

## Podcast #1: Travelling Barefoot, by The Barefoot Backpacker

*[TagAlongDeb - "I'm not sure how he keeps his toes so nicely manicured in that environment"]*

*[Intro Music: "Walking Barefoot on Grass (Bonus)" – Kai Engel, and opening credits:  
"Hello. Thank you for downloading. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a weekly series looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, Ian Oliver, also known as The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Brit with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure."]*

I'm looking out my bedroom window at the weather outside. It's a typical summer's day in the UK; early June, grey, overcast, slightly damp, and humid as anything. I'm casting my mind back to a couple of weeks ago when I was in Rotterdam in the Netherlands, attending a travel blogger conference run by Traverse. Essentially it's where loads of people like me who talk about travel all come together for workshops, networking, and let's be honest, beer; there were bloggers there, photographers, YouTubers, people with in-depth experience with GDPR, SEO, LinkedIn, Instagram .... all coming together to talk about travel, and sharing knowledge.

Two of the workshops I attended were on Podcasting. Now, I've been contemplating podcasting for over a year now – I grew up listening to the radio more than watching television, and even now I tend to have the radio on in the background when I'm at home (BBC 6 Music, mainly), plus I've never felt comfortable in front of the camera; most of my selfies have me facing away from the camera which in part is because I like the artistic effect of having the viewer be able to put themselves in my place, seeing what I can see, but mainly it's because it means no-one needs to see my face. Including me. That it's taken me so long to start experimenting with my own podcasting is because I've always been wary of expecting people to listen to my Northern England drone for half an hour or so; a future pod will talk about this more but I'm pretty much always a solo traveller, and this extends to travel admin and blogging too; whereas most of the podcasts I'd encountered have either been two or three people in conversation for the whole pod, or one host running it and interviewing others along the way.

I'm not entirely 'new' to the concept; I've been interviewed by Amanda Kendle (NotABallerina.com) for her podcast "Thoughtful Travel Pod", and I'm the "travel correspondent" for the political (they describe themselves as 'lefty') podcast and online magazine '(Left) Ungagged', but that latter is simply me recording a 5-10min piece and letting them fit it in.

Before the conference, aside from my limited experiences with them, I knew very little about who podcasts, what works and what doesn't, and what people wanted in them. But one of the workshops there was run by Lucy Lucraft, host of the long-running "What She Said" podcast, and one of the first things she said (because I asked her!) was that I shouldn't get too hung up on worrying about doing it mostly solo, or about things like the length of a pod, since the word of podcasts is full of people doing everything and there's no 'right' way.

So here I am! This is all highly experimental for me; I'd love to know, after you've heard a few of them, whether it works for you, and if not, what changes you think I should consider.

My plan over the coming pods is to talk a lot about travel, but not necessarily the standard 'talking about places'. I mean, there'll be some of that, but even there those places will be ones 'off the beaten track', places which are often not mentioned on twitter travel chats or seen on pictures on Instagram. I also intend to talk about topics in travel, from Bucket Lists and Solo Travel, to concepts like Ethical Travel and the joys of International Borders; there'll be some history and

political thought thrown in there too.

I suppose I should introduce myself a bit really first though! Hi. I'm Ian. Pleased to meet you. Sit down, kick your shoes off, grab a beer, make yourself comfortable.

At the time of this pod recording, I'm 42 years old; a little older than the average backpacker, but hey, there's room enough for all of us. It's just another reason to do podcasting rather than vlogging ... it also, as an aside, amuses me when Millennials and Baby Boomers fight online. I'm like "raises hand tentatively; I'm Generation X, we exist too you know!". That said, in one of the arguments I saw on Twitter, one Millennial said that the one great thing about GenX was that we had the best music. No arguments here ...

I've recently been made redundant after 20½ years working as a data analyst in the energy industry, for a company that supplies electricity and natural gas to businesses and households. Over 20 years of looking at spreadsheets and databases going 'oooh that's interesting, let me look into that in more detail', and coming to conclusions like 'people in Yorkshire are happier than people in London', and 'people who have prepayment / pay-as-you-go energy meters in their properties are more likely to be less affluent'. Cutting edge stuff, this ... Anyway, now I have an awful lot more free time, I figured it was a good time to go deeper into travel, and do what I enjoy rather than what pays the bills. I'll let you know in a couple of years if it's worked or not.

I've been into the travel thing for much of my life, and my travels have pretty much always been slightly, what you might say, offbeat. My first adventure abroad was at age 11 when my uncle took me somewhere he'd been a few times on business. So, unlike most young Brits at the time, my first destination wasn't Ireland, France, or a Spanish island, but rather Denmark, with a day trip to a wet Sweden thrown in for good measure. Evidently the experience didn't put me off, as from then on a healthy desire to see the world followed. Having penpals in my teenage years helped, and my first proper solo adventure in foreign languages came at the age of 19 when I ventured to Yugoslavia. A country in civil war at the time. To meet a friend I'd only written to three times. And with virtually no money. Strangely she still speaks to me, and indeed may well appear from time to time on the pod!

Since then my travels have continued to be varied and somewhat unique. I'm very much attracted to places more off-the-beaten-track than most, and I guess one of my aims is to prove to the world (and myself) that every place is worthy of mention – most people don't live in tourist hotspots. Indeed, I tend to visit places because I want to – there's always something there that I find interesting, even if no-one else does. You will note, very quickly, I have a related and strong interest in socio-political history; yes old buildings are pretty, but my interest is in the other things that humanity has done – the places where we have changed the world, for better or worse. In addition, as I mature like an old cask of brandy, I seem to be becoming unusually more socialist and firebrand, and have developed a particular interest in revolution, dictatorships, and civil strife – places where people have been repressed, and places where they have fought back.

This all means I've sought out places like Timor-Leste ('the' student-agit-prop cause when I was at University), and the Aral Sea, where I could stand and see the devastation that humans have wrought in the name of 'progress'. Also, I was drawn to Cambodia not for Angkor Wat which I only visited in passing, but for The Killing Fields and Pol Pot's grave – "I was born in Year Zero", even.

Some places I want to visit in the future are Bolivia; the civil war reminders in El Salvador; the genocide sites in Rwanda; the food, culture, and scenery of Pakistan; the volcanoes of Vanuatu – but they're in no particular order.

This connects with an obsession with maps, and a feeling of wanting to know what lay 'beyond' the confines of them; I used to obsess over them as a kid, and even now I have a 'liking' for borders and frontier zones, and will actively plan out a route specifically to cross the most obscure one possible. Because I can. Again, a future pod will talk about my feelings about borders, their apparent inviolability, and the right of self-determination.

I also have a strong pull towards the natural environment – countryside rather than animals it has to be said, although being so close to elephants and hippos in Botswana was pretty awe-inspiring. My most relaxed state (on the road at least; ignore the tattoo – that'll be the subject of a future pod) is when I'm walking alone in the mountains or forests, lost in nature, with only myself to worry about. One thing I'm not is a beach-bum; perhaps surprisingly, given my blog identity's name. Partly this is because I have the attention span of a gnat high on ecstasy and always need to be doing ... 'something', and partly because I'm British and therefore melt in temperatures above about 23°C ...

This attention span problem, coupled with being incredibly impatient at times, means most of my travels are place-to-place-to-place; I find it hard to stay in one place for more than about 3 or 4 days. It's one of the reasons I only carry hand-luggage when I travel (I haven't checked in bags on a plane since 2012); it saves unpacking and repacking, plus it's much easier to physically carry on public transport. When you're wedged into a seat of the back of a 16-seater minibus that's carrying 24 people (Benin, I'm looking at you), you need as little luggage as you can.

Naturally then, given my offbeat destinations and my travel style, I prefer to travel alone – this is for several reasons, including a penchant to be as flexible with my plans as possible (I do a lot of things last-minute, even down to waking up not knowing what country I'll be sleeping in that night), an allergy to commitment, a dislike of having to rely on other people, and a general preference for being on my own anyway. This is also why I'm very bad at relationships...

Online, I'm co-host of two travel chats on twitter; #TRLT on Tuesdays (one of the largest and most influential chats on Twitter), which concentrates on "The Road Less Travelled" rather than just the usual tourist sites; and #PTTravel on Sundays which in theory is a collection of part-time travellers talking about how they travel whilst still holding down a full-time job, but in practice is a nice community of chilled people talking about anything and everything. Even bridges.

My aim for this pod is to have a topic each week, introduced by a series of vox-pops of fellow travellers with their brief opinion on the topic, before I go into more detail about it. I'll also have a 'lesser-known-destination-of-the-week' where I'll spend a couple of minutes talking about somewhere I really like, or where I find interesting, that may not be on your radar.

I ummed and ahed about what my first pod should be about, but decided that as we're talking introductions, I ought to address the elephant in the room.

*[TagAlongDeb: Yeh, travelling barefoot? I don't really get that. I don't even go barefoot in my home. I mean, think of what the bottoms of your feet are exposed to.]*

So says Deb, from TagAlongTravel. Yep, today's topic will be barefoot travelling, and I asked a few people I know online what their first impressions were, and you can hear from that that Deb was ... particularly uninspired by it! But other people I've spoken to were a little more open to trying it. Here, for example, is Nat, from NatPackerTravel.

*[NatPackerTravel: It's definitely different, travelling barefoot. I can definitely see the benefits; I love walking around barefoot, and I do it as often as I can, but my feet are so pretty sensitive so it's*

*not something I could do. Also I'd be scared of glass all the time if I'm honest, but fair play, why not?]*

My friend Jeja in Serbia is even more open about it but highlights some issues she has with it.

*[Jeja: Travelling barefoot. I've never tried that. I only went barefoot on long walks in my neighbourhood, and I really enjoyed the experience; the fresh grass, and it's very very lovely, but ... I'm not sure I would be able to travel barefoot. When I travel, sadly I need very very comfortable shoes with very good insoles, because I like to walk a lot and explore a lot on foot, and that's the only way that works for me without getting tired.]*

But most people have just never come across the idea before, and Roobens, from [BeenAroundTheGlobe](#), speaks for them pretty well I think.

*[Roobens: It would be interesting to hear some experiences.]*

As you may have no doubt noticed by now, I have a slight 'quirk' – my footwear, or apparent lack of it. I am “The Barefoot Backpacker”. Now, a “barefoot doctor” is someone, usually a local farmer, who is trained in basic medicine and operates with few resources, but serves as the only local doctor in rural areas (mainly in China) where more qualified doctors generally can't, or won't, practice. I kind of see myself similarly when travelling. I have a basic knowledge and skills around travel, carry very few resources with me, am not great with languages, but am prepared to go right down to the local level when I travel, and see a country from directions other than from outside the window of a 4-star hotel.

But let's be honest. Although my blog has a metaphorical name, I do prefer to be barefoot, and indeed there's a whole host of friends on twitter who have never seen me wear standard footwear. Indeed, at one previous travel blogger conference, despite my reluctance to post pictures with my face in it, people still came up to me and recognised me ... by my toenails :) That, right there, is an example of a great brand image. Tho even I have a face picture on my LinkedIn profile. I am, at least sometimes, vaguely professional.

So ... why barefoot? Well I'm sure you're expecting me to say something about how it allows me to feel a resonance with the Earth, and how 'grounding' (I hate that word) is important, or because I'm channelling my inner hippie (I do like daisies, to be fair, I have a couple of daisy toe-rings), or because I'm anti-authority and trying to stick it to the man, or something. Or maybe you're expecting me to reveal some kind of foot fetish, that it excites and arouses me to walk barefoot.

But no. Simply, my feet get too hot in closed shoes; they make my feet uncomfortably warm and stuffy, and sometimes make me feel like I've got two bricks on the bottom of my legs. Doubly so considering I walk around a lot, or am stuck on transport in enclosed spaces with dodgy air-con. That said, I do enjoy the freedom that being barefoot gives – the relaxed, casual style and that sense of being unrestricted. My clothing style in general might be defined as 'smart hippie'; I'll tend to wear a shirt everywhere on my travels (short-sleeved for comfort, quick-dry, and non-iron, yet still with buttons and a collar), and my trousers are usually full-length and work-safe; I do have a couple of pairs of denim  $\frac{3}{4}$  length trousers that are cooling in hot weather but also hide the knees so they're suitable for religious and conservative sites.

So, how does it feel? Well ...

I do find it more comfortable and it feels kind of more natural to be barefoot. Generally, pavements are pretty smooth, and some of the country trails around my house are made of what feel like

compacted soil/mud, so they're soft but not damp. Sandy roads, the mainstay of clichéd holiday pictures, don't feel much different to walking on hard beaches (soft sand is awful to walk on, regardless of footwear). It does take some getting used to, but once you've done it a bit, it's fine. My stride seems to naturally shorten a little, and I have a tendency to walk more on the balls of my feet than further back; my heel barely strikes the ground at all. This means that less of my foot touches the floor, which means less scope for injury.

And that's the question most people ask - 'aren't you afraid of stepping on something nasty?' - which is a fair point to be honest. Thing is, I have these objects called eyes ... lol, I know it's not as simple as that but walking barefoot does make you concentrate more on the route in front of you, so you pay more attention to what's there than normal. To be fair though, most of the things you might be worried about walking in, you wouldn't step in anyway; no-one walks through dog-poo on purpose, and things like broken glass you'd probably avoid anyway just out of sheer reflex. It's more the things you wouldn't think of that are the most dangerous; for example, I find that cobblestones/flat marble are slippier under bare feet when wet than they are in shoes, and I don't have good balance at the best of times. Also, I'm not very good with spacial awareness so I've banged my little toe several times on things like raised kerbs or, in three very painful cases, the wheels of shopping trolleys I've been pushing ...

The other thing that frequent barefoot walking gives you is very tough soles. This has the advantage of meaning that I can (and indeed have) walked over small shards of broken glass or thorns without any discomfort, because my feet are too hard for them to penetrate far. The disadvantage is that my heels get very dry and rough, and if I rub them together I'm in danger of starting a bushfire. One of the compromises I make by only travelling with hand luggage is not packing moisturiser. Maybe this will come back to bite me when I'm old and look like some kind of four-year-old shrivelled prune.

It's not infallible; in Antwerp a couple of weeks ago I managed to get a large piece of glass stuck in my sole. But after limping to a nearby wall, I pulled the offending glass out, mopped up the blood, waited a while until it all stopped, and then walked on. I do always carry a pair of tweezers with me, just in case. The thing is, at no point did it hurt at all, it was just bloody (literally) annoying. I should have been more attentive; I'd already spotted that in both Antwerp and Leiden earlier that week, there was a tendency for glass to collect in the gaps between the cobbles, but I'd just had an argument in a nearby museum (don't ask!) & I wasn't feeling in-sorts. I was helped, by the way, by a chap working at a nearby bar/café who brought me out some strong alcohol to rub on the wound, which presumably helped (at least I think he was working there. I hope he wasn't sat outside drinking the stuff; it didn't look like it was in a standard bottle, shall we say!). At no point did he make any comment about my lack of footwear; he just left me use the bottle, gave me some kitchen roll, and wandered back to his seat.

It's sometimes interesting to gauge people's reactions once they know I'm barefoot (tho I'll mention later about how in recent years they don't even notice most of the time). To be fair though, it's hard to judge whether they're thinking about the feet, or what's on them. My toenails aren't particularly attractive so I bling them up with sparkly nail varnish, usually green or purple, which catches people's eye if I'm sat down or not moving much (in Chile I had three people walk past me, look at my toes, and walk off laughing!). To be fair though, often I won't notice people's reactions at all, and it's only friends I'm with who'll tell me that people are looking.

I had a few comments in West Africa, but not the way you'd expect. I mean, you'd have thought that the sight of a tall, hairy, white man strolling the streets of Africa barefoot would raise a few eyebrows. In actual fact I had far fewer comments than I expected, and those that did come came, amusingly enough, from shoe salesmen. African shops tend to be more like street stalls; people

sitting by the road with their wares displayed on the floor in front of them. When I walked past them, I was invariably (and unsurprisingly) greeted by 'you want shoes, look, here good shoes'. This especially happened in Togo, where I also had several offers to "repair my sandals" (they assumed I was barefoot because they were broken; in any case the ones I had with me, which I'll talk about later, were made of a rubber-type material, a typical cobbler would have no chance). They seemed a little surprised, but accepting, that I preferred to not wear shoes.

I've certainly had no problem with officialdom; I've crossed a number of international borders barefoot, including two in West Africa and a couple in the Balkans. I've travelled on coaches, local buses, trains, through airports (in and out) with mostly no worries, and riding on the back of motorbike taxis in Africa barefoot felt so free and refreshing. In more recent times, with my barefoot sandals (which I'll talk more about later too), I've been going to restaurants, pubs, etc with no-one batting an eyelid about the fact my feet were bare. People genuinely don't pay attention!

The only times I've ever been warned have both been to do with air travel. At Brisbane airport (of all places) the woman at the gate wouldn't let me on the plane until I'd put my sandals on (I was completely barefoot and wearing my knee-length shorts, so it was blindingly obvious), whilst on a flight from Chicago to London I was sat in the bulkhead seat near to where the air crew sit, and one of them told me I should really wear footwear for take-off and landing, just in case the plane crashes and we have to all make a quick escape. Cheerful, thanks for that advice; I'm sure in that situation my first thought isn't going to be how my feet were feeling ...

I've had a couple of questions directed at me about my barefootedness, including with a chap in Shkodra in Albania about it being unusual and culturally 'odd' but that was about all. As I'm registered on Hostelworld as "Barefoot Backpacker" I have had a couple of hostels note my unusual name and look at my feeds online before I arrive, and been looking forward to my arrival in excitement so they could ask me about it; this happened in Albania but also in the USA where I was called 'famous' by one of the hostel staff. Again, strong brand image there.

Oddly, I never used to like being barefoot, at all; I remember once my uncle dropping me off at school, then getting him to go back home to pick up my trainers for PE that I'd realised I'd forgotten to bring, rather than have me do it barefooted. I hated the idea of being barefoot, I found it ... I dunno, humiliating maybe? Or at least, that I'd 'lose face' by being so, or worried that people would laugh at me if I did. No idea when it changed; some time in my mid-teens I think, and I've no idea why. Maybe I wish I knew, but that was a very strange time in my life anyway that I'd rather not think about.

I still have those feelings sometimes, especially the thought that people will judge, that people will laugh, but the older I get the less I seem to worry about it. It's kind of linked in with self-confidence; it's something I do more when I'm feeling more confident in myself; I always worry about it beforehand but once I do, it feels the most natural thing in the world, and it feels very weird to slip on even minimalist sandals again after a prolonged time walking barefoot, almost as if they're 'in the way'. And, because I feel more at home being barefoot, doing it ends up \*giving\* me that self-confidence, as it means I'm being 'me', I'm able to be the person I am, so I'm more likely to stand tall and adventure forth. It's also great for my mental health; as someone who often has issues with mood swings and feelings of low-self-worth, I find feeling the grass under my feet to be very de-stressing and relaxing.

As an aside, I always feel more confident walking barefoot if a) I'm walking with someone else, whether they're barefoot or not (it doesn't actually matter to me), or b) if I'm holding my footwear or they're attached to my belt (rather than being in my bag). I guess that way it's clear from people looking that while I'm choosing to walk barefoot, it's apparently for a specific reason (because they

can see I have shoes), so would wear them if I needed to, rather than not having any at all and so I'd think that they'd think that I'm just weird. Or something.

Interestingly, I'm also more likely to travel barefoot than I am to be barefoot around my home town. I think this is partly because I know when I travel, I'm just passing through a place and I know I'll never see those people again. There's also a bloody-minded streak that comes out from time to time, a kind of 'I will do this', feeling. Macedonia (or whatever it was or will be called now) is the only country I've only visited barefoot, but I didn't wear footwear for the entire time I was in Netherlands for the recent travel blogger conference (a total of about 13 days), and I've certainly had long periods of time on my travels where I've chosen to remain barefooted, in countries as diverse as Togo, Albania, the USA, Germany, and Australia.

Now I've mentioned this in passing earlier but, to help additionally with my self-confidence, and also to allow me to travel barefoot more without hassle, I had a friend of mine make me a couple of pairs of crocheted, what you might call, 'barefoot sandals'. Now, you can find a myriad of traditional ones online (just search on Etsy); they're basically more akin to foot jewellery than sandals, often quite 'blingy', and you fit a toe through a loop, pull them up your foot, and tie them around your ankle and lower leg. The trouble with them is they usually only loop around one toe and are often merely a strap of fabric or cord in width, so while they look great for barefoot beach weddings or hippie festivals, wearing them around town ... it looks a bit silly. Plus, I wanted something that made it less obvious I was barefoot; what she made me were a thick pattern (one of daisies, the other of sandal-like straps) that cover most of the foot and hook around two toes. The effect means that unless you're paying attention, or look at me walking from behind, it does look as though I'm wearing proper, if slightly fancy, sandals. This allows me to get into museums, restaurants, etc without anyone batting an eyelid, and walking down the street is a breeze; no-one pays me a second glance anyway. People have loved the style of them and been genuinely surprised when I reveal their lack of sole. I've had them for a couple of years now – prior to that I was entirely and clearly barefooted – and I feel more comfortable and less-self-conscious wearing them than I was wearing nothing.

Of course, I'm not always barefoot. There, I admitted it! Let's be honest, I'm British and it gets cool and wet. I've done the whole 'barefoot in the snow' thing “for the 'gram””; it burns. I know of people who do go barefoot in the snow, and fair play to them, but I'm quite fond of my toes and I'd quite like to keep them. That said, I am a cold-weather creature who doesn't feel chilly until long after everyone else is wearing woollen tops, so it does take a real dip in the temperature before 'dressing up warmly' comes to mind; it has to be below about 5°C before I resort to closed shoes.

More likely, it's underfoot conditions that prevent me being barefoot. I don't like gravel, or trails littered with small stones; again this is quite a popular British thing, with many footpaths being through quite stony ground. With a light enough step, trails with scattered stones are 'okay', but a full gravel path is very awkward. I also find that damp weather causes every little stone, even on what appear to be decent pavements, to stick itself to my foot like glue, which is incredibly annoying. Obviously also some wilder environments are often ... 'unsuitable'; climbing hills or walking through forests is usually best done with some foot protection if you're not used to it (rocks and twigs and prickly flowers, oh my!).

In addition, I'm always a little wary if I'm in a new town and don't know the feel of the environment yet. I'll often sit on buses and look out the window at the pavements and go 'hmm, that looks okay', or 'erk, I'm not sure about that'.

So what do I wear when I want the freedom and coolness of bare feet but not the hassle? Well, I'll tend to wear what seem to be called 'minimalist sandals', specifically the brand Xero Shoes. They

have very thin soles (around 4mm) and attach to the foot using a cord that links to a node next to the big toe, and a strap around the back of the ankle (causing an argument at work when their suitability as office footwear was called into question; my old workplace banned flip-flops, but these have a back to them ...).

Despite their thinness, I've had no problems with them across any of the terrain I've worn them on, from mountain passes in Kyrgyzstan to hot stony roads in West Africa. They're also easy to slip on and off if I need to enter a temple or someone's home, and for barefoot days, I can roll them up and stick them in my pocket or, more usually, slide them between my trousers and my belt, so I always have them to hand if need be.

So there we have it; an introduction to who I am and what it means to be a "barefoot backpacker".

Now, as I said, every week I intend to have a 'lesser-known-destination-of-the-week', where I introduce a ... well, the clue's in the name really. The place could be anywhere in the world, from small towns near popular cities that people should explore more, to entire countries that seem to have fallen off people's radar. What I'll always try to do though is talk about a place that relates to that week's pod. I've started with a tricky one, but here we go ...

[segment into music]

This week's destination is Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. I spent the best part of three days there a couple of years ago, and I think I've decided it's one of the most pleasant cities I've been to. It's calming, restful pretty, a nice size, and seems to have everything you might need. As a non-Lithuanian speaker, it was relatively easy to get around, although learning the local language would bring more benefits than it would in, say, the Netherlands. It's just a nice shade of cool without being too 'hip'.

My first impressions upon arrival by train from Belarus, under a torrential downpour, were that it looked like a very pretty city, and despite being Soviet for 50 years, it never felt like it, resembling more a central European city, similar to places like Krakow and <http://barefoot-backpacker.com/here-be-dragons/>Ljubljana

The other thing it has in common with Ljubljana is its closeness to the countryside. A short walk West of the city lies Vingis Park, a huge (about 160 hectares) park and forest area, which seems to be very popular with joggers. Although the main routes through are very popular (and in the centre is a rugby stadium, of all things), it's quite easy to get off the beaten track and wander through the trees in a world of your own. In addition, on the other side of the city there's another park, with a hill, topped with The Three Crosses. These are three pure white crosses built in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> Century, supposedly to honour the memory of a group of early Franciscan Monks executed on the hill by locals for proselytising. They were torn down by the Soviets in the 1950s but subsequently rebuilt upon independence.

Nearer to the city centre, on another hill, is the tower of Gediminas Castle. Built originally in the early 1400s and rebuilt in the 1930s, it's what remains of the original fortification of the city, and named after the founder of the city. Gediminas himself was the Grand Duke of Lithuania some 80 years earlier, and the believed founder of Vilnius itself. It's a steep climb but you're rewarded with great views over the city.

As well as historic, Vilnius is quite a quirky and 'alternative' city. A teaser for this can be found in the Western suburbs, on the way to Vingis Park there's a statue of the head of Frank Zappa, because of course nothing says 'obvious' than a statue of a 1970s experimental musician. Yeh, no, I've no



idea really, but apparently it's quite a famous 'thing'. And I guess it makes a change from Pushkin.

Another teaser is in the old town, where there are several streets lined with poetry and artwork. This is apparently a local initiative, called the "Street Of Writers" (Literatų gatvė); promoting Lithuanian writing and pretty much anyone who has ever written in Lithuanian, is a writer from Lithuania, or who has any connection whatsoever with the country or its culture/heritage is commemorated here. I'm kind of half hopeful that the very act of podding this gets me on the wall, though I'd probably have to translate into Lithuanian first ...

The main alternative centre however is Užupis - the artistic quarter of Vilnius which, with a bit of tongue firmly in cheek, has declared itself an autonomous republic. On the wall of one of the streets there is the constitution of the microstate, black on silver tablets, in 20 different languages. It's all very philosophical and utopian, but it's meant to show a point whilst still being humorous.

Užupis' 'Independence' Day is, as you might imagine, April 1st (!) and on that day, mock border guards stamp your passport as you cross the bridge. In addition, they advertise that anyone can be an ambassador to the micronation, for any concept, you just have to ask. This means that, for example, they have an ambassador for Clouds (strange people, artists can be!). I always meant to ask them for recognition as the Užupian ambassador for 'barefoot backpacking'.

And this is why I've chosen it as my first 'lesser-known-destination'; as a whole, Vilnius has a good place in my heart for making me feel more self-confident about myself and the way I am, and it was the first place I went to as the 'barefoot backpacker' (mainly because the only sandals I had at the time had broken), but it was a very comfortable place to backpack barefoot; I didn't feel any bad vibes about doing so, the pavements were comfortable, and pretty much everyone (from the public, to the shops, to the tourist sites) barely gave me a second glance. Just the way it should be.

Well, that's all for this week. Next week's pod will be more 'travel' related, as I discuss the benefits of Hometown Travel. Until then, thank you for listening, and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

*[Outro Music: "Walking Barefoot on Grass (Bonus)" – Kai Engel, and closing credits:*

*"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. I'm pretty bad at that sort of thing myself, so I'll understand perfectly if you don't.*

*Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure was written, presented, edited, and produced in the Kirkby-in-Ashfield studio by The Barefoot Backpacker. Music in this episode was "Walking Barefoot On Grass (Bonus)" by Kai Engel, which is available via the Free Music Archive, and used under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.*

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*Until next week, have safe journeys. Bye for now."*