

**Matt Bowles:** My guest today is Phil Marcus. He is a travel documentary filmmaker and the creator of the YouTube channel [Phil's Guide to the World](#). The mission of his work is to spread global positivity with a particular emphasis on showing the good people of the countries that western media usually represents only negatively. Phil's high quality video documentaries allow you to see for yourself the beauty, humanity and joy of people and cultures all over the world. As a former CPA lawyer and tech entrepreneur, after selling a successful company, Phil went all in on his passion for world travel and cross-cultural connection and he has now been to 190 countries.

Phil, welcome to the show.

**Phil Marcus:** Hi, thank you for having me. Matt. How are you today?

**Matt Bowles:** Brother, I am so good that you and I are finally having this conversation. Before we dive into all of the amazing stuff that you're up to, let's just start off by setting the scene and talking about where we are recording from today. I am actually in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Asheville, North Carolina, on the East Coast of the United States. And where are you today?

**Phil Marcus:** I am on the west coast of the United States in the most beautiful city in the United States, San Francisco, California. I'm in my home for the first time in seven months and loving it.

**Matt Bowles:** Bay Area represent. Let's talk now about where you and I met. You and I connected in Bangkok, Thailand at the *Extraordinary Travel Festival* put on by our mutual friend [Ric Gazarian](#), *The Global Gaz* who Maverick Show listeners know because he has been on the podcast. And I feel like our first real meaningful connection was when you invited me to have dinner at a Sri Lankan restaurant in Bangkok. And I don't even think you knew how much I love Sri Lankan food. And that when I was living in D.C. one of my housemates was Sri Lankan and two of my other housemates had lived in Sri Lanka, and one of them was studying to be a chef. And so, we had Sri Lankan cooking going out all the time, grating coconuts and stuff like that in my house. And so, this is one of my favorite foods in the world. You reached out to me, and you were like, yo, do you want to do Sri Lankan food tonight in Bangkok? And I was like, sir, you are speaking my language. And so, we bonded over our love for Sri Lankan food. But I would love if you could share a little bit from your perspective, what is your connection with Sri Lanka, and how did you fall in love with Sri Lankan food?

**Phil Marcus:** Sri Lankan food is the best because it merges sweet and savory together. That's what I love the most. Complex flavors, unique cultural connection between the different flavors that you have there. It's one of my favorite countries. And the one thing about Sri Lanka that I love the most is the food. I just loved walking down the street and picking up egg hoppers. I mean, that's just the greatest thing in the world. And if people don't know what egg hoppers are, it's dosa meets a crepe with a fried egg in the middle. Then you put some coconut sambal, which is the perfect blend of sweet coconut with red spicy pepper, and you just put it in your mouth, and it melts. It's the best.

**Matt Bowles:** And you have this tradition of looking for specifically Sri Lankan restaurants in cities where there is likely to be a Sri Lankan community and amazing Sri Lankan food. Bangkok, obviously, is one of those cities, and you had identified pretty much the best Sri Lankan restaurant in the city and invited me to go. And, man, I am still thinking about the food that we had that night.

**Phil Marcus:** I go out of my way to find Sri Lankan food wherever I can, because we do not have Sri Lankan food in San Francisco. Now, in Los Angeles, they have Sri Lankan food, but it's in the Valley or in Orange

County. And whenever I go, I went to school in LA. Whenever I go to la, I will drive an hour and a half round trip to get Sri Lankan food. And my college roommate is married to a Sri Lankan woman, and when she found out that that's my favorite food in the world, I have a standing invite to her mom's house. Whenever I'm in LA, I will always go to Rohani Slipbox Mother's house to get the best homemade Sri Lankan food. So, yes, I go out of my way to get Sri Lankan food. And I'm very blessed to have someone in my life that cooks it for me out of their home. And it's the best.

**Matt Bowles:** That is absolutely amazing. And I was super privileged to be the beneficiary of your Sri Lankan food identification quest that you do in these cities. And so that was such a fun night. And we ended up walking all around the city after that. And I know that you have actually traveled around the world to a number of other countries with Gaz. And I want to start this off by asking you about one of your many adventures. I'm wondering if you can tell the story of when you and Gaz were in Cameroon and you decided that you wanted to go meet the crab whisperer. Can you explain how this came about, give folks some context and then describe what this journey was like and how it ended up.

**Phil Marcus:** Well, I enjoy wacky experiences, and this is one of those ones where you kind of had to go out of your way. And even once you're in Cameroon, most people don't get to Cameroon. But once you're in Cameroon, you have to drive seven hours on. When I say the worst road in the world, I mean it, because I've been on some of the worst roads in the world. And that instantly rose to the top of all the worst roads in the world, meaning it wasn't a road, it was a pile of rocks for seven hours. So, I didn't know how bad it was going to be, but I knew we were going to be going really out of our way to meet the crab whisperer. And I was cool with that because I was just interested in how this guy and his descendants for hundreds of years have told the fortunes of the villagers. You can ask him questions, and then he will ask the question of his trusty crab, who will therefore whisper into his ear the answer.

So, the crab is the actual whisperer. And the crab whisperer, as you say, is just the deliverer of the message. So yeah, you go into this village and first of all, I don't even know if I would have done it just for the crab whisperer. But the fact is, where the crab whisperer lives is one of the most unique landscapes on earth. So, to travel seven hours on the worst roads in the world, you have the cultural experience and then you have the landscapes. This place is called Rhumsiki and you get there and they have a barren rocky landscape with one giant thousand-meter rock coming out of the land where there's no other mountains or anything like that. So, it's just like this beacon in the middle of nowhere. And to see it at sunrise or sunset is amazing.

**Matt Bowles:** So, did you find the crab whisperer? And then what was the interaction like? What was the experience?

**Phil Marcus:** Okay, so we left the hotel, if you can even call it a hotel. It was very grimy, but we had a nice sleep, and we went on the back of motorbikes to the village, and we came across this guy who was very stoic, and he came up to us with his crabs. He had two of them, apparently. One was a crab in training, and the other one was the crab that will actually give you the answers. But they were both there in front of us, so we asked many questions. But the most important question that I had, I think Ric kind of egged me on because I've been traveling solo for a long time, and it's quite difficult to find love on the road. And when you're home in San Francisco for only three or four months at a time, and. And then you always know that you're going to be leaving again. It is hard to find a partner.

So, the question I had about the crab was, will I ever get married? So the crab whisperer basically picks up the crab and says that in his local language to the crab, shakes the crab a bit in the water, and then picks the crab up, puts the crab to his ear, and then puts the crab down, and then puts the crab up to his ear again, just in case the crab has something more to say, puts the crab down, waits a couple seconds for me to just take it all in, and then says, the crab thinks that you have right now more important things on your mind than getting married. Not that you cannot get married or you will not get married, but right now, you have something else on your mind. And I said, you're right. I'm trying to go to every country in the world, and it's very difficult when you're traveling six to nine months out of the year to find love. So, I was not expecting a real answer but long live the crab.

**Matt Bowles:** That's amazing. Well, I want to talk a little bit about this journey to going to all 193 countries, but I feel like we need to start all the way back and give folks a little bit more context on you and your journey and how you arrived at the decision to pursue this quest. Can you take us all the way back and just share a little bit about where you grew up? And as a kid coming up, how did your initial interest in world travel start to develop?

**Phil Marcus:** I grew up in Miami, and my dad was an attorney, and his client was the cruise Director for Norwegian Caribbean Lines for a cruise line. And so, every year, we got a free cruise to the Caribbean. So that was really my first and only introduction to international travel. We went to the Bahamas. We went to Cayman Islands; we went to Jamaica. And even though those places aren't crazy different from Miami, which is a tropical place, I really took to them in the sense that I just really love the differences in the accents, the differences in the way people live their lives. So, I lived for that stuff. I didn't say back then, oh, I definitely want to go travel all around the world. But it was ingrained in my being at the time. I really loved it.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, after college, I want to ask you about your European backpacking trip. Can you share a little bit about the decision to do that? What inspired it and then what was that trip like? What were some of the highlights at that age? What impact did that trip have on you?

**Phil Marcus:** Well, there you go. Because that was the first time I actually went overseas, I knew that I wanted to do that. If you're fortunate enough to do it, it's a rite of passage. A lot of people in other countries do it for a year. We did it for six weeks, which I'm supremely grateful for. I did it with five of my friends, and we went to about seven or eight countries in Europe. And what I really took from that was how small of a world it was. I mean, back then, we didn't have the Internet. But if you go to Europe, you realize how small the world is in terms of all the different countries are so close to each other. So, in one day, you can be in three different countries easily, and they're speaking different languages, and they have different cultures, but they're so close to each other.

It also informed me how easy it is to get between places and how cheaply you can actually do it. After college, you're at a hostel. It's a couple of dollars a day. And I really feel like, though I don't do it that way now, that was an easy way to get me inclined to travel even more. And in terms of the experiences, I mean, running with the bulls in Pamplona, you know, staying up all night drinking in Pamplona, and then going to Oktoberfest and going to The Pink Palace in Corfu, Greece. I mean, it was all great. Completely different from the way I travel now. But I think every traveler has. If you're fortunate enough to do it, over many years, you morph into a different way of doing it. And I'm very grateful for those years. I slept in a giant tent; I think it was in Munich. It was actually called the Tent. It was a hostel, which was a tent for 100 people. So, you basically got a sleeping bag, and you were next to 100 people under a canopy. It was awesome.

**Matt Bowles:** So, let's talk about the traditional professional career trajectory that you then began to pursue. Becoming a CPA, becoming a lawyer. And then how did you eventually go in the entrepreneurial direction?

**Phil Marcus:** So I always wanted to be an entrepreneur, and I went to law school, not because I wanted to be a lawyer, but because my father, who was a lawyer, said that if you want to be an entrepreneur, you can go to law school, and that will help you, but it'll also give you the option of being a lawyer as well. So, I took that path to be a lawyer and tried to get into business. And I was on that path when I started my own business at the beginning of the Internet, back in 1994, I had a very difficult time finding an apartment in San Francisco. It's always difficult here. And I had a friend who was working at IBM at the time, and he told me about this Internet thing, and I kind of looked at it as a way to be able to get information. I mean, this all sounds so obvious now, but back then, it wasn't. When it first came out, it was a light bulb moment. Can you get information about apartments from another city, from around the world, before you get there? So that was my idea. And so, I dropped out of my third year of law school because I had started the business and it hadn't completely taken off, but I felt very strongly about it. It was one of those things that you didn't want to miss.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I want to ask about your entrepreneurial journey. You obviously built a very successful company and were able to exit out of that. So, I want to share a little bit about that. But then another transition about going into music and music production and maybe give us a little bit of background as well as the role that music has played in your life and how you transitioned back into that.

**Phil Marcus:** So, when I was in college, I kind of had a dual path. I always was a musician, I played piano, and in a perfect world, I wanted to be a film scorer. I always loved the juxtaposition of music with video. And even when I was a kid, there were certain movies that were not the best movies, but I liked them because of the music, because of the way it made me feel. So, I never was a singer, but I always had a good feeling for Melody. It was my passion to try at least. I really wanted to get into film scoring while I was in college. I was writing some jingles for radio broadcasts. I actually wrote the score to the ACC college football game of the week that was broadcast on 180 stations nationwide while I was in college. So, I was on my way. It was very exciting. But I also knew that I didn't want to put my destiny in other people's hands. And I think that my dad was very instrumental in that. Have the music as a hobby, but try to make your way and make your money in a way that you can control.

So, I went to law school, but I always kept music as a passion. But I always knew that it would be something that hopefully I could revisit in the future. Fast forward a couple years. During law school, I started a business on the Internet. I kind of got sidetracked for seven years. We started it out of my law school dorm and ended up with 300 employees. It was a very, very wild ride. And I didn't sleep for about seven years. Worked about 100 hours a week. But I was in my 20s and I had all the energy in the world, and it was awesome. But once I sold the company, I decided, you know what, I'm going to start doing music again. If I fail, it's okay because I've already been successful. And so, I tried it, and I worked actually for six years, played in front of three, 400 people, original songs, produced some musicians in LA. It was really rewarding to be able to do that and not rely on that for my livelihood. Most people don't have that opportunity. So, I'm really grateful about that.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I want to ask about the major decision that you made in 2011 to take at the time a six-month trip through Asia. Can you talk about where you were in your life there? You were doing your music, you had sold your company, had all your business success and everything else. What then brought you

back around to make a decision that you wanted to do this type of travel again? And what was the initial plan when you embarked?

**Phil Marcus:** I sold my company in 2001, and for 10 years I had been writing and producing music. And I had another failed startup that I put two years of my life into. And during those 10 years, I had traveled to probably about 20 or 30 countries, but more the way that most people do. You go and you travel to the country for seven to 10 days; you see a couple of the cities and then you go home. And I really enjoyed that. But I wanted something more. I wanted to be gone for a while and backpack around and not have a plan. You have an outline, but not a plan. And so, after my last business wrapped up, I decided that I was going to rent my condo in San Francisco and travel for six months, and I was going to start in Southeast Asia. Even though I had been to Bangkok and I had been to Vietnam, and I'd been to Cambodia before. When I had been to those places, it was three days in Bangkok, it was three days in Ho Chi Minh City, and it was three days in Siem Reap. So, I didn't really feel like I had actually experienced the country. So, I wanted to go and spend a month in the country. I wanted to go around and spend two months if I felt like it. So, I rented my place in San Francisco and took off for six months.

**Matt Bowles:** Did you have a plan, or was it just, I'm going to land there and then spontaneously see where I go?

**Phil Marcus:** The plan was to fly into Beijing and then to stay there for a couple days to go to Tibet and then go to India. So, the first I'd say two weeks were planned, and then after that, it was all spur of the moment. I had a festival in India that I really wanted to go to. So that was actually planned. It was the Pushkar Camel Festival, a gathering of 75 to 80,000 camels from all around India, everyone camping out in the fields. And that was the plan. And then after that, I could spend two weeks in India, I could spend two months in India. It was all up to my whim.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, before we dive into some of the experiences on that Asia trip, I want to ask you about a travel decision you made before you left that has stuck with you this entire time and become an integral part of your content and your brand, which was the decision to bring a stuffed animal doll of Beaker from the Muppets with you on this trip. Now, I am a huge fan of the Muppets, and I'm a huge fan of Beaker in particular. So, for me, this has just been an absolute delight to watch Beaker appearing in all of your content. But to start off with, for maybe some people in our international audience that may not be familiar with the Muppets or with Beaker, can you share a little bit about Beaker, who he is, and then your affinity with him and how you began traveling with Beaker?

**Phil Marcus:** Beaker is a very misunderstood character. He has a very funny face. He works in a lab, and he carries out the tests on the wacky inventions from Dr. Bunsen Honeydew, his boss. So, he's the guy who has to get blown up or electrocuted or frozen whenever the inventions go awry, which is every time. So, I would say he's an underdog. I would say he's a fighter. He always comes back. He's very persistent and he's beloved for that. Why do I have him? He's my favorite character. And my little sister gave him to me as a gift 25 years ago. And he remained in my home for that time, and I never considered bringing him. I had a friend who had just returned from backpacking in Southeast Asia, and he had seen other people taking photos of inanimate objects. And he said, you know what? I really want to follow your journey, but I think it'd be really cool if you took this stuffed owl along with you. It was his stuffed owl. It was a paper mache owl with real feathers. Completely fragile. It was not going to make it six months, let alone 13 years. But I agreed to take his stuffed owl with me. And up until about five minutes before I left, it was going to be the stuffed owl that came with me.

When I rented my place, I put all my belongings in storage. As I was closing the storage door five minutes before leaving for the airport, Beaker's in the storage room. We locked our eyes. I saw Beaker. I shit you not. It was a split-second decision to take Beaker instead of the stuffed owl. The reason being is because he has a very interesting face. He has orange hair. And as a photographer, I realized that Beaker with orange hair would look better in photos than a stuffed owl with white feathers. But I had no idea at the time what a phenomenon it would become. I had envisioned taking pictures of him in front of the Taj Mahal, in front of the Great Wall of China. Just kind of like documenting places instead of taking selfies, taking pictures of Beaker. But what it turned out to be was way more than that. It was people coming up to me because I was taking pictures of this uniquely orange haired Muppet and wanting pictures with him.

Instead of asking people for photos, people asked me for photos. And what that turned into were more candid shots, more real reactions. And it's not just about the photos. It's about the feeling that I got when meeting these people. And Beaker opened doors to all sorts of different places around the world. It sounds strange that a stuffed animal would have that type of impact, but I will tell you that by traveling to 190 countries in the world, this Muppet has enriched my travels by threefold. And you can see it if you watch my videos. You can see the real reactions of people.

**Matt Bowles:** It is amazing to watch your videos and to see the power and the impact of Beaker in creating these cross cultural connections, oftentimes with people that, that don't speak the same language at all and yet you're able to make them laugh and you're able to build a warmth and comfort and connection and bring out joy and happiness from people. So, it is really incredible. And I have marveled at watching the way that that has worked in a lot of your videos and how you have featured that. I'm wondering if you can just start off by giving some examples. You take Beaker, you land in China, you're in Beijing, you go to the Great Wall. What is the first experience? How did you realize the power of what this could be?

**Phil Marcus:** My first experience was landing in Beijing. I had been up all night. I don't really sleep on planes, so I had been up all night, and it was 7pm I was trying to stay up as long as I could. I walked down to Tiananmen Square, and I took Beaker out. It's my first picture of Beaker. I'm holding him in my left hand. I've got my camera in my right hand and before I can even snap a photo, I'm being tapped on the shoulder and it's a policeman. And I'm thinking, oh man, I don't want to be disrespectful. I hope I'm not disrespecting the culture. What is about to happen?

And I turn to him, and he speaks in kind of broken English. Do you need some help with that meaning? Can I hold Beaker for you? So, you can get a perfect photo of Beaker in front of Tiananmen Square. And at that point I realized this is going to be good. And that happened for 14 months straight in Asia and for the last 12 or 13 years. People come up to me. Like I said, I don't ask for pictures with Beaker. A lot of the time people come up to me and they want fixtures with him and it's just pretty awesome. Most of the locals in the countries that I go to don't even know who Beaker is. They just see his face and he's non-threatening and he's funny looking and he's weird and people kind of gravitate to that. And I get people to speak to him. They come up to him and they don't know who he is. So, they don't know that. All he says is, me, me, me, me, me, me, me. He doesn't speak English. He just says, me, me, me, me, me, me, me. And so, I get people to actually say that on camera, and they. They love it. It's fun.

**Matt Bowles:** That's amazing. All right, Phil, I have to ask you to tell the story of why there is now a photo of Beaker hanging in the security room at the Taj Mahal.

**Phil Marcus:** When I go to travel to important places like the Taj Mahal, I try to give myself at least two visits, one at sunset and one at sunrise, if I can. So, I arrived at sunset at the Taj Mahal with Beaker, and he was not allowed inside. The security guards said, you are not allowed to take this Muppet inside. I was pretty sad because, as I said, I was very excited about taking pictures of Beaker at the Taj Mahal, at the Great Wall of China. That was the reason of bringing Beaker to take pictures of him in front of these iconic places. But the next day, for sunrise, I got there. I was the first person in line. It was 5:45am I went to a different entrance to the Taj Mahal just to stay away from those security guards who wouldn't let him in. And my bags were not checked.

Beaker was allowed in, no problem. So now I'm in there, and it's a glorious morning. The sun is rising over the Taj Mahal. I take Beaker out. This is victory, right? I'm taking a picture of him. And as I'm taking a picture of him, I hear a bunch of cameras clicking behind me. There's a crowd of 20 or 30 people taking a picture of Beaker at the same time that I'm taking a picture of Beaker. I had no idea the pull of this Muppet. Anyway, next thing I know, the security guards are around me. Not the same security guards, just different ones saying that I'm creating a scene because everyone's crowding around me taking pictures of my Muppet. So, they bring me to the security room, and they say, we will hold him for you, but first, can we take a picture of him?

So, I'm underground in the security room of the Taj Mahal. They tell me that I cannot take pictures of Beaker with the public, but they want a picture with my Muppet. So of course they can have a picture with my Muppet. They hold him. I spend two or three hours wandering around taking photos of the Taj Mahal, and then I return to the security room to pick up my Muppet and When I do, they've already developed the photo, and they want me to sign to. I don't remember the name of the guy from Beaker, and so I signed it for him. And I don't know for sure, but I imagine with that type of impact, maybe there's a picture of Beaker in the security room of the Taj Mahal.

**Matt Bowles:** That is amazing. Well, one of the other things that I have watched in your videos as you travel around the world with Beaker, is you outfitting Beaker in customized local garb. Of the places where you are traveling, can you share a little bit about that and the deeper level of connection that you're making with Beaker and these places?

**Phil Marcus:** Well, like I said, most of the people don't know who he is. He's got an interesting face. But to make him more accessible to people, I get him a custom-made outfit from the region. It may not be from that specific country, but from the region that makes him look more like them. And it's always a fun time when I go into the souk, say, in Morocco, and I take my Muppet out and I say, hey, can you make him an outfit? Because they don't think I'm serious. And once I tell them that, I'll pay them for it. And by the way, the cost for a Muppet outfit, \$5. If you have a Muppet, do not pay any more than \$5 worldwide. That's the price. Okay. I've made 15 outfits for him and one person wanted to charge me \$40, and I had already made around 10 outfits, and they were always \$5. So, when he said, \$40, I said, you're crazy. And then he said, how about your watch? And I said, oh, well, I bought this watch in Taiwan two years ago for \$10. Yeah, you can have the watch, no problem. So, it's always fun to bargain.

But also, the other thing that I've always found is that whenever they see that I'm saying, serious about making an outfit for this Muppet, they call all their friends over and it turns into 15, 20 people just laughing and being silly. And these are the people that aren't normally silly. That's one of the greatest things about it. You get even the toughest salespeople; they turn into little kids and it's just a lot of fun. So, yeah, I love making outfits for the photos and for interacting with people, but I especially love the hour or two that I

spend with the tailor that's making the outfit, because that's always a blast. And I have some of those videos on my channel and some of these.

**Matt Bowles:** Connections that you've made have really opened doors for you. Can you share a little bit about some of the experiences, some of the invitations that you might not have gotten had it not been for Beaker and the connection that he created?

**Phil Marcus:** One time in Kyoto, I was photographing Beaker, and an Australian guy came up to me, and he actually knew who Beaker was, and he wanted some photos. And then we struck up a conversation. He said, oh, I'm staying with my friends. They're local people from Kyoto. They invited me to dinner tonight. Would you like to come? So, of course. Of course I did. And it was awesome because I would never have had that opportunity before to have that type of local experience. Another time, I met someone scuba diving in Indonesia, a Korean guy, and he said, whenever you come to Seoul, hit me up and I'll show you around. So, of course I did. I've done that many times with different people that I've met. But his brother was getting married, and he invited me to the ceremony.

But a Korean wedding has two parts. There's the close family part, which is done in traditional dress, and that's only limited to about 10 or 15 people. The closest of relatives, and then they go crazy with 3, 4, 500 people in a giant ballroom. I was invited to the close family party, which was awesome. And I arrived there without Beaker because I wanted to be respectful. And I got read the riot act by my friend. Why didn't you bring Beaker? I'm here with your brother. It's not your wedding. It's your brother's wedding, who I've never met. There's only 20 people here. Why would I bring my Muppet to take photos there? He was so upset. So crazy stuff like that. I've been invited to funerals. It's all about making that initial connection, making it easier for someone who doesn't know you to talk to you.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, it is amazing how you have captured a lot of those moments of connection in your videos with Beaker. And so, anybody that starts to watch through your content will see exactly what you're talking about. So, Phil, you start this Travel experience in 2011, and then year after year, you're traveling for the majority of the year. Take us to the 100th country.

**Phil Marcus:** The hundredth country was a big deal I sought out on Facebook. I said, how should I travel into my hundredth country? And nobody had a really, really unique way of doing it. I wanted to do something special because I didn't think I was going to go to every country in the world. 100th country, that's a major, major thing. And when I realized that I was going to be doing it by land, which is a very cool experience, just crossing into a country by land is a totally different and awesome experience than it is by flying. Since I was doing it by land, I decided that I was going to literally roll into the country over the border on the ground, rolling into it.

**Matt Bowles:** And what country was this for context, Phil?

**Phil Marcus:** I went from Malawi into Zambia. Okay. I have a video of it. And the best part about it, this kind of segues back into the Beaker thing. Beaker had a local outfit on. And I gave Beaker to the machine gun wearing security guard at the Zambian border. So, I have a video of a very large man holding a very small Muppet with a machine gun as I literally rolled into the country. And he and his friends are laughing their ass off.

**Matt Bowles:** I have seen this video. I can verify that this exists. So, you roll into Zambia as your 100th country. You've now done that. How from there did you decide that you wanted to make it a priority to go to all 193 countries?

**Phil Marcus:** It was kind of a gradual thing, but somewhere around 2017 or 2018, I got connected into this Facebook group called *Every Passport Stamp*. And then I learned that there are people that are doing this and it's possible that you can go to these countries that most people around the world are scared to go to, and you can have a really impactful experience without really endangering your life. I think there's probably 10 to 20 countries that most people would never even consider going to. And when I hit my hundredth country, I was one of those people. But then I started looking into these groups of people that have done it, and only three or four hundred people in the history of the world have ever done it. So that actually excited me too. So, I started researching it, I started talking to people. And that's when I met your and my friend [Ric Gazarian](#). And if your listeners know, he has a podcast that interviews people who have gone to every country in the world. It's called *Counting Countries*. And so, as I started listening to other people's stories, it started to humanize these other countries. And it started to make me feel like, okay, if they can do it, I can do it. It's always been a curiosity of mine to see new places. It may not have been a I have to visit every country in the world, but as you start to go to more and more places, you want to see more.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah. Shout out to Gaz and shout out to the *Counting Countries* podcast. I want to also, Phil, talk to you about your YouTube channel, Phil's Guide to the World. Can you give us a little bit about the background and the evolution of the channel and. And then what the mission and purpose of the channel is today and what people can expect?

**Phil Marcus:** I've been making videos my entire life. I've always liked making videos, even back to high school and college. If you've ever traveled with me, I will always make a video of it within a couple weeks. That's something I've always done. I never considered that strangers would want to watch my travels. It wasn't something that I jumped on with YouTube. I wish I would have done it back in 2011. It would have been great. But it was something that I started during the pandemic. At that point, I had decided I wanted to go to every country in the world. I was on my way. I was at about 165 countries. I had traveled with Ric to several African countries, including the Cameroon trip that we referred to earlier. And then I had some more time on my hands, and I started making videos from the travels that I had done with Ric, the Crab Whisper and other things, and it started to gain some traction.

And so, as I went along, starting in 2021 through today, I've been going to the, "more difficult", "more unsafe" countries that most people leave until the end of their journey to 193 countries, they're more difficult because they require visas. You have to send your passport in. Sometimes you have to get them in another country. For example, Afghanistan doesn't have a consulate in the U.S. So, I had to get it in Dubai. These types of countries that, because they're more difficult to get into, most people leave until the end. These were the countries that I was spending my time actually making videos from, as opposed to making videos from Paris or from Rome or whatever. And it turns out these are the most interesting ones for me. I find that they're the places that are most misunderstood. And I had super impactful experiences in these places because the people there are not expecting tourists in a lot of these places. So, they're more apt to engage with you whether or not you have a camera. They're just more inviting. They're more hospitable.

And so, I went to Iraq. That was the first country I went to in this realm. I went to Iraq with Ric, and we went around, and the people were just so awesome, and they really wanted to show that their country was not what you saw on the news. And it was an eye-opening experience. So, I didn't go into this thinking about

anything. I just went into it thinking I was going to immerse myself and talk to people. And it turned out they set me on my course, really, because they were telling me in not so many words that you shouldn't just believe what the media says. The media narrative about places is completely different from what you see on the ground. And I noticed that, and I experienced that and I experienced that firsthand for the first time in Iraq in 2021.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I know that after you started getting traction on your channel for the way that you shared your Iraq experience, the next major increase in traction that you got on your channel is when you went to Iran. You published a video that I have seen, and it now has over 2 million views on this documentary. And I want to ask if you can talk about that Iran experience. You have the long form documentary and then you have different short form videos as well. One of the videos is called [How Iran changed me forever](#). And I'm wondering if you can share a little bit about your experience in Iran and how it changed you forever.

**Phil Marcus:** I feel like Iraq was the start of it. But when I got to Iran and I had a lot of people saying, you really shouldn't go there, they hate Americans, obviously, they have nuclear weapons. And even my sister-in-law, she's half Persian and I had just gone to my brother's wedding, and I had met her whole family, they live in LA and they were saying, do you really want to go to Iran? Because they were afraid to go back. I understand why. It's a very touchy thing. When you arrive in Iran and you drive away from the airport and you're entering Tehran, there's a sign that says down with America. It's very old and it's very faded. It's from the late 70s, but that's what most people think. They think that an American will go there and get held hostage or get killed or whatever. But when you enter Iran and you talk to the people, you realize that the majority of the people love America, and you wouldn't know that unless you were there. That changed me forever in the sense that I don't believe everything the media says.

The media is there to scare you and to sell advertisements. So, when I made my video from Iran, after being around to 15 different cities and seeing the desert and seeing the culture and living in a cave hotel and having the incredible food. I made my video and titled it [Fuck the Media I went to Iran](#) and that's when my channel started to really pick up steam because it resonated with people. The media's there to sell advertisements. They're not going to show you the good parts of countries. And at that point, it became my mission to really dispel those media stereotypes and to go around and talk to people, not in a political way. I never talk to people and say, what do you think about the government? It's really just having normal conversations with people that many people in the U.S. and other places think are out to kill you or whatever. It's just not the case. People around the world, for the most part, are good. It's just governments sometimes that have different agendas.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I think your content is so consistently amazing at showcasing the humanity and bringing out the joy in people in all of these places and capturing that. And sometimes it's with Beaker and making people laugh, and other times it's in all these different, various settings where you're able to connect with people and you're able to smile and you're able to laugh and you're able to really showcase the humanity and the joy of all of these different places around the world. So that is one of the my very favorite things about watching your channel. And I think it's something that's incredibly consistent throughout all of your videos and rooted obviously in the mission of your channel to do that. Can you share a little bit for folks that have never been to Iran? And I am one of those people and it is so high on my list. But you traveled quite extensively. Can you talk a little bit about sleeping in the Cave Hotel and just describe the architecture of this place? I was watching this video, and I was just blown away by the

aesthetics and the landscape and what you were doing there. And then share any of the other highlights of Iran and why people should definitely go to this country.

**Phil Marcus:** Iran is a huge country and its super diverse in terms of landscapes. I think that most people picture Iran as a complete desert. And they do have one of the most brilliant deserts in the world. It's called the Lut Desert. And I spent a couple nights down there. But to experience Iran over three to four weeks was a pleasure because I had the time to go south, to go north. And in the north, the country lies on the Caspian Sea. And it's very green, surprisingly green. And this is a part of Iran that even the people that go to Iran, they don't go to. Meaning the Western tourists, Iranian tourists. It's a big part of their vacation. From Tehran, they'll go to the Caspian Sea coast for a weekend or for a week. It's quite a popular spot for them. But most people, when they go to Iran, and most people don't go to Iran, but when they do, they spend seven to ten days going south of Tehran, checking out Shiraz, which is spectacular, checking out Isfahan. These are the most beautiful architecture and culturally rich places in the country. But in the north, you have awesome hiking, awesome villages, green landscapes, and you have Kandovan, which is an ancient city that's carved out of the stone, very similar to Cappadocia in Turkey. Are you familiar with Cappadocia?

**Matt Bowles:** Yep.

**Phil Marcus:** So, if people haven't heard of Cappadocia, it's a large village that was cut out of stone where they had cave houses. And the same thing happens in Iran, except you can go there and be the only tourist, as opposed to being in Cappadocia, where it's kind of an Instagrammed out at this point, not saying, don't go to Cappadocia, it's amazing. But when you go to places like Iran, you can have that same sort of experience without any other tourists. And you're not really looked at as a walking wallet. You can walk around and talk to people, and they're actually interested in why you were there, as opposed to interested in what they can sell you.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, another video documentary that you did that now has well over a million views is the one on Afghanistan. And I'm wondering if you can take us a little bit on that journey and what you experienced when you were in Afghanistan along those same lines.

**Phil Marcus:** When you go to Afghanistan, this is a place that's kind of a time warp. People say when you go to Cuba, it's like being in a time warp, which is true. But in Afghanistan, they have preserved their culture. Even in the capital city of Kabul, you will walk around, and I'd say at least 75% of the people are walking around in traditional clothing. So, you feel like it's so well preserved that you want to get your own dress. And that's what I did. I mean, you want to fit in, let alone beaker. I got my own Afghan wardrobe because I stood out as it was. But you want to show respect because that's the way people live. And when you do that, people are very interested in talking to you. And I never felt unsafe. I had a lot of people coming up to me and asking me why I was there. And then when you get out of the city, I along the lines of Iran, the mountains are absolutely spectacular. The red rocks, the snowcapped mountains, the greenery. It's really, really wild. They have this place called Band-e-Amir National Park, which is the bluest lake that I've ever seen. It is really, really to be seen, to believe because when I'd seen photos of it, I thought they were all completely photoshopped because it was so blue. But then when I got there I couldn't believe that it was actually that clear and deep blue. Really amazing place.

**Matt Bowles:** One of the things that I have noticed just thematically in watching a lot of your videos across a lot of these different countries is the extent to which you find yourself consistently showered with

kindness and generosity, often in unexpected ways from strangers in all of these different countries. And you document that in some really beautiful and heartwarming ways, which is one of the things that I appreciate so much about your videos. And I want to ask if you can just share a couple of these experiences, starting perhaps with your road trip in Saudi Arabia. Can you talk about that experience and just start with the context where you were going and what you were looking for?

**Phil Marcus:** Ric and I were driving around Saudi Arabia, super, super safe. Everyone was very helpful. But there was one place that we went to called Wadi Lajab that was on our radar. But when we arrived at the scene, maybe it's changed now, but there weren't really any signs. We were using Google Maps, and we arrived at kind of this parking lot, if you will. It was just rocks, it was just this open area, and this is where Google spit us out. And there was no one around, there were no signs. But we knew we were close, but we didn't know what to do. And so, we just walked for a couple minutes and the next thing we knew, a pickup truck of guys arrived on the scene. They said, are you lost? What are you doing? And we said we wanted to go to this. A wadi is like a canyon. And we were trying to find this canyon and they said, get in the back of the pickup truck, you cannot go down there without a four-wheel drive.

So, we were thinking, what should we do? Should we just join these complete strangers? Get in the back of the pickup truck, what do they want? But for the most part in all my travels, I've actually never had an experience where I felt completely in danger. So, I think the rule of thumb is to say yes. And so, we said yes and we got in the back of the pickup truck and they brought us along. It was about, I don't know, about 15 minutes into the canyon. And the next thing we knew, they offered us a free guided tour of the canyon. So, they walked with us for two hours. Locals dressed in full gear and everything gave us tea, walked us there, and then we thought we were done. I mean, it was a beautiful experience. The wadi was super nice. There were monkeys and there were clear springs. Have you ever had a fish massage?

**Matt Bowles:** I have not.

**Phil Marcus:** Do you know what a fish massage is?

**Matt Bowles:** I do not.

**Phil Marcus:** Okay, so in Thailand, they have tanks with little small fish.

**Matt Bowles:** Oh, yes. On your feet.

**Phil Marcus:** Yes.

**Matt Bowles:** Yes. You put your foot into the fish tank and the fish eat all of the, like, dead skin off your toes and stuff. I have actually had that experience. Yeah.

**Phil Marcus:** Yes. Okay. So, on this trek through the wadi, we had a natural fish massage because there was a point in this area where they all congregated. And so, the guides brought us there and they said, take off your socks and get the fish massage. So that was cool. And then we thought we were done. Of course, there are many photos with Beaker, and that's on the YouTube channel. But at the end, they said, hey, do you have some time? We'd like to show you our coffee plantation high up in the mountains. So, they drove us up there and they showed us their coffee plantation. One thing leads to another. We're there for four hours having tea and coffee and dinner with them. And we asked them; how much should we pay you? And they said, no, we will not accept your money. And they drove us back to our car. It was a whole day of just

going with the flow and seeing where it led us. And it was a really beautiful experience. And I think that really impacted me in saying yes to more things later on.

**Matt Bowles:** All right, we're going to pause here and call it the end of part one. For direct links to everything we have discussed in this episode, including all the ways to find, follow, and connect with Phil on social media and how to watch his video documentaries and check out his [YouTube channel](#). All of that is going to be linked up in one place. Just go to [themaverickshow.com](http://themaverickshow.com) go to the show notes for this episode, and remember to tune in to the next episode to hear the conclusion of my interview with Phil Marcus. Good night, everybody.