

## Transcript for Spaces 001 – Q&A for St Mary's School, Astley

Hello :)

So, as you know, a couple of months ago, an old friend from Primary School days approached me with a thought. She's now a schoolteacher herself and her class was looking at travel writing, so she asked if I'd be willing to answer a few questions that her class would put to me, to help them in their lesson. I of course agreed, so they all went away and researched me, and she came back to me about a week later with a list of questions that her class were curious about, regarding my travels, why I started travelling and writing, and about interesting things that had happened to me along the way.

I wasn't sure the best way of answering them, whether in a specific writing to them, or a blog post, or something. But then my VA had an idea. She'd been looking at the idea of Twitter Spaces for a while. These are akin to audio discussion panels, with a host and speakers, broadcast live on Twitter so people can listen in to them and join in if the host allows. Because I have a podcast anyway, she thought that doing something audio-wise would be the most comfortable way of answering the questions, and we could check out this new social media while we do. Two birds, one stone, kind of thing.

Anyway it went really well, felt pretty natural, and my friend was more than happy with the recording we made from it. But off the back of it, me and my VA wondered if there would be mileage in doing it on a regular basis, about other topics that felt natural to talk about. At the time of recording this introduction, we're preparing our fourth.

Twitter Spaces themselves remain available to listen to for 28 days before being lost to the aether, but there are ways of home-recording them. One of the thoughts I had was, well my podcast is fortnightly, so is there any mileage in uploading previous Twitter Spaces as 'extra' podcast episodes to fill in the gaps, effectively making a weekly podcast for not very much extra work. My VA said there was no harm in extra content, so here we go.

This, then, is the recording of the first Twitter Space we did, answering the questions from my friend's school class. When editing it I noticed at times the quality of the recording dips slightly in a couple of places when I speak, but hopefully it won't affect your listening pleasure, and be aware too the original Spaces conversation took place over a mobile phone rather than through the computer.

Hope you enjoy!

*{intro music – jaunty, bouncy}*

*{Intro standard announcement:*

*Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a fortnightly series 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 Brit with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'whys' behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}*

*{Music fades. Spaces recording begins}*

VICTORIA: Good morning!

BB: Good morning! Good afternoon even.

VICTORIA: Oh yes, good afternoon It feels like a morning here.

BB: Yes. It's a very bright and beautiful day here

VICTORIA: Oh that's nice

BB: The sun is out the sun is shining, everything is glorious and dry

VICTORIA: Oh god, that's something's bound to go wrong any minute now then

*{giggles}*

VICTORIA: Right, so, think we should probably start by saying who we are and stuff

BB: Yes, I think I'll leave that to you, you're in charge of this

VICTORIA: Okay, so my name is Victoria Pearson, but you can call me V, and today I am just here to ask some questions that have been sent in by St Mary's School in Astley, just so it doesn't sound like the Barefoot

Backpacker is talking to themselves. The Barefoot Backpacker travels to places so you don't have to, with very little luggage and rarely any shoes.

BB: That's about the space of it, yes

VICTORIA: I realise that I didn't check that introduction with you, but I thought it was quite accurate

BB: It's very accurate, it's basically what I'm e written on my media kit and things that like, so yes.

VICTORIA: Fabulous, excellent. So as I just said, we were sent in some questions from St Mary's School in Astley. They've asked some very interesting questions of you, but obviously, with a younger audience, we have to be careful not to swear.

BB: of course, of course

VICTORIA: And stop swinging on your seat, I know you are {giggles}

BB: What?

VICTORIA: Every class has someone swinging on their seat, they're always near the back of the class and they've been told a million times, stop swinging on your seat

BB: I wouldn't know, I wasn't that child.

VICTORIA: Ah, I'm very surprised by that to be honest.

BB: I was the child who kept arguing with the teacher.

VICTORIA: Oh that really doesn't surprise me.

BB: At the age of 10 or 11, I thought I was the greatest thing known to the universe

VICTORIA: Everyone does, everyone does, and some of you possibly are, who knows.

BB: I happened to be right.

{giggles}

VICTORIA: Okay, should we dive straight in with the questions then, cos there are quite a few and we don't want to take up the whole of their lesson time with our wittering?

BB: Fair enough

VICTORIA: Okay, so, we'll kick off with the first one but it kind of ties in to another. So the first one is: what inspired you to become a travel writer, but that kind of feeds in to: when did you start travel writing and what was the first place that you wrote about?

BB: I've always been interested in writing, so when I was at Primary School, so like 7 to 11 age, creative writing and just writing in general was my favourite subject, so I've always had that writing bent to me. At the same time, when I was that young, I also had this fascination with maps, and map books, and encyclopaedias, so I used to just idly sit there, looking at maps, looking at places around the world that I knew nothing about and would probably never visit, but just the idea of them being there fascinated me. So as I've grown older it made sense that the two combined, basically, so I ended up writing about places, and travelling to places, and writing about trips that I've taken. The first one I remember writing was an inter-rail trip back in 2000 that I took with my then girlfriend We went around Spain, Portugal, and Morocco And it was more of a travel diary than what you might call travel writing these days, in the sense it was a lot around 'well today we went to this place, we had this much fun, then we took a train to here, and we played scrabble on the train', and things like that. Very much like blogging used to be.

VICTORIA: So more based around your feelings around the trip than what you might have actually seen while you were there.

BB: Yeh. I mean, obviously some of what I write was the places that we went to, but it certainly wasn't as in depth as the stuff people are writing now, and it certainly wasn't detailed or particularly informative. It was very much 'this is what we did, this is how we felt', and there was a lot of stuff that isn't terribly useful for other people to know about, but I was just writing based on what we did, it made sense at the time, so when I got old, I could look back and read it and go 'oh I had a great time in Morocco', and things like that.

VICTORIA: And was that an analogue type of diary, or it that online somewhere?

BB: It was actually online, and one of the reasons for putting it online was so that, and this is true of a lot of my early diaries, a lot of reason why it was online is so my mother knew I wasn't dead. Because my mother has this, and still does to an extent, has this view about me and my personality, and she worries about me, and she worries that I'm going to go to some far-off country and, come a cropper, shall we say, partly because of my own ineptitude or my own distrust of authority figures. So, I have to ...

VICTORIA: But that has to be partly because you don't tend to stick to the tourist trails when you travel. You're not one to go for an all-inclusive two weeks sitting by a pool somewhere.

BB: Oh, no, absolutely not. It's just also that my mother still thinks it's 1983. And has a view that that the world is as it was then, which means some of the places I'm going to since I started travelling are places that when she was younger, weren't exactly safe. So she was fairly worried about me going to Cambodia, despite the fact Cambodia has been, you know, perfectly valid for a couple of decades now. But she just remembers what it was like when she was younger, and so in her head it's still a dangerous place to visit.

VICTORIA: I'd imagine that for a lot of people who don't do much travelling, there are a fair few places like that in their head, where actually they're very safe to visit now, but they weren't when they were younger so they might find it hard to imagine you'd want to visit there. But that is a good thing for you isn't it? Visiting places that people don't usually go to as tourists?

BB: I find ... my belief is that everywhere is interesting, because everywhere there are people, everywhere people live, everywhere people work. So there is a reason for everywhere to exist, and one of the things I like to do is find out what that reason is. So I travel for cultural reasons, I travel for historical reasons, sometimes I travel for scenic reasons too, like you'll put a town in a valley somewhere in Yorkshire that's very pretty, so why not visit it. But yes, there's a tendency for me to visit places other people may not have thought of going. Part of that is because one of my main reason reasons for travel is history, and it just happens that a lot of places with some interesting history, and I use the word interesting quite ... interestingly, are places that are off the beaten track, as they say, or at least off the beaten track for tourists like me. I mean, one of the countries I've visited that people from Britain don't generally visit is Bangladesh Now Bangladesh is certainly not off the beaten track, it's one of the most populous countries in the world, and gets horrendously large number of visitors. It's just those visitors don't tend to come from the UK. Or, they don't tend to be, you know, middle-class white people from the UK anyway.

VICTORIA: Okay, so some of the places you've visited are quite scary then? What's the scariest place you've been to?

BB: I had a gun pointed at me in Palestine. Which was kind of my own fault in a way, because, uhm, the thing about Palestine is you've got Israeli settlers and Palestinian residents, often quite far away from each other, to stop them from fighting. But in the town of Hebron, they're literally on top of each other. And there's a bit of the town of Hebron that's literally closed off and no-one's not allowed to walk down it.

VICTORIA: Like a sort of no-man's land between the places?

BB: Yes. Very much no-man's land between places. And I did not know this at the time. So I just blasé walked down this street and ended up with a UN soldier going 'oi, stop doing that', and pointed a gun at me, which is, you know a nice welcome.

VICTORIA: That does sound quite scary.

BB: Yes, yes. I mean the thing is as well I know they would have shot me had I carried on. They didn't know who I was, I could have been anyone.

VICTORIA: That sort of thing doesn't put you off going to places like that, then?

BB: Er, no. And two and a half years later I ended up in Burkina Faso, which on my visit had just had a revolution three weeks earlier, and they'd only just opened the borders, and that's the sort of place I go to. And it's just had a revolution now actually, it's just had a military coup.

VICTORIA: Ah, so you're planning on going back then are you?

{laughter}

BB: It was actually a, Burkina Faso's a great example of this, because it's a country not on pretty much anybody's radar, certainly in Britain A lot of people in Britain probably don't even know where it is, never mind anything about it. But that doesn't mean that it's not a place to visit, because everywhere is interesting and I found Burkina Faso actually a lovely and pleasant place to go. I'm not sure I'd go at the moment, but it's a very lovely and pleasant place, and more people should explore places they're not familiar with.

VICTORIA: I mean that is a big sort of thing with your blog isn't it, visiting the places that are off the map that people haven't heard of. So how do you decide where you're going? This is not a question on the list, I'm just interested.

BB: It's a very good question. There's a number of reasons but they're usually, either there are things in the past that have happened there that I have a great interest in. So one of the places I've visited is Timor-Leste, and I visited there because ...

VICTORIA: Where is that?

BB: It's a small island connected to Indonesia And I went there because when I was at University, it was... you know how students often have this ... there's always a cause they're fighting for, and you know, producing publicity letters and raising money for funds When I was University, the one they were doing most of was Timor-Leste independence

VICTORIA: Ooh interesting, You just thought 'I hadn't head of that, I must go visit'.

BB: Well, essentially it was more a case of, when I was at University it was the big student fighting call, it stuck in my mind. So when I was travelling the world twenty years later I thought, you know what, now it's all settled down and it has become an independent country, I might as well visit it, see what all the fuss was about, so you've got a situation where something was in my head, and I thought, well Ive heard of it now, and it sounds quite interesting, and I'm connected with the history of it, so let's see what it was all about, let's learn a lot more about it. And I do that for a lot of places, so there's quite a few places I've been to that either I've heard about

on news reports when I was growing up, or I've read about them on maps when I was growing up, or they're places that I feel I should know more about but we're not taught about. Like for example, West Africa. We're not taught anything about West Africa. We know nothing about it whatsoever, and considering what we've done there, quite interesting.

VICTORIA: I find it actually, we don't know much about Africa as a continent, we seem to think of it as a homogenous place rather than a great many countries that are in a block together.

BB: yes yes, I think there are 54, it depends on where you draw the boundaries, but yes, there's a lot of countries in Africa and they're all very very different from each other, and most of them have borders that, shall we say, don't represent the reality of people who live there. I have issues with borders.

VICTORIA: I feel like in future we could do an entire Space about borders, so maybe we won't drill down too deeply into them today.

BB: I've done two entire podcasts about borders, so yes, that could work rather well.

VICTORIA: I forgot to ask you a second ago, I meant to ask you at the beginning. You write a travel blog, where you write about all of your adventures and things that you're exploring. How long does it take you to write it?

BB: I can write it ... if I'm feeling in the mood and I'm inspired and know what I'm doing, I can probably write it, and this isn't counting any of the admin, I can write it in a couple of hours, maybe 4 or 5 hours. If I'm not feeling in the mood, there are posts that I've not yet finished, that I started writing, well one of them's dating from about 2017, which I've done two-thirds of, it's on Detroit, but one of them's from 2013 that I still haven't written, well I haven't finished writing, I've done half of it, and that's on Middlesbrough and Saltburn-on-Sea in the NE of England. At some point I might finish them.

VICTORIA: Is that because you're not very inspired by the destination, or you're not sure what you want to write about there, or you just got bored of it?

BB: ... you've never been to Middlesbrough, have you?

VICTORIA: {laughs} I have not!

BB: Actually, it's more a case of, and this comes, this is another aspect of travel blogging., travel writing, that's possibly isn't as well known. It only takes me a few hours to write the blog, to write the post. It takes me almost as long again to edit the pictures, well, to find the pictures I want to use to illustrate the blog, to edit the pictures, and then to write the captions for them. And what happened with my Middlesbrough blog was ... the pictures that I took weren't that good, so I wasn't inspired to illustrate them. And I always meant to go back, but I haven't managed it yet.

VICTORIA: Were those pictures not very good technically, or not very good because you're visiting the place you're not thinking about your blog?

BB: Er, well it's a bit of both. But obviously this was back in 2013, so I wasn't as good as visualising how to take a good picture, and the camera I was using wasn't as good as the cameras that are around now, so I know I could redo a lot of the pictures. Also things have changed up there I imagine. But yes.

VICTORIA: So you touched on there you weren't as good as taking pictures and things then I'm guessing that you feel more confident about that now, you've had a lot more practice. Have you gained confidence writing about your travels, in general?

BB: I think so? I mean one of the things about the way I travel, and the places I travel is that I'm very much on my own most of the time, which forces me to have the confidence, and then if I'm writing about a place that no-one, well, fewer people really know about, then I feel like I can be more ... well, honest is possibly the wrong word here, I feel like I can be more, sort of, genuine about how I'm feeling, and genuine about what the place is like, because I don't have anything to compare it to. The other thing about the way I write and the blogs I do, the pods I do, is that they're very much geographically centred. They're about the history, the culture, the environment, the society. I don't write posts about '13 cute cafes in Paris', and I don't because I simply can't be mythered with the admin of upkeeping them.

VICTORIA: Yes I'd imagine things like cafes changing ownership quite often, things like that, changing their menus often, it must be quite difficult to keep that information current, if that's what you're doing

BB: Absolutely. Whereas if you're writing a blog post and you're saying there's a ruined castle in a field, that ruined castle's been a ruined castle since, what, 1647. There's a fair chance that no matter when I write my blog, that ruined castle will still be a ruined castle. And also, actual historical events. It's like, so there was a battle here in 1644. There will have always been a battle here in 1644, so I can still write about it. What I write isn't time-dependent but also what I write is not situational-dependent as well. Nothing will change with the way I write, because I'm writing about what was, and I'm writing about the society.

VICTORIA: Yeh, so you're focused on cultural things rather than touristy things really. I suppose that is kind of the difference between travel and tourism in a way?

BB: Possibly although that's a discussion for a very different Space I suspect., There's arguments on Travel

Twitter about that very subject, about what is Tourism and what is Travel.

VICTORIA: I know, I've opened a can of worms I wasn't aware of. {giggles}

BB: The thing is, you can be a tourist in your own city.

VICTORIA: Yes, and that's one of the things you do as well, isn't it? The way you try to travel to local places, but with the mindset of a traveller.

BB: yes, as I say everywhere is interesting. And the thing is, when you live in a place, you may not know what's on your own doorstep, because you don't think of it, because you live there so where why would you think of it. So people go all the way round the world to look at a beautiful waterfall but there might be one 20 miles away.

VICTORIA: I mean, when you visited local to me, you went and took pictures of concrete cows that I don't even really notice when I walk past them.

BB: Yes, well that's because they're unusual. It's also famous; that's what your area is famous for, it's famous for concrete cows.

VICTORIA: {giggle} That's quite the claim to fame, isn't it?

BB: I mean, the town I lived in for fifteen years has statues of cricketers in it. Now, you're not necessarily going to go all the way around the world to visit statues of cricketers, but if you happen to be in the area, and especially if you live in the area, it's a cultural representation of what that area is famous for.

VICTORIA: Yes, well, I would say that in the UK, to the rest of the world we're pretty famous for being tea-drinkers. And one of the questions we've been sent in from St Mary's asks: When my nana travels, she brings her tea-bags with her. What food or drinks do you always take with you when you travel? And that also does kind of tie in with another question from St Mary's which was: is there anything that you always carry when you're travelling?

BB: This is where I make the admission that I don't actually like tea.

VICTORIA: Neither do I!

BB: I find it boring! I mean I will have Arabic mint tea which is made with an entire mint bush and about three tons of sugar. That's about the only tea I drink. One of my Twitter friends does carry teabags with her because she is very British and believes you can't get decent tea outside of the UK.

VICTORIA: My nana lived in America for a while and when I went to visit her she asked that I brought some PG Tips and some Marmite.

BB: Marmite's another good one. You can't get, well, you can get Vegemite I guess

VICTORIA: Yeh but it's not the same, is it?

BB: Don't say things like that, you'll have the entire, my entire Australian Twitter friends on your back!

VICTORIA: I didn't say it was worse, I just said it was not the same!

{giggles}

VICTORIA: I'm getting cancelled over Marmite!

{giggles}

VICTORIA: So is there anything that's not a food thing that you always carry with you when you're travelling?

BB: I was going to say ... I don't carry food things with me partly because I travel so light so I only ever travel with, basically, with what fits in hand luggage on an aeroplane, so I'm not in a position to take food or drink with me, particularly. And also ... when I'm abroad I like to eat the local food. So there's nothing I really would take with me? I mean if I could, I'd take an entire Greggs store with me, because they rule. But failing that, I just eat what's there.

VICTORIA: You're just exposing me as not being a real Brit now cos I don't like tea and I've never been to Greggs.

{giggles}

BB: Yeh I don't understand how you could never have been to Greggs. Their vegan sausage rolls are actually bloody good. Better than the normal ones.

VICTORIA: They're on my list of 'things to do'.

{giggles}

BB: Er, there are things that I do take with me all the time. Erm, as I say I only ever travel with hand luggage, but in that hand luggage is always a notebook and a pen, because I'll always be doodling and I'll always be writing stuff. But I also take two soft toys with me. A small teddy bear type thing that's about the size of the palm of my hand, and a slightly larger ... I think he's a dog. And this is Baby Ian and Dave. And they are very very naughty. If there is a sign saying 'do not climb on this wall' they will climb on the wall. Most of the pictures I have of Baby Ian and Dave, they are either staring at, or have their faces in, beer and cake.

VICTORIA: I'm sure you help them out with finishing those off.

BB: Oh yes. Can't take them anywhere, that's the problem.

VICTORIA: Erm. Where would you like to go next? Have you thought about that yet?

BB: I have a number of places in my mind. When I went on my Inter-Rail trip around Europe in Autumn

2019, I was basically ticking off a lot of places I felt I ought to go. And when I was travelling, I realised that I'd actually rather to go to places for specific reasons rather than just because they're there. And that also means that I don't generally go to, like, big tourist attractions, because I mean some of them are famous for a reason but some of them are just famous for being famous. So, with that in mind, and with my 'lesser places travelled' kind of hat on, there's a couple. One of them is Bolivia. I've been trying to get to Bolivia since about 2012, and I've still never managed it. But South America itself, it's ... the only country I've been there is Chile and I only went there for about 11 days, so most of South America is a complete blank space to me. But the history of it fascinates me, and it's ... I think I'd like it. I think I'd fit in well in South America. I can't explain why, I just think it is the continent I think I should be connecting to more than anything else. It does, for my own benefit, require me learning a bit of Spanish which, I'm useless at foreign languages, because my brain doesn't work quickly enough and I'm too socially anxious to, you know, speak it, just in case I get things wrong, and you know, I don't want to get things wrong, uhm, but, leaving that aside, it does, South America, and Bolivia in particular, do impress on me. A couple of other countries I want to visit, I want to visit Pakistan, because, yeh, the thing with Pakistan is you've got the history there, you've got the culture there, and the food, the food is fabulous. And it's also going to be interesting cos I've been to Nepal and I've been to Bangladesh, and I've been to Sri Lanka, so Pakistan is in a similar area but different again, it's comparing and contrasting. One day I'll go to India. But not yet. And the other ...

**VICTORIA:** How do you keep track of the places you've been? Like, do you have one of those maps where you scratch off the country you've been to, do you keep a list, or do you just try and remember, and find yourself in a place and go 'oh no I've been here already'?

**BB:** I actually have two scratch-off maps but I've not used them. Er, yes, no I pretty much remember everywhere I've been. I don't necessarily remember the details of it but I remember having been there. So. Also I take a lot of pictures. There are days when I travel where I take like 120, 130 pictures in the day, so ...

**VICTORIA:** I suppose your blog works as a sort of diary for that, as well?

**BB:** That's another reason why I do it. It's so that I've got ... if I write it there and then (which rarely happens), but certainly having taken lots of pictures, it means that I can remember it, so when I get old, I've got something to look back on so I don't have to rely on my memory all the time.

**VICTORIA:** That's an excellent idea. And then we all get to enjoy it as well.

**BB:** Indeed, indeed. That's the thing; I go to these places so you don't have to. And a lot of people either won't or can't go to some of the places that I go to. So essentially I'm allowing them to travel vicariously through my words and through my pictures. And through my voice.

**VICTORIA:** I enjoy your blogs and pods for that reason.

**BB:** Thank you. But it's like, another country on my list is Kiribati, which is a group of islands in the South Pacific, that's horrendously difficult to get to. And, they're like, whenever people think of the South Pacific, they think of places like Fiji, they think of places like French Polynesia, and they're quite pretty. Kiribati is more ... functional than aesthetic. And ...

**VICTORIA:** That is a very very nice way of saying 'ugly'.

**BB:** I'm not saying that they're ugly. I'm not saying that at all. What I am saying is that if people are going to the South Pacific, they're more likely to go to French Polynesia. Because French Polynesia has the picture-perfect atolls, and the beaches, and ...

**VICTORIA:** And more people have heard of it.

**BB:** But I want to go to Kiribati. Partly I want to go to Kiribati because it's in Micronesia. And South Pacific has three island groups, it's got Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia, and I've been to at least one country in the other two groups, so again it's a compare-and-contrast thing. Cos one of the things about travel is that it's interesting in the way you can start doing that, you can start going 'okay so this reminds me of this place, but equally it's unique for this reason. And I do that even in Britain as well, so I've been to the Outer Hebrides, and I've been to Orkney, and they're two island groups off the coast of Scotland that are quite similar but also very very different in a number of ways. And it's just fascinating to make those comparisons.

**VICTORIA:** You touched briefly a second ago on social anxiety that you're forced to confront because you travel alone. One of the questions here is: How does travelling make you feel? But I want to open that up a bit and ask you how you deal with things like shyness and social anxiety when you are far from home?

**BB:** It's really very much dependent on my mood. So sometimes I will figure, okay so I'm alone in this country where I don't speak the language, don't understand the culture, I've spent a lot of money to get here and there's a lot of fascinating things to do here, this is why I'm here, I have to force myself out there and have those conversations and make sure things happen because that's why I'm here and I'm going to enjoy it dammit! Sometimes, it doesn't work like that. And there have been times when I've literally come home because I have not been able to face the environment because, for one reason or another, I've got so many things going on in my head that I just can't; I don't have the spoons for it. So there's a couple of places I need to go back to

because my experience there was awful, but my experience there was awful because of my own mental state, not because of anything that happened in the country.

VICTORIA: See, I was just about to ask you if those places you'd consider going back to, or if you then find yourself intimidated by those places and not want to return again.

BB: I find myself intimidated by most places. One of the worst feelings in the world that I have is if I'm flying, and this happens on a, more regular than you might expect, when I'm flying into a country that I've never been before, and I know I'm not going to speak the language, and I know I'm going to be obviously standing out as a, you know, the tourist, and it's that 'we're going to land in ten minutes' announcement, that's the scariest bit because then I know it's about to happen. I get round it by, one of my favourite phrases is 'knowledge is power', and I get around it by doing things like, beforehand, making sure I know exactly how to get out of the airport, making sure I know how to get from the airport to the city centre, making sure I know how to, if it's a bus, where to buy the ticket from, how much the bus costs, so I have to pay by exact money, do I have to buy the ticket in advance, if I buy the ticket in advance where do I buy it from, literally I have downloaded maps of airports before now so I can plot my route.

VICTORIA: That sounds very (good with?) me.

BB: Yeh.

VICTORIA: I mean even if I'm going somewhere fairly local to me, I will have a look on Google Maps to see exactly where I'm going to park, to see which way I'm going to walk from there, to reduce anxiety, so that makes perfect sense to me.

BB: Yeh, one of the troubles I have is a lot of the places I go aren't on Google Streetview.

VICTORIA: Yes. {laugh} That must be quite a strange concept for some of the younger listeners that there are places that are not on Google Maps at all.

BB: When I first started travelling, the very first (we'll ignore the Irish adventure), the very first place I effectively went to on my own was I took trains across Europe, in 1994, before the Internet. Before mobile phones. So I was literally on my own, going across Europe at the age of 19, with almost no money and no real knowledge of what I was doing. Or, couldn't speak the language.

VICTORIA: That's very brave to me. That feels like something I'd be too anxious to do.

BB: Weirdly I'm not sure, looking back I don't know how I did it.

VICTORIA: {giggle} Maybe you'll be thinking that about adventures you're having today in twenty years time.

BB: Oh quite possibly. I don't know if I'm feeling more socially anxious than I was then, or maybe I was just too young to care. But certainly I do look back on ... I was visiting a penpal who I'd only been writing to for about three months.

VICTORIA: You may need to explain what a penpal is.

BB: I shall. A penpal. Someone that you write to. And they write back. Very similar to how you'd have friends on Discord, except that it takes about three weeks between each message.

VICTORIA: Usually someone you haven't met, in a different country, would be your penpal.

BB: I don't think I've met any of the people I know on Discord. So you know. And half of them live in a different country. So, imagine Discord but it takes three weeks between messages. That's a penpal. So yeh, at the time, I'd only written her about three letters before, and decided to go across Europe to visit her. And she was living in Yugoslavia which at the time was at war,

VICTORIA: {giggles} So you've never actually shied away from visiting warzones and places at conflict and things like that, you've always just gone for it.

BB: She lives in Belgrade; Belgrade wasn't technically at war at the time, the war was like 100 miles west, but it was interesting to get the train from Hungary and see lots of UN-branded wagons by the railside, it was like, over there, there's a bit of fighting that the UN are going to try to stop, and it's like, okay {laughs} despite what my mother thinks, I have never been to an active warzone.

VICTORIA: I'm quite surprised by that actually. Like I would have thought it'd be the sort of thing that you might wander into by accident.

BB: I've wandered into places by accident but they haven't been warzones.

VICTORIA: What sort of places have you wandered in to?

BB: I wandered into Burkina Faso by accident because the border didn't exist. I was in Ghana, I wanted to go to Burkina Faso, don't get me wrong, The whole point was to cross the border, just I was intending to cross it legally. And I didn't. So, imagine a small village, on the very edge of Ghana, no signposts, so I was sort of saying to the locals 'where's the border, where's Burkina Faso?' - 'Just go that way, follow the motos, follow the motorbikes', cos everyone rides a motorbike or a moto-scooter over there. So I did. I followed the moto-scooters. Turns out, moto-scooters driven by locals don't follow strict border controls, they just cross. And the only border post was at the road, and the moto-scooters were on this path through the middle of the landscape. And 7km later I'm at a police station in Burkina Faso going 'where's the border?'. '7km that way'. Ah. Bearing

in mind it was about 2 o'clock in the afternoon and about 35°C, I didn't really fancy the idea of walking back. But I managed to hitch a lift off a passing moto driver, and, one of the scariest things in the world, you asked earlier about scary things, crossing a border illegally isn't scary if you don't know you're doing it. Crossing a border illegally on the way back, when you know exactly what you're doing, that's the scary bit.

VICTORIA: Since you've been talking about illegally crossing borders, and Baby Ian and Dave getting into all of the beer, probably a good time to remind people you are Hashtag Not A Role Model.

BB: I am not a role model, do not try this at home, I go to these places so you don't have to, I do these things so you don't have to.

VICTORIA: Of all the places that you have visited, is there anywhere you'd like to go back to?

BB: Er, yes, yes. I mean, I really liked Benin, in West Africa, because it's one of those countries that should be a lot more popular than it is.

VICTORIA: Would you say that's your favourite place?

BB: It's one of them.

VICTORIA: I've also got a question here that says: what's your favourite place and why do you like it? And they kind of tie in together.

BB: I don't really have favourite places but I certainly have places that I like, so, as I say, Benin has history, it has culture, it has scenery, it has really good food, it's the home of two things that are really culturally interesting. One is the African Kingdom of Dahomey, and the other is it's the home of Voodoo.

VICTORIA: Oh, very cool.

BB: Yes, so, I have partaken in a couple of voodoo ceremonies and they're very interesting. And, I mean, they're not great if you're vegetarian.

VICTORIA: Yes, I've seen the pictures. You can see the pictures on The Barefoot Backpacker's blog, if you're interested in seeing what real Voodoo looks like.

BB: Yeh, it's actually quite funny. We have this impression of Voodoo of being this really strange religion about dead people, but actually, when I was speaking to the Voodoo Priest in Benin, what he said was the vast majority of people go to a Voodoo ceremony to either pass an exam, as in, you know, I need help passing an exam, can you give me the blessing of the spirits to pass the exam, or for love life. You know, I'm single and I need a partner. Can you bless me to get a partner? And fertility as well.

VICTORIA: Some of the totems in your pictures make it clear fertility is quite a big part of the religion.

BB: Yes, I mean that's the same with most religions. Most religions are ... people want blessings for good luck or for good family, it's kind of worldwide, they're just what people do. It's just that Voodoo requires the use of animal bones to do it. And some very strong spirits.

VICTORIA: As in the ghostly kind?

BB: Er, 'to protect yourself from evil ghostly spirits, you'd better take this bottle, and drink the stuff that's in it, which is itself a pretty strong spirit.'

VICTORIA: {laughs} So that's why we call them spirits. That makes sense.

BB: Yeh, so Benin's one of the most interesting countries I've been to.

VICTORIA: And you think you'd like to go there again?

BB: yeh, I spent 12 days in it so I saw a lot of it, but still there's things that, I mean obviously things change over time as well, so, but there's things I didn't see in Benin that I want to see again. Erm, Albania's a really nice country, very strange history, well, very strange modern history anyway, cut off from the rest of Europe for about 40 years and there's some very interesting remains there, very interesting modern ruins. It's also a very picturesque country. You might not think it, you might not think of it, but it's got some absolutely gorgeous mountains and forests in it. And Belgium. I really like Belgium because I absolutely do not understand that country.

VICTORIA: {giggles} And that's why you like it?

BB: It's a country that basically consists of beer, chocolate, waffles, chips, and the strange sense that two halves of it don't actually like each other but don't want to split because it might make things more administratively awkward.

VICTORIA: Nice architecture there as well apparently?

BB: Yes, oh yes, very much so.

VICTORIA: I'd like to go to Bruges for that reason.

BB: Yes. There's a couple of very nice, well there's a lot of very nice, I don't think I've come across a bad Belgian town. Where else, there's lots, I mean I've not been to a bad place. That's not strictly true.

VICTORIA: I was going to say, you've been to Luton.

BB: I have been to Luton. I have been to Luton. I will go back to Luton. But Luton is the, yeh, I should have said this earlier too, we talked about scary places, Luton is the only place I've ever actually been scared for my life.

VICTORIA: {laughs} Like, despite having had a gun pointed at you in Palestine.

BB: Yes, yes.

VICTORIA: Right. {laughs} Maybe we won't go too deeply into that.

BB: If the Luton tourist board want me to advertise their services, then I'm quite willing to do that because I believe that everywhere is interesting, everywhere has a reason to be, and everywhere is special. Luton doesn't have a tourist board.

VICTORIA: It doesn't have a tourist board? I'm not really surprised. Why would you come to Luton, really? No offence, Luton.

{laughter}

BB: You grew up in Luton, didn't you?

VICTORIA: I did, I'm allowed, it's fine.

{laughter}

VICTORIA: Erm. Now. You are of course The Barefoot Backpacker, and we haven't really touched on that yet, but one of the questions from St Mary's asks: Why do you not wear shoes, and have you ever cut your feet?

BB: I tend not to wear shoes because I don't like shoes. My feet get too hot if they're too enclosed, and I'm quite a cold-weather animal. So I don't like feeling too hot, it makes me uncomfortable. If I'm uncomfortable I'm more stressed, if I'm more stressed then I'm more anxious. So being barefoot allows me to be more relaxed, and allows me to be more chill. I will, I mean I often wear sandals, and I have minimalist type shoes as well, but I don't like closed shoes and I will try not to wear them wherever possible. Sometimes I have to. So sometimes I'll go to a place like, erm, I went to CERN, that place in Geneva.

VICTORIA: The Hadron Collider?

BB: Yeh, that place. I can't remember what CERN stands for, I know it's something in French. But yes, the Large Hadron Collider place, And the instructions there say 'you must wear closed shoes'.

VICTORIA: Did you have to buy some especially? Because even in Winter you're a sandals person aren't you?

BB: I had to buy some especially from a supermarket in France, where I was. I was in Toulon, on the South of France, and I had to go into a supermarket and specifically buy some knock-off converse for 20 quid or something, which I've worn about three times, one of which was at CERN. Another place where I was told I had to wear closed shoes was Chernobyl. And when I was in Chernobyl I realised why I had to wear closed shoes. Because, you know, full of abandoned buildings with lots of broken glass.

VICTORIA: Oh, I was going to say, that's not like a radiation thing, surely shoes can't save you from that?!

BB: No no, it's not a radiation thing, it's simply a rubble thing, there's a lot of broken glass and what have you here, so you might want to protect yourself as much as possible.

VICTORIA: That's a good idea. Have you ever injured your feet from barefooting?

BB: I got a piece of glass stuck in it in Antwerp after 10 days of barefooting through Belgium and Netherlands, including attending the entirety of a travel blogger conference. And it was awkward because I couldn't walk on it. Not because it hurt, because it didn't hurt, it was just in the way and I couldn't put my foot down properly. So I had to stagger over to a seat by a cafe or pub, and pull it out. And I felt kind of, well that's what happens when you're barefoot I guess.

VICTORIA: I suppose if you're used to barefooting you would tend to, if you're going far from civilisation, carry a first aid kit for that reason? Because if you're in the middle of nowhere and you damage your feet you could end up in quite serious trouble.

BB: Yes, yes, I mean even in Britain I'll carry a pair of tweezers around with me. Cos, like, I do parkrun every Saturday, and most of the time I do parkrun I do it barefoot. So I carry a pair of tweezers regardless. But when I'm travelling abroad I'll carry a small first aid kit, with bandages and wrap and stuff like that. But yeh. The main problem I have with being barefoot, and this may come as a surprise, a lot of people say 'well isn't it cold?', and yes it is quite cold sometimes, but my main problem has been the opposite. It's been, sometimes some of the places I've been, I had this trouble in Southern Africa, where I stepped off the plane, and it was about, I'd say about 35, 34, 35 degrees, and I couldn't walk barefoot on the pavement because it was too hot.

VICTORIA: Yersh. I'd imagine most people think about things like frost and snow, but yeh, walking on very hot ground can't be very good for you.

BB: Er, no, it's not, that's another reason I carry sandals around with me. You get used to it, and, when I was in West Africa, I was around West Africa for five weeks, and by about the fourth week I was barefoot most of the time. That was partly because my sandals had pretty much fallen apart by then, but that's not the point. By the time it got to that fourth week I was used to the heat in West Africa, but it still took a while to get used to. The other issue I have is gravel. There's a considerable number of gravel roads and gravel pavements. Not just across the world but also in Britain. So. I really really don't like gravel.

VICTORIA: I imagine mud's not very pleasant either, must be quite squelchy and horrid?

BB: I, personally, don't like mud. But that's just because I don't like the squishy feeling of mud, and I don't like the fact I have no balance so I will fall over a lot. But I know people, other people who run or hike barefoot quite often, and they love mud, they love that squishy feeling. And I just don't. It's a texture thing.

VICTORIA: It doesn't appeal to me either. Although I suppose if you're doing a lot of hiking and it's very muddy and you're wearing hiking boots then your shoes can become really really heavy, so being barefoot might be an advantage in that situation?

BB: Yeh, I mean, I did a bit of this on the Pennine Way on my Hike Across Great Britain, after my toenail healed, but you don't need to know about that one. It was quite muddy, and the advantage of being barefoot in those environments is that you don't have to spend ages cleaning your boots. All you need to do is find a little stream and then hey presto! your foot's clean.

VICTORIA: And it dries quickly as well.

BB: Yes, yes, absolutely, it dries far quicker than a hiking boot. Again I'm not necessarily recommending you hike the Pennine Way barefoot but ...

VICTORIA: But if you do want to find out more about what that's like, Barefoot Backpacker does have blog posts about that on [barefoot-backpacker.com](http://barefoot-backpacker.com) and on the podcast which you can find linked on there as well.

BB: Yes. {giggles} Smooth. Like it.

{laughter}

VICTORIA: And actually yeh, I have come to the end of the questions sent from St Mary's in Astley. Thank you guys very much for sending those in because it's given us a lot more structure to have this conversation with, that's been fantastic.

BB: Yes, thank you very much, And I hope that I've answered your questions informatively and well. If you've got any more questions, then let me know.

VICTORIA: And yeh, so we're more than happy to answer more questions on another Space if you come up with some more from the back of that, or like I say you can find out more on Barefoot Backpacker's website about all of their adventures and travels.

BB: Awesome.

VICTORIA: Okay, so thanks very much for answering my questions today, that's been really interesting to listen to all of your adventures. I hope we can do it again soon.

BB: Thank you for allowing it, and I'll speak to you soon.

VICTORIA: Okay, thanks very much. Bye bye.

BB: Bye bye.

*{Outro theme tune, same as intro, just a different bit of it}*

*{Outro voiceover:*

*Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.*

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