that you're the one that's out-of-place in this environment. There's an awful lot of people who could do with experiencing this. Sadly, their idea of 'foreign' is Leicestershire.

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There's a meme, originally from Tumblr, which I keep seeing on my Instagram explore tab, that goes something like “weird how no-one ever comments on the absence of smells unprompted. 'It's dark in here' - normal regular observation; 'doesn't smell like anything in here' - absolutely deranged sentence.”

I don't know how much people notice smells in everyday life, I'm a bad person to ask about this; I'm someone who has to hold their breath every time they walk into a large Boots or Superdrug or other similar store because the smell of perfume around the stalls and displays at the entrance can be overwhelming to me, which Laura finds amusingly odd. I am the sort of person who can smell when a heater or radiator hasn't been used

for a while when it's switched on as I can smell burning dust; I can smell electricity and dubious cable wiring more than most people. And yet strong everyday smells pass me by – I tend to be indifferent to urine-stained subways and vomit-covered coach floors. And I can't tell the difference between hops and cannabis, which probably makes me a bad person to consider a career in brewing, especially as I've had hemp-infused beer in Andorra and it wasn't particularly good.

But everything has a smell, and those smells can definitely guide a traveller, both at the time they're in a place, and afterwards when a smell reminds them of being somewhere. The most obvious is, of course, street markets, particularly in Asia; herbs and especially spices, are very good at bringing a memory, a place, a food, to mind. I'm fond of making curries, and there;s absolutely nothing like the aroma from frying spices like turmeric, cumin, paprika, cinnamon .. just the thought of it takes you to street markets, restaurants, even homes, in places far from Yorkshire.

It doesn't even have to be spice. Even something as simple and ubiquitous as frying onions can take you places near and far – from a street stall outside a nightclub in Birmingham at 2am frying a hot dog to placate your mood after a failed attempt at a snog with a random reveller, to a street market in Malaysia cooking up a curried stir-fry for lunch after visiting a mosque.

Similarly, some cuisines have a generic aroma that can't be pinned down to any one ingredient, and when mixed with humid air, gives you a weird but not unpleasant sensation of being in a restaurant. When I first set foot in Hong Kong, back in early September 2002, that was exactly how it felt – it was like walking into a town made up entirely of Chinese restaurants, the sticky heat trapping the flavours in the air, making a wall of heat, water vapour, oil, and smells, and and giving the sense that you were *in* the kitchens as they were cooking up food; this, more even than the sound of frying vegetables, was my overriding impression of the city. But I'll talk more about humidity later.

It's not just food that brings the sense of smell to mind. As you know, I grew up by the coast of North-West England, and as a teenager I jogged through the pine forests at Formby. Pine has a specific smell, a clean, fresh, outdoors aroma, which is why it's commonly used in cleaning products. Make your bathroom smell as fresh as a red squirrel nature reserve. And doubly so after a rain shower, when the water releases more of the chemicals that causes the scent for reasons that history-focussed me didn't care about learning, Petrichor is one of the most popular smells, although in my nose, certain trees and shrubs give out a post-rain smell that reminds me of semen. Insert your own metaphor here.

I'm not sure if the concept of a smell being out-of-place really makes sense, given that the most common smell people encounter *is* that of food, and in the modern, multicultural world, it's common to find different cuisines in even the smallest of towns. The other issue with smell is that some of the most ubiquitous smells are quite strong and override the more unusual ones. It is perhaps surprising where I live that I don't smell the cows more, or at least what the cows do, but certainly in rural environments that's a pretty common aroma. It would be weird to smell it in a town, but even around urban farms it's not that strong because the towns themselves have an overriding smell. In my lifetime it's changed somewhat; my childhood was spent with petrol-driven cars and very little environmental regulations, so as an 8 year old I was probably 80% lemonade and 20% lead. Some places still have this smellscape – mix exhaust fumes with industrial pollution and, again, humidity, and you end up with places which make you ill; even if officially you just have a cold or something equally as benign, because they of course don't have pollution there, that's a capitalistic Western problem.

Other places have distinctive and specific aromas, though you might have to think hard to describe them. As a child I had that feeling about the underground railway stations in Liverpool – the combination of what I now assume was a combination of damp, oil, bird, and metal meant standing on the platforms as a train arrived gave rise to a very distinctive 'I am in an underground railway station' aroma that, weirdly, I have never got on the London Underground. And for those of you who think 'could it be diesel', the Liverpool rail network was electrified in 1903 making it I believe, after what is now London;s Northern Line from Kennington to King William Street, the second oldest underground electric railway in the world (albeit it opened as a steam line; the aroma and pollution of which was *why* they decided to electrify it after only 17 years). One can only imagine the atmosphere inside those early steam-powered railway lines was. China would never. Allegedly.

The most common aroma travellers, travel blogger types, will come across though is other people. And honestly, it's usually not pleasant. I'm especially looking at hardcore barefoot backpacker types who travel the

world for months at a time using only hand luggage, spend every night in hostels, and who have a slightly liberal view of personal hygiene and clothes-washing, especially in warmer and stickier climates. I don't know anyone like that. In the same way the average Republican Party Conference attendee doesn't know any gay or bisexual men. Look, my clothes were literally in the washing machine at the time, okay? Anyway. Hostels are a veritable pot-pourri of interesting aromas, especially all-male dorms, including all the obvious bodily wafts, but also strong deodorant, beer, potent food, and weed. Regarding potent food by the way, I am indifferent to people eating on public transport and enclosed spaces, but I draw the line at one foodstuff. Cheese & Onion crisps should be banned from being eaten anywhere that's not open to the skies.

It's not all bad though. I'm sure there are people in hostels who have caught the passing whiff of the aftershave or perfume of someone they find attractive but are too shy to do anything about. Or too mindful that while their dorm-mates might tolerate farts, they draw the line at the sounds of earthly passion and the movement associated with a rhythmically rocking bunk bed. Some things are too irksome to ignore. Weirdly I've never had that experience; I'm 100% convinced any dorm-mate activity on that score has been solo. Which, fortunately, doesn't really smell. In the short-term, anyway.

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One of the things that many thoughtful, ethical, political, travel bloggers talk about is cultural sensitivity and cultural manners and expectations. For those of us who travel to places outside our comfort zones, this is something that's very definitely in our minds as a concept, even if we don't necessarily remember all the subtleties when it comes to travelling in real time.

Many of these cultural situations revolve around food, including the offering and receiving of it (in the sense of some cultures require that you offer a set number of times, and refuse the offer a set number of times, which to my ears is an insanely illogical and inefficient way of transacting), the particulars of eating all that's on your plate and knowing when not to, and even knowing what to eat at certain times. Me and Laura once got grumped at because I had the audacity of ordering a hot chocolate at lunchtime in Italy. And honestly, as an aside, I always feel there's far too much gatekeeping around cuisine, around food, especially Italian food. Honestly, nobody cares if you put cream in carbonara except you, so get over it. “But it's not carbonara” I don't give a shit. This is food, I like this food, I don't run an Italian restaurant, and anyway you only got tomatoes 500 years ago so don't tell me anything you cook is traditional. Come back to me when you've eaten lasagne the way they would have done under Pope Martin IV.

Anyway.
The problem with cultural sensitivities and norms is, what happens if you genuinely don't like the taste of something (or, obviously, can't eat something because of your beliefs, health, or lifestyle). The biggest one for me is actually quite benign, but it's definitely a cultural norm across the world – I don't like coffee. I don't like the taste, I don't like the smell, and obviously in some cultures, coffee is The drink. It's what you get offered when you walk into a social setting, it's what you get offered in and around meals, it's what you get offered when someone's really keen on you, and even in metaphor it's ubiquitous – 'let's grab a coffee', 'would you like to come to my place for a coffee', neither of which *mean* coffee but for sure coffee is involved, even if in the latter it's several hours and about 130 calories later.

I'll concede a lot of that is quite flippant – there's more to cultural connections than one drink, and in fact most of the places I've travelled to, tea is much more popular – but it is true that taste, regardless of what the taste *is*, is very much something that travellers will encounter at a much deeper cultural level than you might first imagine when you think of senses while travelling, Food and drink are universal, and every culture, every country, has its own distinctive variations, styles, and ingredients that not only can you lose yourself in when you're in a place, but also which remind you of that place when you're back at home, and those memories aren't limited to the taste itself, but also the emotions you felt when you first came across it. Sure, coffee and tea are universal, but having a mint tea in an Arabic country is very different to having chai in a South Asian country, and having either in situ will vibe far differently than, and cannot be compared with, having them while sitting outside a Georgian country house in England's East Midlands, eating salmon and cucumber sandwiches.

Discovering taste while travelling is not always A Good Thing, but of course Your Mileage May Vary. In the 21st Century, UK cuisine has a bit of a bad rep, but honestly, it's not because it's bad, it's just ... boring. You don't come to the UK for flavour, you come for hearty meals that full you up, and that's a cultural vibe as much

as it is a taste vibe. We live in a cool temperate climate that's *great* for stodge; admittedly it'd be nice to use more flavours than parsley, sage, salt, and thyme (and occasionally mint), but the Gregg's Chicken Bake is a wonder of the world and I won't hear anything different.

Since taste and culture are quite inherently linked, of course food is very much a way that people travel differently. Some people stick to what they know, like my old flatmate from the 90s I've mentioned before who baulked even at the idea of a German sausage (absolutely not a euphemism), and all the restaurants I've seen in places from Cyprus to South East Asia which advertise Full English Breakfasts and Carling on draft, because they know their target market. You don't go to Benidorm for Spanish food, that's for sure. Or, indeed, Spanish culture, but that's probably a subject for another pod. Other people travel specifically to taste the local food, that they're less likely to get at home, and use the shared emotions contained within cuisine as a way into different cultures, specifically to take themselves out of their comfort zones. Anthony Bourdain, who made a career out of simply doing exactly this, said "you learn a lot about someone when you share a meal together", and as a traveller, as a tourist, as a foreigner, the meal you share ought to be, initially at least, something central to the place you're travelling in, rather than something generic. Of course, true cultural experience is sharing and swapping, but as the interloper, I'd strongly suggest eating locally first before you subject your host or new-found friends to boiled beef and Yorkshire Pudding. And if you're from Norway, maybe sit this one out completely.

In terms of cultural taste, my worst experience was in Kyrgyzstan; they're very fond of milky drinks and foodstuffs over there, which already I'm a bit wary of – like, I love cheese but not the blue cheeses that smell of feet and taste like all-male backpacker dorms. And I'm okay with yoghurt but the mere thought of sour milk is enough to have me retching into the nearest bin. Now, obviously this is cultural upbringing and not being used to it, but as a nation with a strongly-nomadic heritage, it makes sense that their milk doesn't come from cows, goats, or sheep. It comes from horses, And if you're not used to it, if you're not used to a quite sour and unfamiliar taste, when you get offered a glass of Kumys, the traditional fermented horse milk drink popular across Central Asia, on entering a yurt, and you don't feel confident enough to decline, it's a very strange sensation. It would definitely take me back to the Steppe in my mind if I ever drank it again, however I've no plans to do that, for the same reason I've never had lutefisk in Scandinavia.

Similarly, I've had the slightly sedative Kava in Vanuatu that tastes not a little like a muddy puddle, and which I'm led to understand that even the locals don't drink it for its flavour. As Abba's spiritual successors sang, some things are better best forgotten.

So, obviously some tastes can't be replicated, due to cultural preferences, manufacturing processes, or simple geography, and so trying them in their place of origin will give you an experience and a feeling that's always going to remind you that some tastes are better there. I really like mango, it's my favourite fruit, but having had mangoes in Cambodia and Dominica, I can safely say what I can buy in the UK might look like a mango but it will never be the same, in taste or texture. Similarly, many years ago I spent two weeks in the Levant, eating basically nothing but hummus and falafel, and what I can get in Tesco Sowerby Bridge would have you exiled for 40 years in the desert.

But everywhere has tastes that define a place, that will always take you back to that place in your mind, even your home country, even potentially your home town. Like, back in Roman Empire days, Britannia, the cold, damp, windy, god-forsaken island on the edge of the world that I'm a citizen of, was noted for really good oysters, and in the absence of refrigeration, what we would now define as Ancient Roman Food Bloggers and Influencers would go over there and rave about them.

The question could then come up: do some places 'taste' different, in obvious or subtle ways? Can you tell if the flavours are different, if the textures are different, if even things like the water are different? And yes, with regard to the latter, there's reasons why for example beer is better in certain parts of a country, even, not just the world – the water used to make the beer has different minerals depending on where it comes from, and even a country the size of the UK has some significantly different geology as you go along it, in terms of type and age of rock, and elements present in the landscape around them, meaning yes, the water in Burton (a very big beer brewing centre) does taste and act different from the water in Aviemore (a very big whisky brewing centre). Could I tell that the water in Aviemore and the water in Burton taste different? Probably not. But evidently some people can, which is one reason some people notice when beer production is moved from one town to another; even if the processes, the recipe, remain the same, there's enough of a difference in the water

to affect the final taste. This is another reason why I'm not a beer blogger.

The other aspect to taste is texture; even if that's more the sense of touch, because you're 'touching' with your mouth it does kind of belong here more. I'm one of those people who at times likes and dislikes food based on its texture rather than its taste – in that category of 'ugh no, don't like' are dried fruits like raisins and sultanas, raw coconut, olives, and possibly bananas. I like foods that crunch, rather than foods that squish; I'm wary of chocolate-covered peanuts in pick-and-mix situations because they're usually next to chocolate-covered-raisins and the possibility of cross-contamination is strong. When I was younger we had a bag of sweets called Revels; a mix of chocolate-covered flavoured things including nuts, orange, and coffee. Even their adverts were parodies of the Russian Roulette scene in the film The Deer Hunter. I simply Can Not With That.

Weirdly though, it's not something I think too hard about when I travel. I don't think places tend to think about texture when they promote their cuisine, and I don't think that any country or culture naturally tends towards, say, predominantly creamy foods or rock-like foods or foods that have a bit of bite. Obviously places have a cooking style that will lend itself to certain textures – the stir-fries of East Asia having a little crunch, or the sauces and light cooking of French cuisine that tends to make things more on the softer side, but I don't feel anywhere prides itself on 'food you need teeth of steel to eat' or anything similar.

{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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The second best way is to appear on the pod yourself; if you sign up to my newsletter you'll be able to see what episodes are being planned, and see which you'd like to contribute a voice recording for. It's also a great way to keep in contact if and when the soch meeds undergo a lingering heat death. Newsletters should come out in the first week of each month, and sign-ups can be found at barefoot-backpacker.us14.list-manage.com/subscribe.

Now, on with the show}

{section separation jingle}

It'd be a bit weird to travel around the world touching everything. Apart from anything else, people might find you a little strange, and of course it's a great way to get some slightly dodgy disease (remember kids, always wash your hands). As such, you might wonder quite how the sense of touch could be used to travel through – what do you really touch when you travel, that can give you a sense of that place and the adventure getting there entails.

However, if you think about it, you do touch an awful lot of things, even if other senses either are more dominant or, in the case of foodstuffs, take over the sensations. You might eat with your mouth (and to a lesser extent your nose) but things like the feel of certain fruits can place you somewhere, or take you back to a place in your mind.

Sometimes though it's even more simple than that. Smooth marble flooring and walls, especially in religious or administrative buildings, are pretty distinctive, and that's not including statues and sculptures that you might touch as you pass by. Conversely, a countryside walk brings you textures like wood bark, rough stone or wooden fences and posts, or mossy walls and gates; things you're not likely to encounter as much in a large city. Conversely, in those urban areas you could have the feel of the architecture – some places are largely brick, some different kinds of stone, others wood – and touching the buildings can be just as distinctive as seeing them. There's also more mundane things that you touch in everyday travel life – from the straps and poles on public transportation to brace yourself with, to the different types of cutlery and plates you use when you eat.

Holding a bamboo chopstick feels very different to a metal fork, and using one in an environment and place you'd fully expect to be using the other, might feel quite jarring. To be honest, there's even a cultural difference between bamboo and metal chopsticks; the former feel far easier to use than the latter (which are popular especially specifically in Korea, again giving that sense of travel through texture). Similarly, plastic cutlery and plates place you in a different place or on a different adventure to, say, fine china – not just a question of budget but also one of practicality and journey itself; a camping trip is very different to an afternoon tea at a country house, even if what you eat and drink might be the same.

Think too of something as ubiquitous as money. In many countries these days, if you even get to handle physical cash at all, the notes might feel quite plastic or vinyl, quite hard to bend, and fairly sturdy, whereas in other places you find paper notes, rough and slightly ripped, and easy to stuff into a wallet or purse. The coins might be sold metal, or they might feel quite hollow, and the embossments will all be different – some much more plain and smooth to the touch than others.

The places you spend time in too will have different textures and vibes; think in terms of soft furnishings, bedding, throws, towels, and the like. Do things that are different textures to what you're normally used to make you remember them when travelling or feel you're travelling – for example rough woollen blankets in a farm cottage if you're used to linen or cotton, or soft furry cushions on a sofa in a boutique AirBnB if you're used to foam or leather. Even chairs – there's a world of difference in feel and comfort between a fabric-covered bus seat, a wooden bench, a leather armchair, and a polypropylene diner seat, and each of them potentially highlights a different part of a journey to a different part of the world.

One thing that might often be overlooked when it comes to the sensation of touch is the weather. For example, do things like warm sunshine or raindrops make you feel like you're travelling? And is the feeling of each different depending on where you are in the world – does a downpouring of rain hit different in a rainforest or tropical environment than it does on a mountain or a grey northern English city? Indeed, do places have distinctive and apt weathers that you can sense when you travel? Even the simple sensation of 'cold' versus 'hot is something that can define a place – an adventure in the polar regions feels different to one in the desert, even in opposing seasons, and feeling those temperatures afterwards cab make you remember those trips. And does the weather change how you feel about a place? Like, I found Porto quite charming in the rain and I feel it one of the nicer cities in Europe; Chisinau was not, and my vibes for the place are accordingly quite low. But I don't know if I'd have the same feelings about either place if it had been completely dry and sunny on my visits. Chisinau might be a bad example there, though, not gonna lie. Also, are you more inclined to like or hate a place if the temperature, the weather, what you feel on your body, is different, or at least different to how you expect? A beach when it's wet invokes very different emotions to a beach when it's dry, but while it might make a difference in somewhere like Antigua, does it matter as much in a British Seaside Resort, where you explore the same rock pools, just with wellies and a mac? If the moors and the heights didn't feel wuthering, would that make them less apt, less evocative, less, I don't know, appealing somehow since your expectations and desires of visiting a place haven't been met?

In addition, when we travel, especially long-haul, and especially the closer to the solstices we travel, the weather in the destination might be completely unlike the weather in our starting point. How long does it take you to get used to that change?

And are your first memories of a place, and thus how you remember your time there, influenced by what you feel when you first step off the plane or the boat? I have trouble in warmer and humider weathers, especially sleeping (at least without some kind of industrial-strength aircon), so I've certainly remembered some of my trips for that reason – like the time I had heat exhaustion at the temples of Angkor because mangos are not a substitute for shade and the distances between the temples was much further than I anticipated. I barely remember Bayon because I was so dizzy and weak at the time.

I mentioned blind travellers in the section on sight; another aspect around the sense of touch caters directly to them. In many cities, especially in Europe, outside some important buildings there's often a small sculpture of the building in question, set inside a tactile map of the surroundings and a legend in braille so blind people can grasp the layout and the scale of it in physical form, rather than just simply hearing about it. There's several other ways in which tactile sensations can be used to help blind travellers, including different textures on the pavements to indicate, for example, pedestrian crossings or places to stand on a tram platform to be next to where the doors open.

Speaking of ground textures, I've been known to travel barefoot – clue's in the name, ya know – and certainly there's an overlap there too; one adventure had me leaving the airport in Livingstone, in Zambia, getting about five paces down the road towards the taxi rank, and going 'you know, barbecued toes aren't terribly useful to walk on'. Those sandals stayed on for most of the subsequent two weeks.

With regard to barefoot backpacking though, one could argue that in itself is a way to explore the world through the sensation of touch. Certainly many people do experience this; think of the world of mosques and temples, and even some museums and shops in certain countries, where shoes are forbidden for one reason or another. Those marble floorings feel more evocative when you're standing on them in bare feet; indeed often cold too as compared with the heat of the outside world. In some places there's even designated 'barefoot walks' – specifically-designed trails, usually outdoors, where people take off their footwear and experience different sensations like mud, stone, twig, gravel, grass, and water. In a world where we insulate ourselves from everything, baring our feet like this is akin to baring our soul and exploring what sensations that brings, though if you're not used to it it can be a sensory nightmare. On a more holistic level, one might argue that being barefoot allows you to feel every step, every part of the earth, and gain a great connection and understanding with it, to truly feel in the moment in that place. Forest bathing, grounding, earthing, all those terms are synonymous with the sense of touch; I'm led to believe there's maybe 7000 nerve endings in the foot, the most per square inch than any other body part, so there's definitely some truth to the concepts, although when people start talking about electron transfer I admit to switching off a little.

My feet are very ticklish though, and I've certainly done some world travelling with that in mind, but that, I feel, is a tale for a very different podcast episode.

{section separation jingle}

Speaking of feet, albeit in a more practical way, there's another sense used when you travel, albeit in a more oblique way. I'm talking here of the related senses of Balance and Proprioception, and they're both quite important to me, because I'm not very good at either of them.

I feel an explanation is in order. I'm sure you all know what the sense of balance is – if not, simply stand up, close your eyes, and see how long you can stand on one leg. I've been recommended to do it in my pre-run warm-up exercises; it's supposed to strengthen the ankles, as well as improve balance in a general sense. My first attempts in a session are generally measurable only on high-speed cameras, but I do get better. Proprioception however is a less-seen word; it refers to the related sense of 'position', of where you are in space, and covers all manner of concepts, including depth perception, spacial awareness, and body movement.

Those of you who know me will know I have ... trouble with many of these things. I did do a podcast episode around dyspraxia some years ago, but concentrated mainly on how it affected my life in general rather than in my travels specifically. To be honest, it's not something that mythers me too much, only that it's the reason I can't drive, cycle, or swim, all three of which are useful skills for a curious world traveller to have, since it opens out wider opportunities for interesting adventures. No scuba-diving for me, and no independent travel to distant obscure historical sites. But does it affect my day-to-day travelling? Not as much as you'd imagine, save the occasional broken toe and the knowledge that locals laugh at me when I try to get in and out of small river transportation. And of course my issues with going down hills, which is awkward as a hiker.

From a wider travel perspective though, proprioception being centred on body-movement means the concept could also be said to cover include afflictions such as vertigo and travel-sickness. I'm pretty good with most transportation; an ex-girlfriend and travel-partner once saying, after a particularly bouncy ferry across the Mediterranean, that I seemed to have the constitution to be able to stomach molten lead. For many people though, travel-sickness is an important part of travels, not a pleasant one but a significant one nevertheless. Bumpy roads, rolling seas, plane turbulence, all serve to make someone nauseous and possibly provide some memorable travel moments, even if not always the most delightful for dinner-party conversations. It's one reason I've never considered going to Antarctica, because the Drake Passage is deemed as one of the roughest places in the world and you're stuck there for two days; even I might find that uncomfortable, especially in the smaller ships you should be visiting on.

Sometimes though it's not even nausea, but fear – in a recent episode I spoke about Laura's dislike of flying.

When every slight movement of the plane (especially when turning) results in a vibrant reaction from your body and mind, that's quite an unpleasant way of how motion affects personal travel.

For me, the only issue I have with excess motion of my body in those holistic senses is in things like rollercoasters – and, by inference, certain undulating roads with sharp crests. The combination of speed and going downhill really doesn't feel pleasant for either my mind or my body. Conversely I know a couple of people who actively seek out theme and adventure parks for their vacations *because* they love those feelings of movement; they thrive on the adrenaline rush they give.

The opposite to all of this of course is what you might call 'sea-legs'; the feeling of being 'at home' on the move and comfortable being shaken about on a frequent basis, where you feel pretty 'balanced' regardless of what the sea or air throws at you. Indeed sometimes, and this is seen on long sea journeys especially, you're so used to the movement that when you return to dry land, it takes you a while to acclimatise; in effect travelling through (and sensing) movement has become so ingrained that it's hard to shift out of.

Body movement is also important in travel on a micro level too though. Most travel by definition involves movement, but what I mean in terms of the sense of movement is, for example, the way you move through a city, or the way you're aware of your surroundings in an environment – awe at huge buildings and spectacular vistas, or how it feels to walk through narrow twisty alleyways in the oldest part of town, or even wandering through places with varying altitudes; hilly hikes, cities with large numbers of staircases or escalators, funicular railways, and the like. There's a very real strong emotional feeling when you stand on a balcony or ridge and look down at the world below, a world you've just come from, and sometimes that can be quite overwhelming. Or maybe I just don't like heights. I'm one of those people who never stands on the edge of things unless there's a huge fence in front of me, because I know, you know, everybody who knows me knows, that there's a non-zero chance that I'll stumble and go careering down that cliff.

Spacial Awareness also affects your interactions in, say, a city, and how easy it feels for you to get around without getting lost. It's around having a sense of the place, knowing where everything is, having a sense of direction and being sure that if you walk down a road, you're going the right way and not, as has happened to me several times, most recently in Yerevan, turning right instead of left out the transport hub and ending up deep in the suburbs without any clue as to where I am, simply because it's felt 'correct' based on the direction we arrived from. Listener, it was not correct, and I only found out after a quarter of an hour of walking. This is also why I got lost at least thrice on the Calderdale Way, a mostly marked footpath, remember, when I did my first Ultramarathon. I *can* read maps. I just ... make too many assumptions and often they're not correct ones. Or simply don't pay attention. Some people love the feeling of getting lost in a new city, as it gives them a perfect chance to explore and see things they otherwise wouldn't. Others get very angsty if they're even one block from their known path. To be fair, I'm one of those people who, if I've done a particular journey once, I can usually find my way again, as I recognise and react to landmarks – a particular pub or shop, a colourful building, an unusual junction, that sort of thing, and everything starts to look familiar quite quickly – though I do get stymied the first time, especially if there's a junction or something that doesn't look in real life quite how its depicted on the map.

The sense of movement and positional awareness is also present in travel in terms of other people and objects. I, for instance, have trouble with other people using either umbrellas or wheeled luggage, both of which are commonly seen when I travel, and both of which I never quite know where they are in relation to me until I bump into them. I use neither, partly for the same reason; I have enough difficulty knowing where and how big my own backpack is, and I've certainly accidentally sideswiped people with it, never mind something that's much more external to my body. I'd love to say that's primarily a 'me' problem but I do get the impression quite a lot of people, tourists, don't quite know, or, frankly, care, where their luggage is, especially on public transit, leading to accidents and resentment.

Out of all the senses, this is also the one that's proportionally more affected by alcohol, which is an important part of many people's travel experiences. Being slightly tipsy might impact your other senses a little, but movement, balance, and spacial awareness are, I think, affected to a higher degree. You're less aware of how your body's moving, less caring of where your body is, and much less conscious of your surroundings and positional awareness. If you're already in an unfamiliar location, and possibly overwhelmed by your other senses in the first place, adding alcohol into the mix to actively take away one of your important senses is often not a good idea.

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The last sense I want to talk about in this episode is possibly not one you might consider when it comes to travel, or indeed at all, but I feel it's worth a mention simply because at a holistic level it's quite an important aspect of travel.

People talk about having a 'sense of timing', but often in the context of sport, or comedy; something where it matters to be in the right place or say the right thing at the right time. But travel involves a lot of time, sometimes excessively so, and how you acknowledge time, how you understand it and track it internally, can matter a huge amount when you're on an adventure.

Obviously the most prescient is simply making sure you start your journeys on time. It helps to have a good judgment of how long it will take to pack, to wake up, to get ready, to get to wherever it is you need to be so you're not late. This isn't just a case of knowing that you want to be at the airport 3 hours before your flight, it's judging how long everything will take in order to make *sure* you are, so knowing you need to wake up at 6.30am because you know it'll take you this long to get ready, and that long to get there, taking into account traffic, accidents, or wombats eating the track at Loughborough Junction, or whatever, Overlapping a little with Proprioception, it's about knowing how long it takes to travel the 3 miles to the main railway station, knowing how fast each type of transportation is, and knowing that if you leave at 12.26pm and run, you'll just make it in time. This happens to me about as often as you might expect.

Another aspect of a sense of timing is on the journey itself. If you're on a bus without a watch, and you don't know what the time is, can you judge how long you've been going, and how long you have left to go? I'm one of those people who gets quite angsty if they don't know where or when they are at any given moment – I'm not very good at tracking time in the first place and the idea of being on an 8 hour flight and not knowing at any given point if I'm only 2 hours in or only have 2 hours to go irks me in ways I can't really fathom. And before I check the flight tracking information, I genuinely don't know either way. Or if I'm in a local bus on the way to catching a train – every single red light, every single traffic jam, has me recalculating in my head how long the rest of the journey will take, whether I'm still on course to catch my train, or if I'd be quicker getting off the bus and walking.

You might ask, but Nel, you could just catch an earlier bus, or go a different way, and my answer is also related to a sense of timing. I'm very impatient, but also I hate waiting around, especially in a place where there's not a lot to do. In my head I feel I would have been better off making use of my time in more fun, practical, or useful ways. Possibly by staying in bed longer.

People talk about the concept of liminal spaces, of those places that exist on the edges of the world but aren't really 'of' it, where time goes for a cigarette and a doughnut. A lot of travel is set in those liminal spaces and is, let's face it, kind of boring. We're talking airports, bus stations, hotel corridors, shopping centres, places that exist for a functional purpose and that functional purpose doesn't care about the normal course of time. Have a beer with your breakfast at 6.30am, it's not 6.30am in here; let's face it, it's barely recognisable as a Tuesday. It's a lot of waiting around for something to happen, largely forgettable, but yet an important part of the whole travel experience. When we as travellers, especially travel bloggers, talk about where we've been, we often leave those bits out, but that's an awful lot of time to dismiss, but I don't think we really 'sense' it properly, we don't think about it after the event or can really judge how long that 5 hour stopover at Trinidad airport really was.

One aspect of timing that's specific to long-haul flights is jet-lag. I rarely get jet-lag, but that's partly because I messed with my internal body clock so much in my teenage and twentysomething years that I can generally handle the weird effects time changes have on me. I find it relatively easier to stay awake if I'm tired, than sleep if I'm not, so all I do is stay awake long enough to go to bed at a reasonable time in my new timezone, which then means I wake up at a decent time and lo!, I'm time-shifted. This is much easier for me to handle when travelling west, especially given many transatlantic flights are overnight ones and I absolutely can't sleep on planes unless I'm completely zonked. As an aside I also hate napping, even in everyday life, I just don't understand it and it gives me a headache. But for most people, Jet-Lag is one of those problems when their internal sense of timing and body-clock is at odds with what's happening in the real world around them, and is often an important sense to consider when travelling; don't do too much on the first day, I think is the only sensible advice I can give.

One thing that becomes apparent to me quite quickly into a trip too is I lose a sense of how long I've been away. Generally my days are quite busy, even if just with travelling between places, and my other senses tend to be overwhelmed with new things so my brain takes in a lot of information. This makes the days seem longer than they are, and it's quite common for me to be on Day 2 or 3 of a trip and feel like I've been away a week already. Einstein's theories of relativity are often simplified to the concept of 'a watched pot never boils', in the sense that if you do mundane things, time drags, but if you're busy doing exciting things, time seems to speed up, and honestly, travel seems like the opposite effect; so much happens that my brain assumes time expands to fill the expected gap rather than time speeding up because I'm not noticing. I mean, sure, a four hour bus ride feels slower than a four hour evening chatting with friends, but over the course of the whole day, the whole week, for me at least, I lose my sense of timing in the opposite direction when I travel.

I've spoken in a previous pod too about the concept of being driven around in a car while blindfolded – not having the sensory input of sight is quite hard, coupled with my relative lack of spacial awareness, but not being able to see the actual time, nor the landscape pass, means it's incredibly hard to judge speed and therefore, especially too if the car's quiet, with no radio or music to provide a kind of default tracking (I know this song's about 3 minutes long; I know that one's 10), after the first minute or so that journey could be two minutes or two hours long, I simply have no way of telling. It's often a fun way to travel, but mentally draining, and certainly messes with my control issues; my need to know things. Knowledge is power, and with a bad internal sense of timing, not having access to the time makes me feel very vulnerable. Sometimes I sing songs in my head to pass the time, but of course not at the right speed and also I tend to gloss over the instrumental bits, so I'm always come out much shorter than I ought.

For some other people though, none of this matters; it's not that they don't have a sense of timing, its that the way they travel means they simply don't care how long things take and they're not tied to their watch. They can just let go and enjoy the moment. I sometimes envy those people. The only time I can truly let go of everything is when I'm hogtied, which obviously isn't conducive to travelling; indeed it's the exact opposite. Even when I'm in the boot of someone's car. I am not a role model.

{section separation jingle}

So what have we learned this episode? We use a whole host of senses when we travel, and it's absolutely not limited to sight alone, it's just that sometimes we might not realise it. And every sense adds to the experience, and removing one fundamentally changes how you relate to that particular trip.

In addition, your brain creates a sensory map of every trip, and absolutely anything can trigger that map, from an aroma of a spice to a rocking sensation on a local bus. And there's a correlation between a sense, a trigger, and a memory, making it quite easy to reminisce about an adventure – sometimes even those remembrances are stronger than a simple photo since you have other associations you can connect with it; you can see a pic but you remember too the weather, the ambient sound, the background aromas – it's all there in one core memory. Indeed the senses are how places *become* memories, and by opening yourself out to embrace all of them, the more fundamental, the stronger, those memories can become. We travel with our whole bodies, not just individual parts of it, and our experiences and our senses reflect that. As we travel through the world, we should let the world travel through us.

As a final note, I've talked a lot about senses, but not much about emotions. The two are different but do interconnect; your emotional state, and indeed mental health, does very much affect your sensual inputs. If you're having emotional issues with friends back home, or if you're having angst about non-travel issues, or if you're feeling ill, all those sorts of things. And I've definitely had experiences where my feelings about a place have been affected by what's been going on in my life at the time – I've spoken about several on previous pods – and that's had a knock-on effect with how I've taken in that place with my senses; impressions of more muted colours, louder and more jarring crowds, less flavour. And of course if you're ill, that chocolate cake might smell much worse than if you're feeling well.

{end pod jingle}

Well that's about all for this pod. Join me next time for another adventure Beyond The Brochure. Until then, have a think about whether travel makes you more, or less, aware of your own surroundings, and whether you

are too 'awed' and 'overwhelmed' by everything being new on the senses, to stay stable and grounded. 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.}