

The Maverick Show Episode 29
HOST: Matt Bowles GUEST: Maria Sirotkina

Matt Bowles: Hey, everybody. It's Matt Bowles. Welcome to The Maverick Show. My guest today is Maria Sirotkina. She is a serial entrepreneur and world traveler who has been to over 50 countries. She holds an MBA and is proficient in five languages, Russian, Arabic, French, Spanish, and English in which we'll be conducting this interview today. She also co-founded her first business, J Study, in 2007 at age 18. It's an educational travel company. She founded it in her home country of Russia and has since scaled that business to be a national level tour operator with five office locations serving thousands of students and generating eight figures in annual revenue.

In 2016, she followed her passion for nomadic travel and founded a co-living space in the Canary Islands called Restation Co-Living and has since grown that from one to four properties and hosted over 1,000 nomadic residents. In 2017, Maria co-founded Nomad Train, an opportunity to take the legendary Trans-Siberian Railway from Moscow to Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia together with a group of 30 nomads, which runs once a year. Nomad Train is facilitated by Russian speaking program leaders. And each stopover location on the train trip, which takes two weeks, includes accommodations, access to co-working space with reliable Wi-Fi, and organized excursions on the ground.

Maria is also the co-founder of Co-Living Hub, a nonprofit organization that supports co-living hosts and founders around the world to improve their local co-living experiences with the overall goal of supporting the growth of the co-living movement worldwide. She is hosting the first ever Co-Living Hub Conference next month where 100 founders of co-living spaces from around the world will descend on the island of Gran Canaria to strategize with each other about how to shape and grow the co-living industry. Maria, welcome to the show.

Maria Sirotkina: Wow. Thanks for having me, Matt.

Matt: Well, you've done a lot of stuff. And I am so excited to have you here. We should just set the scene for people right now. I just read through the fact that you are the founder of the Restation co-working space, which is exactly where we are doing this interview right now.

Maria: That is true.

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Matt: And I am actually a resident here for the week staying at the Restation co-living space.

Maria: Yeah. That seems like a nice joke. Who is the guest? Am I the guest of the podcast or are you the guest of Restation? So, we're a guest and a guest.

Matt: That's exactly right. You are my guest while I am your guest. That is amazing. It's a reciprocal relationship. And you and I have just opened a beautiful bottle of Spanish red wine, which you helped pick out. And I'm going to let you describe what exactly we are drinking here.

Maria: It's actually an amazing mix of Cabernet Sauvignon, a little bit of Tempranillo, Shiraz, and it's really, really good.

Matt: Well, we like to provide a nice wine experience here on The Maverick Show for our guests.

Maria: Of course.

Matt: It's part of that hosting experience, you know?

Maria: Of course, you know.

Matt: So, I am super excited to have you here. So, first of all, in terms of me being a customer for your businesses, I'm staying at your co-living space and working at your co-working space. I'm here in the Canary Islands for a week. So, I'm having that experience. And then, later this year, I'm going to be a customer for another one of your businesses because I've already signed up for the Nomad Train experience. So, I am super stoked to do this interview with you because I think a lot of your business accomplishments have been absolutely amazing and it's been super incredible to spend time with you this week and really get to know you and understand what you do and how you built your businesses.

And so, I definitely wanted to bring you on the show and share a lot of that value with our listeners. So, let's just maybe start back a little bit with your origin of the story, your upbringing in Russia and maybe talk a little bit about that and how you became passionate about world travel and decided to start studying

languages and wanting to travel the world and experience other cultures and where did that whole evolution come from.

Maria: Yeah, sure. I like saying that I'm from a small town. So, I really like this part of my story because I was not born into a big family of travelers like many of my university mates. Later on, I studied in the diplomatic corps, and it was very much a community of well-traveled children but I clearly didn't belong to that. My home town is pretty close to Moscow in Russian standards. It's 700 kilometers. But, at the same time, it's very isolated. And my family are entrepreneurs. They're small business owners. And I've always dreamt of being able to travel the world.

And actually, my dream career has always been international journalism. And my first jobs were writing reports for local newspapers. And then, I entered university to get a degree in international journalism on a full scholarship. And that's how I pretty much started traveling the world with this perspective that I could somehow bring a change from this side. But, to be honest, this career didn't stick.

Matt: And how did you specifically get interested in studying Arabic? Because I know you studied Arabic academically. And you and I have both spent a lot of time in the Middle East.

Maria: That's right. That's another cool coincidence, I think. So, I can't really say why specifically Arabic but I definitely didn't want to waste my time at the university. So, from the very beginning, I was kind of thinking that I want to invest the four years of my life into something meaningful. So, I basically had a choice of either being assigned, and that's what happens at least in my school in a diplomatic school, I either get assigned an easy language and an easy language is like French, Italian, German, Spanish, whatever, or I get to pick. And then, I have to pick something more complex.

So, I picked Arabic. I was thinking that it must be enriching. It's great. I love, love, love the language. I love the poetry. And it kind of changes so much into the way you think and the way you perceive the world and also the type of cultures you learn about. It's fascinating.

Matt: Yeah, 100 percent. I totally agree. And I've had a lot of really amazing experiences in the Middle East.

Maria: Same here, yeah.

Matt: So, I spent time in Palestine, Lebanon, sort of the Levant region as well as North Africa. I spent about a year in Egypt and time in Morocco and all of that kind of stuff. And I know you've spent time in a lot of those places as well. So, what was your first experience in the Middle East? Coming from Russia, where did you first land in the Middle East and how did you get there?

Maria: So, my first country in the Middle East was Jordan for a year abroad. So, it was something similar to an exchange program between our two universities. So, I was a student at the University of Jordan. And yeah, I didn't really know what to expect, to be honest. For everyone out there who knows a little bit of Arabic, there's a little bit – well, I don't want to say a little bit. It's actually a big lie. There's a major difference in studying Arabic at school because you're just studying classic Arabic and then, actually getting to speak it on the street. They are two different things. So, basically, it was, for me, arriving in Jordan and not being able to understand any single thing, literally.

There are not dialects. They're just two different languages of what people write and what people speak and the types of things that you hear on TV, you will never hear on the street. It's just different 100 percent. But it was amazing. I even got a part time job and then, I got more of a professional job while living in the Middle East. So, it was very, very welcoming. Sometimes, too welcoming so I decided to leave.

Matt: Yeah. It's amazing. And it's really interesting to your point that when you study Arabic, you study modern standard Arabic or it's called Fusha, right?

Maria: Yeah.

Matt: And if you know that and you understand that that's what you need to be a journalist if you're going to be speaking on the news or if you're going to be writing for a formal newspaper type of thing. But if you actually go to an Arabic speaking country, no one speaks that on the street. And if you attempt to speak that locally, it basically is for English speaking people. It's basically like speaking Shakespearean English, like old English.

- Maria: Exactly. That's a perfect comparison.
- Matt: It's exactly how you would sound so you would sound ridiculous if you were to just speak that to shop owners and local people on the street and hang out in conversation at cafés and that kind of stuff. And so, you need to learn to converse with people, you need to learn the local dialect, which also varies from place to place. But I studied Arabic as well for a little bit and learned the Fusha. And then, also the first dialect that I learned was also the Palestinian sort of Shami, the Levant region dialect as well. But then later after that, I went to Egypt and I lived in Egypt and it was a totally different dialect.
- Maria: Yeah, a totally different world.
- Matt: So, to communicate with people there, you need to then learn the Egyptian dialect.
- Maria: Absolutely. Although for most native speakers to Arabic, Egyptian is not an issue because that's what you hear all of the time on soap operas because Egypt is the major producer of soap operas. But, unfortunately, I was not that much into it. When I went to Egypt after as well, I faced the same issue as you.
- Matt: Right. I think that's true if you learn the Egyptian dialect and you speak it in other Arab countries, you are right that the majority of people will be able to understand you. But then, you need to be able to understand them. So, if you go over further in North Africa to Morocco, it's totally different. And you've spent time in Morocco as well, right?
- Maria: As well, but I never bothered – after the third Arabic country, I stopped bothering about learning dialects. I do apologize.
- Matt: You just spoke French in Morocco, right?
- Maria: Yeah. I just spoke a little bit of French and a little bit of classic Arabic. I didn't bother anymore about the comments, about people laughing at me. I'm like somebody seriously tricked me into this language because I thought I was going to learn one and be able to speak in 23 countries. That's how many countries speak Arabic. But in reality, I learned one and then, I had to unlearn and then, I
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had to relearn three new languages. That's not what I actually wanted.

Matt: Exactly. That's totally true. You can say Arabic is maybe the fifth most spoken language in the world, certainly in the top five.

Maria: Yeah. And 23 countries is quite a good number. Can German language compete with that? No.

Matt: Right. Exactly. But there are so many different dialects –
Maria: Yeah. It makes it impossible.

Matt: That's amazing. But your first time staying in Morocco, you were telling me that story about how you were a student and you were in Russia and you got accepted to a program. What was that?

Maria: Oh, yes. That's another thing about learning these difficult languages that you really need to practice. And I was aware so I was looking for all of these opportunities to be able to be exposed to it. So, I won another scholarship that was amazing. It was covering my lodging and food and tuition fees in Morocco in the capital in Rabat. And the only thing is that I had to get there. And I think I was a second year student at my home university so I was totally broke. I was still working as a journalist part time, obviously, and doing some minor translation gigs. But from Moscow to Morocco, there was one way, one K flight.

So, I was totally not able to afford that. So, I just decided that I'm going to search the internet and find a way of how I can actually fly to Morocco that is not from Moscow. So, the easiest thing that seemed back then, I'm not sure if it's the easiest, but the cheapest flight was from Paris. So, I just bought that one. I think it was close to \$50.00 easy jet Paris to Morocco. And then, the only thing was that I needed to get to Paris. So, I got a Schengen visa and pretty much my solution was to hitchhike to Paris. The only problem is that I had a five-day long visa. And within five days, I needed to cross from Moscow to Morocco.

And to make it even more complicated, this had to be done entering through Finland. So, it means St. Petersburg, Finland, for those of you who can imagine the map, it basically makes a giant hook on Eurasia and then, all the way down from Finland, Denmark, Germany, France, get into Paris. That's the price I paid

for free education. But I made it.

Matt: What an epic adventure, too, as a student.

Maria: It was quite epic, yeah.

Matt: I think that goes to show, too, just the ingenuity that when we are students or we are low budget for any reason, a lot of people want to travel the world. And if you're motivated enough, there are very creative, very inexpensive ways to get around, to stay places. They have couch surfing opportunities where you can literally have free accommodations with people that are willing to host you. And like you said, you just figured out how to get from Moscow all the way to Paris without paying any money for your transportation.

And there are a lot of these creative, ingenuitive ways and a lot of those give rise, I think, to the travel adventures and meeting interesting people and having just really incredible stories to tell.

Maria: Of course. But I think this adds up to your life experience. And I just learned so much about a lot of things, including about myself and about the world on this trip. I don't want to promote hitchhiking because, of course, there are some risks to it and more so if you are, I guess, a single female traveler. But at the same time, the more you travel, the more you definitely explore and you meet different people, people that you wouldn't typically meet in your normal life and different creative ways of traveling. Not like if you just hop from resort to resort.

Just going a little bit differently, you will end up meeting people that are not in your typical social circles. And you will definitely get richer and you'll learn about opportunities and stuff. So, it's always amazing.

Matt: Yeah. And you've traveled to a number of really interesting places. We were just talking about travel and you were asking me about my itinerary for the year. And I told you that in June, I'm going to go to Lagos, Nigeria. And you were like, "Oh, yeah, I lived there for a year."

Maria: Yeah.

Matt: I'm like oh, really, okay. What was that like and how did you get

there and what was that about?

Maria: Lagos is actually one of my secretly favorite places. I guess I don't even want to admit it to myself but I enjoyed it so much. It was great. Lagos is one of the places that doesn't have enough rules in place so you can do whatever and nobody cares. You just kind of enjoy life. You just enjoy it every day and nobody really talks about it, especially locals. You don't really talk about grand plans for the future. But every day is a party and a celebration. I was surrounded by my amazing teammates that were local because I was a part of a nonprofit.

It was a UN affiliated nonprofit that was working on some IT development in the region so it was a really, really important project. It was really nice. At the same time, I was part of a group of ex-pats. And it was a pretty cool community where each one had a story so very diverse. People from oil and gas, people from nonprofits, people from the financial sector, consultants, and also different levels and adventure seekers. So, kind of a weird mix.

Matt: Yeah. I'm so excited. I spent a month last year in East Africa. And I was in Nairobi, Kenya was my base for the month and then, I went to Kampala, Uganda and I went to Tanzania. I went to Dar es Salaam and I went to the island of Zanzibar. And I was just so enamored with East Africa and how sweet and wonderful people were but also just how the night life – it was unbelievable. But one of the things about that was the night clubs are amazing and I was just hearing all of these afro beats and all of this music I had never heard before. And I'm Shazaming all of this stuff. What is this? Why I have never heard this?

And what was amazing is that probably at least 50 percent of the music, of the afro beats that you'll hear at any of these clubs around Africa, all comes from Nigeria. It literally struck me as just understanding this is literally, right now, the center of the music scene of all of Africa and the art scene and all of this stuff. And then, I'd been talking to these other people about I want to go to Nigeria and I'd just been hearing it. And so, I was like let's just do it. Let's organize a trip to Lagos. We'll go for a month, get some Airbnb's and we're just like whoever wants to come can come.

And we'll just hang out, go to a co-working space and work and then, just see the city and go out at night and go out on the

weekends and stuff. So, we're just going to go and do it in June. I'm so excited.

Maria: I'm just so wanderlust now. Seriously, when I hear somebody thinking about Africa, I just have my best memories with Africa, to be honest, and also some really, really cool stories. I think it was the first year of me running the business. And we had this international partner. So, my business, the one that was started in 2007 or maybe it was the second year, it was not that big anyway. And we were at the very, very early stage of it. And we had this international partner that somehow found out about us. And they are owners of a big international chain of schools that wanted to work with us.

They didn't know how big we were. Apparently, we seemed much bigger than we were maybe because of our advertising or something. I don't know. Or maybe because of our HTML website. But they showed up in our office. So, he's from the family of the owner dressed up very nicely. And it's a tiny, tiny office, much smaller than your bedroom. And there's the three of us. Basically, he starts telling us the story about his business and how many schools they have in different locations. And I got really interested in his school in Cape Town. I'm like wow, Cape Town that sounds so interesting because back then, I had never been to Africa.

I was like can I maybe visit your school in Africa. And he was just so confident and saying, "I can invite you to my school in Africa under one condition. You should send me a student. You can sell it to your clients. But you can never do that because Russians never buy educational things in Africa." And so, I was like, "Okay, deal." Basically, in a couple of weeks, he had three almost year long sales. So, he actually paid my flights to Cape Town and a month-long accommodation and I met my future husband there.

Matt: That's awesome. Well, let's use that as a transition to talk a little bit about your entrepreneurial journey, which is quite amazing in terms of the diversity of spaces that you have gone into and how early you started. So, maybe just start with when you founded J Study at age 18 and take us through the evolution of that company because you've now scaled it up to the point where you're able to generate eight figures of gross revenue per year and have thousands of students. And it's at a very impressive scale now but

maybe just take us through the history of that company, the founding of it, and how you scaled it to that size.

Maria: The three of us started it, and I wouldn't have been able to do it without my two partners. And I think over the course of the years, it's pretty impressive. I never thought that it's actually already been 12 years because we were all little puppies. Seriously, we were all 18 years old. We were all from the same university. Actually, I met one of my business partners at a camp when we were 14. And another one was our dorm mate from the university. And each one of us had different career aspirations. It was the three of us from pretty much the very beginning. So, Kerol is my business partner who is currently the CEO of the company.

He did the first trials with the niche. And, basically, from 2007, we started generating small sales. So, in the beginning, it wasn't rocket science. As I said, there was an HTML website.

Matt: Can you explain also what the –

Maria: What was the business model?

Matt: Yes, and specifically what the offering was. What you developed, what you were selling, and all of that, yeah.

Maria: Sure. So, in the very beginning, we were just selling language courses. In the very, very beginning, we were selling language courses to our mates from the university because we were all studying those different languages at the University of International Relations. And so, the university was full of demand. It was like a demand generating machine. We just put a poster at the information board and that's how we would be generating sales. A poster would be \$0.30 or maybe \$0.03, I don't remember. So, a poster, we designed it ourselves. And then, ad words were dirt cheap, free almost.

That seemed like a lot of money even though. In the very beginning, there were posters and we were selling language courses. It pretty much was in Europe – sorry, English in London and maybe Manchester. But our first market was really London.

Matt: So, it was offering people the opportunity to travel to an English speaking location and study English there.

- Maria: To travel to London and study English. Yeah, exactly. So, there would be a two or three-week immersion course, very intensive and, typically, over the course of student break. So, our first clients were students. Then, we started going after student groups so a slightly younger population so children with their English teachers. And since then, it's pretty much our major market.
- Matt: That's awesome. So, what I drew from that as well is that you guys bootstrapped this and you were starting it when you were 18 years old and you had very little to no money at all. And you were using these sort of guerilla marketing, if you will, types of tactics with posters and putting stuff up and finding people and just hustling to get your first sales. And then, starting to reinvest that revenue into very inexpensive forms of advertising at the time.
- Maria: Yeah, of course. Our first start up capital was \$300.00.
- Matt: It's a pretty lean startup.
- Maria: Very lean. And the \$300.00 was enough to actually register a company when we needed it already. But I think the first year, we were working just to cover our expenses and just making small cash. But whatever is small cash now back then was just paying our coffee. And it was amazing. We could go for lunch.
- Matt: And then, from there, what has been the scaling process of that business to get it to an eight figure revenue point that it is now?
- Maria: Yeah. So, from there, we figured out our key metrics so things that we really, really, really needed to pay attention to. And we started working on maximizing our numbers so maximizing the revenues and minimizing the costs. We really, I think, liked working together so it really helped. Back then, the very important thing is that the entrepreneur was not fancy. It was actually quite lame.
- Matt: It meant you were kind of maybe lazy and weren't really doing anything with your life and so you just called yourself an entrepreneur, right?
- Maria: I remember I was calling my father when we finally registered the company because I didn't live with my parents for a couple of years, two or three years already. So, I called my father and I said, "Yeah, dad," I was thinking I'm going to be like you. I'm like,

“Dad, I finally registered the business and I’m the CEO,” because I was the first CEO. And he was like, “I’m so disappointed because I wish you did something proper with your life.” And that was like boom. But in several years, we’ve seen that it was not boom but it was rather Boom!

Matt: Yeah, exactly. That’s amazing.

Maria: So, scaling, yeah, we just worked on getting more and more and more clients into the pipeline, maintaining the control of our costs, very typical things. Very lean and very sustainable. I think it was very sustainable.

Matt: Right. That’s amazing. As an 18-year-old CEO and sort of being able to figure out what the – and I think a lot of times when you are bootstrapping, you really understand the value of every single dollar.

Maria: Oh, yeah.

Matt: Every single dollar.

Maria: Sure. Because it just comes from the pocket left and right.

Matt: It does. And so, your understanding of the importance of ROI on every single dollar spent and what return are you getting on it and how to optimize that and all of that kind of stuff. That is remarkable though that at that young of an age, you were able to just sort of see that and do that. How did you learn that? Did you have training in that? Did you have mentorship in that? How did you learn how to optimize your sales and then, build your business in that way?

Maria: So, actually, no, I did not have any training. None of us had any training. So, we were all self-taught and we were all studying pretty much the same thing. And it was always just purely practice. The only thing that we did was watching how much money we’ve got, how much cash we’ve got that is the main thing for every business. And so, since any financing, loans, whatever you can think of, nothing was an option, the only source of security was cash. So, sometimes, we wouldn’t even be able to apply for insurance. We wouldn’t be accepted because of different factors.

So, it was just like a very, very old school way. And I always

wanted to get the training. So, pretty much I was the only one in the company who later on went on and studied business. My two partners are still doing great and still pretty much no business degree. But as journalists by education, I think, we get most of the information from media. It's really amazing how much you can learn by yourself if you are dedicated.

Matt: That's awesome. So, you were an 18-year-old CEO, built the business and then, decided to go and do your MBA after that.

Maria: Yeah. We shifted positions with my co-founder, I think, in two or three years after starting the company. And he stepped in to become the CEO. And I went to live my semi nomadic life. So, I would be spending half a year here and there and coming back to Moscow. And sometimes, I would be leaving for several years abroad flying in to Moscow every month or so if I needed to meet the clients or something or not even Moscow. Sometimes, it would be London or Berlin or whatever. So, yeah, I went to live this more of a nomadic lifestyle much earlier. And both of my partners are still based in Russia.

Matt: What would you say, in your entire 12 years as you built and scaled that company, what would be the primary leverage points? Were there moments when as you were testing things, you were trying new stuff and all of a sudden, you just had big leap forward or you all of a sudden just got a whole bunch more customers? Were there moments of big escalation or jumps forward? And what were those?

Maria: Yeah, definitely. We've had a couple of big leaps. And one of those, I clearly remember the day when my business partner, Kerol, he came back from his trip to Toronto and he called me out for a coffee in the park. And we were sitting in the park. I think this is the learning that can be applicable to really any business and I have applied it later on as well. So, he was like, "You know, Maria, I found it fascinating." So, he was visiting a business partner at their language school in Toronto. And what they did, they just gathered together their top educational agents from all over the world.

The educational agents are the people who promote the business. And for a small school, it's relatively small, it's not like a global chain or anything, I think they've got two schools joined together

but, again, not hundreds of thousands of students or anything. Still, they invested a lot in building a relationship with their partners by bringing partners from different countries, organizing training for them in person, really curating the content, really thinking of how they're going to appraise the partners, how they're going to make us as partners feel special.

So, my partner, Kerol, came back from this kind of experience of being this special partner and he was like, "What happens if we create this special kind of club for partners?" So, we were just sitting with him and brainstorming and thinking who are our special partners. He's like the people that always come back to us, our language teachers who travel with their students. And that is true. They pretty much travel every year. And we were like okay, let's think about how we can curate this exclusive experience for our language teachers.

In pretty much the same year, we conceptualized – well, not even the same year, at the same bench in the same park, we conceptualized J Teachers, which is an event for teachers. A teacher conference where we invite educators from abroad to share knowledge with our partner teachers who are Russian and we create this special event for them. We always host it in a five star hotel with amazing views for the whole day. We fly teachers in from the whole country. So, if the event is hosted in Moscow, we would have teachers fly in from 10 or 15 different cities. And we would be paying for their accommodation and everything.

As a school teacher, we're the only ones that could do that. Since then, I think we had this conversation with Kerol maybe six years ago or something, and this teacher club has grown massively. Now, there is a wait list to join J Teachers. And our last event we hosted actually in the residence of the British ambassador in Moscow. And that was also quite outstanding because the British embassy was very open about collaborating and cohosting this event with us. So, we wee like all right, we're on the right track.

Matt: And so, what was the impact on the overall business? How did that translate?

Maria: It's just that we figured that this is the core group of users in speaking kind of the modern language. And they're repeat customers. They're the ones who create volume. And then, looking

at our numbers, I don't remember now specifically but pretty much their volume of this club stands for roughly 70 percent of our overall business now. And it grew pretty much from maybe like around 30 to 70 percent. But they're the most stable and that's the cheapest marketing for us.

Matt: So, you put your offering in front of the teachers?

Maria: Yeah.

Matt: And they then extend the offering to their students and refer you their students?

Maria: No, they don't even refer. They do our job. They take the decision for students and, basically, when they need to decide if there is a tradition that they travel annually for language practice to any English speaking country so that could be Malta or England and they always change schools. And we're always their provider.

Matt: Got it. So, the teachers are your actual customers.

Maria: Exactly. And they just announce the price and the location for their group.

Matt: Right. So, they have an entire group of students and that's a way for you go get –

Maria: Exactly.

Matt: Instead of going directly to each individual student, you go to the teachers. And then, you have a class of however many students as one.

Maria: Exactly. Of like five, ten, fifteen. So, we don't market to anyone individually. So, this is like we are working with our B to B. But it's just that it's not a traditional B to B.

Matt: Right. That's a very interesting concept.

Maria: Yeah. It's just that you need to identify who is your promoter, who is the actual customer. And in many businesses, it's very indirect. Maybe the secretary is your main customer, not the CEO who is going to be using the actual item.

Matt: Right. Yeah, that's really interesting because of instead of going individually one at a time and selling the opportunity to parents of a kid and going one at a time, you're going to where the students already are and then, selling to the teachers who end up bringing the entire group on the trip.

Maria: Yeah. Of course. Because then, sometimes, as much as we want to be trendy and market maybe to 15 to 20-year-olds and as much as then 15 to 20-year-olds will be promoting this to their parents, the actual decision is taken by the teacher. And when the teacher says, "Well, kiddos, this year's plan is," and that's it.

Matt: Right. So, that's a really interesting leverage point. So, technically, your customer who is actually paying the money is the individual student or the parents of the student. But your business approach was to build really tight relationships with the teachers and give them an amazing experience, which is way beyond anything that they've experienced before. And then, of course, they want to be part of it.

Maria: Yeah, and trust. It's just relationship building. It's pretty much what we've spoken about. Every business is about building relationships. You really need to take care of the people and then, they will love you back. It's as simple as that. We're not cheap on things that we provide. Again, at the same time, I think we also do a really good job of providing service. It doesn't mean that we have to cut corners then providing the agency experience. But competing with other agencies in the country, provided everything is the same, we definitely win on the relationship side. So, I guess that's the learning that I wanted to convey.

Make sure that you build relationships with your key players because it's really damn important.

Matt: Yeah. That's amazing. So, let's talk a little bit about one of your other businesses. We'll go to the next one. The co-living space that you founded here where we are right now in the Canary Islands, the island of Gran Canaria. And let's just start before we even talk about the business, which I do want to talk about but before we even talk about that, I would love to just ask you to explain the concept of co-living for some people that may be listening who literally never even heard the term. What is co-living? How does it

work logistically? And what are the values and the attributes that you have come to love and be passionate about co-living?

Maria: Sure. Basically, co-living is a concept of sharing living space and the community. For me, typically, co-living would be living and working with like minded people. I think this is a very important component of co-living, not just sharing the accommodation but also, in a way, mindset and the attitude, I guess, the approach to life because there are now many different co-living spaces. And we would all have slightly different focuses. So, there would be, for example, senior co-living spaces. There would be more nomadic co-living spaces like ours talking about Restation. And there will be more student co-living spaces.

This is the most common thing. There would be more residential family co-living spaces. This is now all on the rise. I really love seeing it grow.

Matt: That's awesome. And how did you come to become passionate about co-living spaces? What has your personal experience been that's led you to be committed to this concept?

Maria: So, my personal experience comes from living for a really long time on the road because I actually, at some point, when you travel so long, you miss relating with people so building a strong and deep connection. And this does not really happen when you stay in shared accommodation and people change all of the time. It also does not happen when you stay at your own place because you're too lonely there. So, I had this amazing experience of randomly sharing a guest house with two other nomads and that was in Costa Rica. We crossed paths for a month and we stayed at the same place that was totally not fit for long term living and we were all working remotely.

I think this clicked. So, there was Alex, an IT interpreter from New York, and there was Corey, my amazing gay friend from Australia. So, there were three of us. And we would just open laptops in the mornings, work together in this guest house. And this was our story for a month. It was amazing. It was actually one of the best months of my life just literally co-living with people that I never met before. But we just kind of stayed there. There were struggles, daily ocean dips, it was pretty amazing. And then, I always thought that should be everywhere. This experience should exist

everywhere. And several years later, we opened Restation.

Matt: That's amazing. So, let's talk about that. How did you decide where you wanted to open a co-living space? What was the process about deciding on the island of Gran Canaria, other than the fact that it's basically paradise and it's insanely amazing here, which may be a big part of it? And if it is, you can say that. But what was your deciding process to open it here?

Maria: So, I just toured actually I think it was 10 locations, 15 locations on my list. I probably should go back to the list to check it out. Maybe there was something interesting. And they were all locations in Europe because I didn't want to leave Europe for the sake of business security. I was living in Madrid and I kind of started in the positive experience of not having that many fluctuations compared to Russia. So, it was definitely Europe and there were other places on the map. Location was important. Time zone was important. The urban beach was important.

So, on the balance of probabilities, Gran Canaria and Las Palmas specifically, so not Gran Canaria as an island but Las Palmas as a city was a crucial one and we just moved here.

Matt: Awesome. And so, then once you moved here and you decided on the place and that it had everything you wanted in terms of a geographic location, what then was the business process of founding the co-working space and building it from there?

Maria: Good question. It was not a long process. It was actually all pretty fast because I did some prep work before moving to Gran Canaria. There was quite a bit of marketing and product market fit exercise. It's taken some energy. I moved here in August. And in October, Restation was already open. It was the first property.

Matt: Can you say a little bit about the product market fit exercise that you did?

Maria: Yeah. There were a whole bunch of exercises, not just one. But it was really important for me to understand who is the specific user of co-living spaces because I can explain who I am but what makes me similar to other people and how I can find them, potentially, and what's the easiest and the cheapest way because you definitely want to spread the word about that. And I think, as I mentioned before, I'm not a big money spender on ads. And with my first

business that was exactly that. We just kind of identified the group and then, we went after it. So, I wanted to replicate that. I didn't find a specific group and hit the button.

Matt: Can you share a little bit about the exact tactics?

Maria: Sure. So, specifically, basically, I think the first thing I did, I had two interns that I hired at my business school. And there was loads of research on social media, very, very important. But I was really new to the business. I had no idea [inaudible] [00:43:34] digital nomad had said how big that was, although I was myself a digital nomad. But it's just that this term was so new. It's still kind of new. So, we did loads of research. We read it on Twitter. We posted a lot of research. We posted surveys. We tried to generate different campaigns, a little bit of variety here and there on Twitter, and we saw what resonated more and with which types of audience.

And really, we had 100 people answering the survey. And I know that everybody says that you should survey people. What's the difference between people who say and people who say that yeah, I hear it all of the time? It's like you actually have to do that. You actually have to make people answer your questions and then, read and understand what exactly they're saying. So, all of these things, it was so, so, so super helpful. So, by the time we had 100 people answering the survey, yes, after the survey, I went and interviewed a lot of people in person, spoke to them, and asked them difficult questions.

Then, I understood what the whole thing was that people are looking for and what we should do and how we should put it together on the landing page. So, I think that was the exercise.

Matt: Awesome. And then, when you decided and you were going to found the co-living/co-working space also because that's another piece of it that there's also an attached co-working space, which is, basically, an office with 24/7 Wi-Fi that everyone that lives in the co-living space can also work in the co-working space. So, it's a combined thing. Can you talk a little bit about how you decided upon the culture that you wanted to create for your co-living space and then, what you did to actually found, launch, build, and occupy your co-living space? Because you did it very quickly. You were zero to full occupancy in like two months?

Maria: Yeah. That was for two months. It was really quickly.

Matt: That's amazing. Can you talk about how you did that?

Maria: All of this was quite some work. The first thing is building was hard work to negotiate with landlords because we are on the leasing model. And it's very important for us to explain our value proposition without having any track record in real estate. That's difficult. You know as somebody coming from real estate.

Matt: Okay. So, your business model was you were going to lease a building.

Maria: Sure, right.

Matt: And then, have a certain number of rooms.

Maria: Units, yes.

Matt: And all of that kind of stuff as well as shared common space. And so, you needed to identify the building. And then, once you identified buildings, you had to negotiate with landlords.

Maria: Yeah, pretty much so. And we had to be moving fast because the market is moving fast. Good types of properties don't sit there. So, pretty much when you see that, you're like, okay, am I taking this because yes, yes, yeah, I should take that. But that was the beauty of the whole leasing model because you're not losing millions. You're losing maybe thousands but that's fine. It's still kind of a testing phase. And I told myself that we're going to test that. We're going to have six months. If nothing works, that's fine, I lose six months and I lose I don't know how much money but as much as I can burn in six months.

And that's it. So, after six months, we already scaled up. And so, the second part of your question of what we did to market that, we had this marketing strategy already pre-built. So, we knew the type of communities we were going after. The culture of the space really helped. So, we don't want to really party. So, we're going to be deep work and we're going to be about getting shit done and we're going to be about entrepreneurship, about productivity, this type of place. And this is just the decision. There's no right or

wrong.

Matt: Right. This was your decision but by creating a defined culture, right?

Maria: Yeah, I think so. It's just about personal preferences. And also, somehow naturally, we ended up attracting this type of resident in the first instance. And that's it. It was like yeah, sure.

Matt: And then, other people want to come here.

Maria: Yeah.

Matt: So, now I'm choosing to stay here. I'm in Gran Canaria.

Maria: Yeah, it's just similar people.

Matt: You've got Sean Tierney who listeners will know from Episode 21 is also staying here right now.

Maria: Exactly, yeah, Sean.

Matt: And so, you're sort of attracting a particular type of people by setting a culture.

Maria: Yeah. I think culture is something that definitely works to your advantage once you take certain decisions and stick to them.

Matt: Right. And then, how did you promote and market and make that target market? So, you said this is are culture. These are the type of people we want to attract. And we know that these types of people want to come to Gran Canaria and all of this kind of stuff. So, you did that market research. And then, how did you promote the co-living opportunity, market yourselves, and get it in front of your target market?

Maria: Okay. Here are several things. Why I chose Gran Canaria in the first instance is because it was already on the nomad map, to some extent. I was not coming to the complete unknown tropical island in the middle of nowhere. So, Gran Canaria was already something. And I think it was definitely lacking this. So, that's why we established Restation in the Gran Canaria. And then, it took a very short time. We did a lot of event marketing. So, we

hosted master minds and skill shares and the type of event that will attract people that we like and detract people that we don't like.

And then, it's just the word of mouth because nomads plan really last minute. That's it. It was very simple. I think everybody who is hanging out in Lisbon or Morocco that is just around the corner, after hearing a few things about that there is a new co-living, there are many people that came our way. So, I think it was relatively easy.

Matt: That's amazing. And then, what have been the business strategies? Once you did that and you found the right space, you negotiated for the space and then, you launched and you were able to do these events and do this marketing and get it to 100 percent occupancy in two months, which is amazing, what have been your business strategies for continuing to maintain occupancy and then, ultimately to scale and expand? Because you're now four buildings.

Maria: Yeah. So, there are now four properties. Basically, our strategy is to maintain the vibes and maintain the active community year round so there are no down months. Although there is seasonality, we don't scale down on the event side. There is a weekly something several times a week, actually, going on. Then, what we also do is we partner with nomadic communities. For example, Digital Nomad Girls, we love co-hosting something with them. I don't know. It could be parties, it could be meet ups, it could be something else. And then, other nomads that own their micro communities, we're more than happy to help out.

Even if the community host is not on the island, we're happy to keep the legacy and keep hosting let's say a monthly meet up for whichever group. So, we're just a community center.

Matt: Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about, specifically, what would someone's experience be like to come and stay at Restation? How long do most people stay? What can they expect when they arrive and for the duration of their stay? What is it like?

Maria: Yeah. So, here I think it's very important for us the whole notion about setting the expectations because we're definitely not a camp. So, we don't look after people 24/7. I think the best experiences are the people that stay about four to six weeks and that's our

average. So, four to six weeks or now there is, for example, who is with us for like three to four months and Morgan was also three to four months. So, three to four months would be on the longer side. One week would be probably the shortest.

One thing that I hear all of the time in the feedback is that people meet very long lasting relationships, build long lasting relationships and meet potential partners, meet people that they really click with. So, what is it like? It's just small things that we do for the community are just making people come together, share food, or go out together, or have a meaningful conversation. Stop for a second, take a look around. Who is around you? Make sure you met everybody.

Matt: Right. I think it's really significant because as nomadic travelers, the social sustainability pillar in life is really, really important to maintain. And sometimes, if you're a solo traveler, it can become very lonely very quickly. And so, the co-living space, I think, is a really, really important concept because you can come to a place you've never been. I'd never been to Gran Canaria before I came here. I'd never been. And I came and I checked into Restation. And all of a sudden, there is a whole bunch of people. I have my own room. Just to explain to people my experience, I have my own room, which is a large, very nice bedroom and an en-suite bathroom.

So, I have my own space, which I can spend my time there. But then, there is also a large shared kitchen. So, I can grocery shop. I can keep my food there. I can cook food. And then, there is common space where you can work, hang out, that sort of thing. And then, there are other people that are staying in the same space who also share the common areas. And in so doing, you can meet them and interact with them informally by just running into them. But also then, there are organized meet ups and events and things like that where you are all going together, which is an organized connection.

So, even for people that might be more introverted or might not be into striking up conversations, there are organized ways to connect and meet with people. And the point is that the other people that live here also want to meet you.

Maria: Yeah, exactly.

Matt: And so, you can just arrive somewhere and have a community that's waiting for you. They want to meet you. They want to interact with you. And I will tell you, the people I have met here, some of the people you just mentioned, are super interesting, very well traveled, really dynamic entrepreneurs and people that have amazing experiences. And we've been out having dinner and having drinks in the evening with people that I didn't know before I got here. And now, I know them and now we're connected on so many levels. And we even have all sorts of things in common and we'll be connected for quite some time. So, it's been awesome.

Maria: Yeah, I'm glad.

Matt: So, that's the co-working concept. And I think it's awesome what you've done. And I think it's really cool how you're scaling here on the island and you're up to four properties now. I also want to talk about your other business that you founded in 2017, Nomad Train. But for people who haven't heard about it, what is the Trans-Siberian Railway and then, what was the Nomad Train business that you build around that and what is it?

Maria: Trans-Siberian is a railroad from Moscow to Vladivostok, which is a further point in Russia. Or you can say that it's the railway from Moscow to Beijing or Moscow to Ulaanbaatar, which is the capital of Mongolia. All of this is Trans-Siberian. Sometimes, people say oh, there is Trans-Siberian and Trans Mongolian. All of this is Trans-Siberian. Trans-Siberian is the railroad network. You just have to go for a long time on the train. And it's 200 years old.

Matt: Yeah. And it's arguably the most famous train route in the world.

Maria: It is totally the bucket list travel for everyone. And you can never experience so much diversity and so much of different beautiful, beautiful landscapes and the world passing by the window of the train. And you're just there, choo-choo.

Matt: It's amazing. So, let me give you my full context. Before I met you or heard about anything about Nomad Train, I had been researching the Trans-Siberian Railway because, of course, it is this legendary bucket list item, probably the most famous train ride in the world and just absolutely supposed to be totally epic and legendary. And as I started researching it, all of the comments that I was reading on Lonely Planet, Trip Advisor, any of these

comment forums was that it's very complicated to do, especially if you're not a Russian speaker to book the train and then, if you want to get off at the different stops and see the different places and get back on the train and do the stuff.

That's a very cumbersome, challenging experience if you're not a Russian speaker to figure all of that out and book all of your stuff. So, you should really go through some kind of travel agency. And then, of course, there's the complexity of certain nationalities getting visas to Russia. If you're an American like I am, it's a fairly cumbersome process to get the Russian visa and sort that whole thing out. And you have to have an invitation letter in order to even apply for a visa, which where am I going to get an invitation letter.

And there are all of these different things. So, I'm like wow, that's an insanely epic bucket list experience but that is a lot of friggin' work to try to figure out how to do all of that. I'll put that on my back burner. And then, all of a sudden, I learned about Nomad Train and I was like – but I want you guys to talk about that because what you basically did is you understood the challenges and the pain points that I had uncovered.

Matt:

It was absolutely the same for us. We are the three co-founders and I'm a Russian passport holder and my other co-founder is German and the other one is also Russian. But A) we never had the time to do that, and B) it's cumbersome even for a Russian. I'm telling you I can't even imagine how much effort it could take to a foreigner to plan the whole thing because each one of us from the co-founding team, we did some parts of Trans-Siberian before, actually, co-founding the Nomad Train. But it's like a lot of work to understand what's interesting, what's not, and how exactly you book the bloody train tickets.

And Russia is an amazing country but it's definitely not made for tourism. When you go to small places, even there are cities where you have millions of people, you frequently meet locals that have never been abroad and have never met a foreigner in their life. And there's no infrastructure. When we get to a city, we take over the whole working space, the only. It's just very complicated to plan the journey in a way that is pleasant and it's not really mass tourism like. But Trans-Siberian is amazing. It's definitely a life changing experience. It's not only about the whole trip itself in

Russia but we're changing the country.

We're getting from Russia to Mongolia and Mongolia being one of the most unexplored countries in the world. It's an unbelievable landscape. There are so many things that you can do after you arrive in Ulaanbaatar. And that's like a cherry on top because people enjoy so much the actual experience in Russia but then, when we get to Mongolia, it's even – wow.

Matt: So, can you talk specifically about what is Nomad Train, what is the value proposition and the offering to the customers? Literally, as soon as I saw it, I reached out immediately. I contacted immediately and I said the earliest I can do it is this date but take my money. I'm in. As soon as I saw what you guys had done, I was in immediately. But can you explain what that value proposition is?

Maria: Yeah. Sure. So, basically, for me, Nomad Train is really a passion project because I really like promoting Russia as a country. I don't live there but that's the only thing I can give back. But the value proposition is that we cover the Trans-Siberian route from Moscow to Ulaanbaatar. We do 24 hours on the train and then, make a stop for three days in the city where we have a comfortable hotel, guaranteed Wi-Fi at a co-working space, and we've got some ground excursions so trips with our team leader who is always on the train with the group. And while we're on the train, we get all of the food, which is also quite nice.

So, you get to eat on the train. You don't have to worry about what you have to take on the train. Obviously, you can't order delivery on the train. So, we got hot food there. And it's like local experience. It's 100 percent local. It's definitely not the typical tourist train that you would take. It's just a casual way of going from Point A to Point B and detoxing a little bit, bonding strongly with people who are together with you because we're all hardcore nomads. And all of us are really interesting people that benefit a lot from being together on this journey.

Matt: Yeah. It's amazing. So, on the one hand, you guys handle all of the logistics.

Maria: We do, yeah. That's definitely covered.

- Matt: Which are not only the logistics of the train tickets but at the stops, you've covered the accommodations and you've covered the co-working access with Wi-Fi. So, if people need to do work and they're concerned about the Wi-Fi on the train and all of that kind of stuff then, they've got the co-working access at the stops, which for me, I was like ding. All of my check boxes started going. **[Inaudible] [01:01:46]** just picks up my tickets.
- Maria: Because we designed it for ourselves.
- Matt: Yeah. That's amazing. And you go with a community of like 30 people, which is amazing.
- Maria: Yeah. It's quite cool. It could be slightly less or slightly more. We're aiming to get to 30. But even if we are at 15, I'm sure it's an amazing experience. Even if we are 40, I'm sure it's going to be fine. Our goal is 30. I think that's what we are going to do this year.
- Matt: I even have friends of mine that are already coming because I told them about it. I was like, "I'm going to go do this thing." And they're like the same mentality as me. They're like you're doing the Trans-Siberian and they're bringing nomads and doing all of the logistics and you got co-working and you got this. Where do I sign up? And it was like boom, boom. So, I already have a handful of my nomad friends that are going to come with me because I told them I was doing it. And I'm super excited to meet the other people that come. So, I think it's going to be totally amazing.
- Maria: Cool. I'm sure you're going to enjoy it. I'm sure it's going to be a blast, yeah.
- Matt: And then, we end up in Mongolia, right? So, what I'm doing with my American visa, I have a 30 day visa, which I got, which by the way, that's the other thing that your team, Olga in particular, shout out to Olga, by the way, I hope she listens to this episode. She's amazing. She's been so helpful. And she helped me to go through all of the different visa step processes. So, as an American, it is a pretty cumbersome process. You have to have all of this information. You have to have an invitation letter, which you guys provide. You have to have all of these details to fill out the American visa application, which is cumbersome.
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And you provide all of that information and tell us exactly how to do it. And then, Olga was on with me on What's App, how did it go, do you have any follow up questions. And then, there was a follow up thing and she got it to me immediately and I got it in. So, I got a 30 day visa. So, what I'm going to do is go to St. Petersburg for one week and then, go to Moscow for one week and then, jump on the train in Moscow and then, have my final two weeks be on the train and end in Mongolia. So, I'm going to use my full 30 days in Russia.

Maria: Of course, because you have to. If you've never been to Russia, you have to.

Matt: Right. And then, we end in Mongolia, which I'm ecstatic about seeing. I've heard it unbelievable.

Maria: Well, you've got to use your time in Mongolia because Mongolia is a separate chapter. It's totally amazing. And from Ulaanbaatar, there are a whole bunch of things you can do. You can explore picture perfect landscapes, horse riding, and staying in yurts. And some of them even have Wi-Fi. It's like can you imagine a native house like a little yurt with Wi-Fi? I probably sound like a proper millennial.

Matt: It's so amazing. I'm so excited for Mongolia.

Maria: And the best thing that happens, since I'm a true co-living enthusiast so I have to mention that because what happens on the train stays on the train. No. People bond really well because it's a small space. So, you really meet people, talk a lot. And then, you end up hanging out with them for a really long time. And then, after Mongolia, people will typically go to, for example, Beijing is a really, really typical next go to point or Southeast Asia. So, lots of Nomad Trainers end up in Chiang Mai after.

Matt: But you can continue on the train from Mongolia straight out to Beijing and you can literally take it all the way to the coast.

Maria: Absolutely. It's another 24 hours. We haven't included that because then from Mongolia, many people want to stay in Mongolia. That's why we kind of decided from the very beginning that we're going to stop there to give people some space. And then, if they want to continue, you guys can do that.

Matt: I'm so excited to see Russia. I've never been and it's been on my list for quite a while. And I'm going to be able to both see Russia and do the Trans-Siberian in the same trip and I'm stoked for it. It's going to be amazing.

Maria: I'm stoked for you.

Matt: So, I want to ask you a few other business questions and life questions as well.

Maria: Sure.

Matt: One of the things that I think is really impressive about you and I want to ask you for details on this, you're 30 years old. You are a wife and mother of two small children. And you are the founder and owner of multiple businesses in multiple countries. I want to ask you about your productivity strategies and how you structure your day to be a wife, a mother, a business owner, and just this super dynamic serial entrepreneur. How do you structure your day? How do you manage your time? What are your strategies?

Maria: One thing that I don't do, I don't Instagram because if I was Instagramming my life, it would not be pretty. It looks so hectic. It looks so not – I don't have time for setting up a perfect picture. Seriously, this is not a joke. If you guys look at my Instagram, it's almost dead. I've got loads of kids' pictures from the weekends but really I've got no time to do any social media because it has really poor ROI for me. This is one thing. But in terms of structuring, I have to say at work, I'm a machine. And my husband makes fun of me because I'm a machine. And this is true.

I have to be very, very, very rigorous on how I work because I want to be completely with my family when I'm with them. I think it's just not fair if I'm looking at my phone or thinking of something and trying to be with my family at the same time. I think it's just not fair to them. And also, it's just not a good experience for anyone. The fact of being present. And if any of you guys do that, you should definitely rethink your strategy. I'm really up for the separation in your mind. So, kind of set the boundaries. And if you want a little about my processes, I can explain a little bit about how that works.

I start my week, typically, on Sunday night or Monday morning.

And I start it off with planning the week. And how I do that is typically just maybe 10 minutes of my time but it's very, very important. And since I implemented this system, it has been a total life changer for me, a total life changer. So, what I do is I split my life on all of my projects. So, I count weeks in a year. For example, we are now in Week 14 probably. And every week, I would plan up to three key action points per project. So, each one of my businesses represents a project.

For example, Restation Co-Living and Nomad Train and J Study, those are all of the active projects in my life. And then, also there would be health and wellbeing is another project and then, family as another project. I know I sound very pragmatic. And every now and then, there will be additional projects that just come up. For example, I was mentoring one start up and it popped up on my list for two or three weeks. So, I would create this to do list for a week. So, three items per project, not more than three, otherwise, it gets too crowded. Sometimes, I would set an actual goal plus a stretch goal per project.

And then, every day, I would start my day with actually blocking time for each one of these items. So, action points. For example, two or three hours from 9:00 to 12:00 to work specifically on only one thing. During this time, it would be a deep work time. So, it means that I'm disconnected. This way, I will just take off stuff from my to do list. There are loads of details into that but that's like the basis.

Matt: You can go into the details. I want to try to – I find you quite amazing in terms of all that you are able to do and the caliber at which you're able to do it. And so, to the extent that you can provide tactical details of exactly how you produce and achieve the output and the results that you do, I think that's a huge value. So, if you want to go deeper and explain what you mean that would be amazing.

Maria: I can definitely explain a little bit in detail how that works. So, basically, imagine you created this list of things that you need to achieve per week. For me, it's very important also to dedicate time there for health and fitness because that's an essential productivity boost for me. And it does me that, for example, in my health and fitness section, there would be that I fast, for example, twice a week. So, that would be there as well. And I exercise or work out, I

don't know, it could be three times a week. So, it's also on the to dos. There is also the family section.

So, I need to make sure that I do ABCs with my older child daily because if I don't put it there, of course, I'm probably going to do that but I might forget or I might just – it's as important as work. It really has a strong priority so it should be there. And so, then every morning, I would block time on the calendar because one thing is setting your to dos. For example, on Monday, I want to meet my partner and then, I want to create this website layout and confirm it with the designer. But if you don't assign it to a specific slot on the calendar, you might end up just losing track of time.

And also, for me, it's very important to assign slots on the calendar to see how much time they actually take because sometimes, you will see that the most important tasks will take you 30 minutes. And then, you're like well, where did the rest of the day go. So, on my calendar, I actually see where the whole day goes. I'm productive every time, literally, every 30 minutes of my day. My day is broken into 30 minute intervals. Every 30 minutes, I'm productive because I'm paying for daycare for two children.

So, I've got to make much more than them during the time when I'm productive. So, I have to be very, very productive. There is a lot of pressure. That's it.

Matt: Which, by the way, makes me feel very honored and privileged to have basically spent the entire day with you today. It's been really awesome that you've been able to take the time out and we've been able to hang out and chat about business.

Maria: It's great. I don't do it every week but it's also the perk of being productive because I don't feel guilty of taking the day off every now and then or just spending the day the way I want to spend the day because I know how much value I produce in my regular day. And I don't allow myself to slack off. I don't need extra motivation. I'm very motivated.

Matt: And we did strategize about business stuff today and have a lot of constructive conversations and all of that.

Maria: Definitely. There was a lot of I'm going to report back but I'm sure there are five or six figure things there.

- Matt: For sure, in our conversation today. I think so.
- Maria: For sure.
- Matt: No, I totally agree. I think that as you're talking about things that are productive and all of that kind of stuff, sometimes it's the deep work and grinding out and knocking out things you need to do.
- Maria: Exactly, 100 percent.
- Matt: But in some cases, it's running into other entrepreneurs. I think it was amazing. You and I basically met each other and we're like wait a minute, let's just have some business strategy discussion. And you were asking me questions about your business and advice that I could give from my experiences. And I was asking you, of course, about your businesses and advice that you could give on your experiences. And we just had a really constructive business discussion for most of the afternoon.
- Maria: That's the thing. I think it's always so important to acknowledge that most of the things are transferrable. There is so much that we can all learn from each other that different industries feed into each other. At the end of the day, it's really about how that can be helpful to another person or how this can be helpful to me.
- Matt: Yeah. So, let me ask you one more main question and then, we're going to jump into the lightning round.
- Maria: Cool.
- Matt: I want to ask you though about you are really an expert, I think, in growth hacking and that's how you position some of your core competency. And I want to just ask you for your advice on that. What do you mean by growth hacking exactly? How have you done it? And what advice can you give to other entrepreneurs about growth hacking?
- Maria: Sure. Absolutely. So, from my perspective, it's rapid growth. And rapid growth with certain sustainability and minimal resources, optimizing your available resources for rapid growth. And for me, this is not only finding the right product market fit but also about being able to push the right buttons within your audiences, find the

right metrics that will be key for you and be able to pursue the strategies. Not only knowing all of this in theory but actually being very practical and going after that.

Matt: Can you give an example?

Maria: Yeah. I'm going to give you an example of my businesses and, hopefully, you guys can get that. For example, for co-living, which is very easy for everybody to understand, there are two key metrics. One of them is the occupancy rate and then, there are the costs. So, I just have to watch these two and I need to make sure that my occupancy rates are as high as they can be and that my costs are as low as they can be. That's where the margins come from. That's where the money is made in between these two. For every business, there are pretty much, I think, no more than two or three metrics.

And as soon as you keep those under control, you're growing because you need to always create space for your business to grow and watch the numbers. This is really, really core watching where your numbers are landing, what are the key numbers, knowing them.

Matt: And then, just working on optimization strategies to improve them, right?

Maria: Working on optimization and never use hope marketing strategies, never thinking of let's throw it out at people and see what happens. Nothing is going to happen. Nothing is going to happen. You just need to watch the details of what's happening with your product or service.

Matt: Yeah. I think a lot of what I know about you and the way you run your businesses is the extent to which you meticulously focus on those quantitative metrics and you focus on them very intensely and then, you optimize and you test and you optimize and you test and you optimize and you test and you improve.

Maria: Yeah. Optimizing and testing. And different platforms have different rules of the game and different businesses have completely different metrics. So, everyone needs to identify those and know what you're after.

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- Matt: Awesome. Maria, at this point, are you ready to move into the lightening round?
- Maria: Yes, let's go.
- Matt: Let's do it. All right. We're on the final bit of our bottle of wine here.
- Maria: Oh, my God, that's right, yeah.
- Matt: So, it's definitely time for the lightening round to close this out. The first question is I know that in a lot of your career, you have teamed up with business partners for your different ventures. What is the key to selecting amazing business partners?
- Maria: So, for me, I think there will be three things. The first one is a comparable sense of comparable ambition. So, I wouldn't typically being hanging out with somebody who wants to open a corner shop unless I want to open a corner shop. And the second one is the level of trust. So, I'm definitely more likely to start a joint project together with somebody who I already know. Skill is such an important thing as well. This is also crucial. I guess I just take it for granted that people have to be skillful. It has to be complementary.
- Matt: When you know them, you know what their skills are when they're your friend or whatever it is. You know them and you know what their skills are and you're able to say this is the right person because, obviously, you wouldn't go into business with just any friend because they're a friend.
- Maria: No, no, no, definitely not.
- Matt: But it allows you to understand their skill set and select the right people. So, I totally agree with that. What is one book that has influenced you that you would recommend to people?
- Maria: It's Cal Newport and it's *Deep Work*. So, it was not necessarily mind blowing but it gave me permission to do so many things that I'm doing. Actually, my whole strategy of building my week, my day is inspired by the book. So, I really encourage everyone who is juggling several things or just feels the urge to constantly be checking his email, being on top of things, on top of Instagram,
-

Twitter, Facebook and all of these things, just get the book, read Cal Newport, and breathe in and breathe out. That's it.

Matt: Awesome. What is one app or productivity tool or gadget that you're currently using that you would recommend to people?

Maria: I like recently checking out my sleep quality. That's just for monitoring purposes. And I guess I'm still learning about that. I think it's one of the insights that I learned recently that everyone will have different sleep patterns. And it really influences also the quality of our wellbeing and the quality of our life. And you should know also what helps you sleep better and what helps you relax better during the night. But for this, you need to experiment. So, I'm still experimenting. And if you guys have some interest in all of the biochemistry and the way your personal body works, I believe each body is different.

So, get yourself some type of sleep measurement bracelet, whatever brand but there are multiple.

Matt: Awesome. Knowing everything that you know now in your 30 years of life and your entrepreneurial journey, if you were to go back to when you were 18 and give one piece of advice to your 18-year-old self with all of the lessons that you've learned now, what piece of advice would you give your 18-year-old self?

Maria: I would actually give the same advice that my father gave me. Keep investing in education. Keep learning and invest in that, invest in yourself. It's the best investment you can make. Invest in yourself.

Matt: Awesome. Of all of the places that you've traveled, which is now well over 50 countries, what would you say are your top three favorite travel destinations that you recommend people check out?

Maria: Very, very easy for me. 1) Cape Town and South Africa. Take a road trip somewhere. 2) Iran. Iran is amazing and so under discovered. Iran is totally epic and totally not dangerous. Guys, don't freak out about Iran. And 3) would be probably actually Russia. The top three on my chart today.

Matt: It's amazing. There is so much about Russia and I've never been. I'm so excited to go. It's been on my list for so long. And there's

been just so much that I've been learning and hearing about Russia. For example, something that a lot of people may not even know is how serious the women's basketball scene is in Russia. For people that follow women's basketball in the United States, the WNBA players, the best female basketball players in the United States, which are also the best female basketball players in the world, they are paid in the off season to go and play in these leagues in Russia and in Siberia.

And so, the top WNBA players in the world play in Siberia in the off season. So, one of the teams is UMMC Ekaterinburg, in the middle of Siberia, where they have Diana Taurasi and Brittney Griner playing on the same team. They have the best of the best in the world that play over there in the off season. And they value women's basketball so much. So, Diana Taurasi has for years been the No. 1 player in the world in women's basketball.

And they value women's basketball over there so much that her Russian team offered her to buy out, this was in, I think, the 2015 season, her WNBA contract meaning we're going to pay you your Russian salary and we're going to pay you our WNBA salary for you to sit out and not play the WNBA season so you don't risk injury before you come back for the Russian season and she took the deal. And the best player in the world sat out the WNBA season because her Russian team valued her so much that they paid her to do that.

Maria: Russia.

Matt: Yeah. That's unbelievable. So, I'm a huge women's basketball fan. I've had WNBA tickets when I lived in LA and all of this stuff. So, I'm a huge women's basketball fan. So, when I started learning about what was going on in Russia and how much people appreciate it even more so, to a large extent than in the US, I was just like I have to go. This is yet another thing about Russia that I have to go and experience. So, I want to go back to Russia during basketball season, which is probably like April or so and see some women's games of the players that I know from the US who are literally all over there in Russia playing.

It's amazing. Awesome, cool. So, the last question is what, at this point in your life, are your top three bucket list travel destinations, places you've never been that you most want to go right now?

Maria: Right. I really, really want to go to rural China. I've been to many Chinese cities but it always left me so longing for an actual adventure. I think this country is so full of bizarre things that I really want to explore. It's pretty much like you do on the Trans-Siberian. I really want to get lost somewhere in rural China. So, that's No. 1. So, No. 2, today my husband really sold me on Japan. It's been promised to me for so long. And now, I'm curious. And then, finally, No. 3 is Georgia because I made two attempts to visit and I was at the Georgian border but being in between Georgia and Russia, there are so many political things that I was not able to cross twice.

And it feels a little bit like come on, seriously. I need to make a third attempt now. And I know it's going to be an amazing experience because Georgia is an amazing country and I know you're going.

Matt: I am going right before I come to Russia. Yeah. I've heard amazing things about the country of Georgia, super excited to see that.

Maria: Yeah. It's a truly amazing country. I know because I've got so many friends from there. And Russia is actually infused with Georgian culture, specifically, gastronomy. I cook, actually, quite a lot of Georgian food at home but now I want to eat it in Georgia. Next time.

Matt: So awesome. All right, Maria, at this point I want to ask you how people can find out more about your businesses. How can they find out about Nomad Train? How can they stay at Restation? And if they want to follow you personally or I don't know if you're on social media or if your businesses are on social media or something like that, where can they go to find you? And we're going to link all of this up in the show notes, by the way. So, everything that you tell them, they can also just go to www.themaverickshow.com. We're going to have direct links to everything. But tell them how they can find out about you.

Maria: The easiest way to learn about Nomad Train is to go on the website www.nomadtrain.co and Restation is the same, www.restation.co. I'm actually quite open about connecting with people on Linked In if that's a professional thing. And it's Maria Sirotkina on Linked

In. I think I'm pretty easy to find with Restation or Nomad Train because both of those are there. And I guess we can also mention some specials for The Maverick Show listeners on the show notes if you want to share that.

Matt: That would be awesome, yeah. You said that any Maverick Show listeners can actually get a discount if they want to join us on the Nomad Train, which, by the way, is actually literally if they go on the September 2019 Nomad Train, I'm actually personally going to be there. So, you'd literally be joining me. And Maria will give you a discount.

Maria: So, we're doing a 50 euro discount on the Nomad Train for September. I'm happy to have people at Restation for a free weekend. If you guys book in a month, we're adding a weekend on top of the month stay at Restation. So, this, I think, gives pretty much an 80 euro value to your booking. And you can use this any time during 2019. If you guys want to chill for a little while in Gran Canaria, the Canary Islands are welcoming year round. There is no seasonality here really.

Matt: Yeah. And if you've never been to the Canary Islands, I highly recommend you check it out.

Maria: Absolutely.

Matt: And Restation is a really fun place to do it because you're going to land here and you're going to get an awesome community from the minute that you get in. And even if you don't know anybody, you're going to have a community when you land. And if you book a month, you get a free weekend so that's an awesome offer. Thank you for that.

Maria: No, thank you for having me. And I'm sure that the people that are out there are always eager to also come and share stuff so the more the merrier.

Matt: Amazing. Well, we are finished now with our bottle of wine, which means that it's time to finish the podcast. So, Maria, thank you. This was an amazing bottle, by the way. I'm literally going to link up this bottle in the show notes so if people want to go and find this wine, this was an insane bottle of wine.

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Maria: Yeah. That was so good.

Matt: It was ridiculous.

Maria: It was worth every cent of it.

Matt: It really was. So, we're literally going to put the bottle of wine in the show notes. We're also going to put all of the links of how you can find Maria and if you want to grab those discounts or want to join me on Nomad Train or any of the other stuff, just go to www.themaverickshow.com and you'll have all of the direct links there. Maria, thank you so much for being here.

Maria: Thanks so much, Matt. It was amazing.

Matt: Awesome. Good night, everybody.

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