

Matt Bowles: My guest today is Vanessa Fonder. She is a fierce and adventurous Dominicana with a passion for travel who has been to all seven continents, born and raised in the Dominican Republic. She has been a New York City educator for over 15 years and is a soul-led entrepreneur. She is the founder of the [Global Community Latino World Travelers](#), with a mission to empower her Latin community to experience the world and diversify the face of travel. Her commitment to advocating for representation within the travel industry led her to also found the [Latino Travel Fest](#), an annual travel conference, where she amplifies the voices of the community and educates Latinos on how they can make travel part of their lives. Vanessa, welcome to the show.

Vanessa Fondeur: Thank you so much, Matt, for the invitation. I'm excited to be here to share my story and also have a beautiful conversation with you. We're about to have fun.

Matt Bowles: We are indeed. And we have agreed even though we are not in person, we are still going to make this a virtual wine night. So, let's start off by setting the scene and talking about where we are recording from today and what we are drinking.

I am actually in the Blue Ridge mountains of Asheville, North Carolina this evening, and I have just opened a bottle of Valpolicella Ripasso from Italy. So, I am going to be drinking through that this evening. But where are you, Vanessa? And what are you drinking?

Vanessa Fondeur: I live in Newark, New Jersey, and I am drinking white wine from the Renault winery, which is here in New Jersey. And by the way, they are one of the only producers that can say they produce champagne in the U.S. Normally, you cannot call any sparkling wine champagne unless it's produced in Champagne, France. But this winery can, so I hope you can come one day and visit. I'll take you.

Matt Bowles: They actually have a super interesting history. We will link up the Renault winery in the show notes so people can go and read a little bit about the history of that particular winery. It is actually a really fascinating story. I was just going through it myself. So very cool and cheers to you. So, I feel like a good place to start would be talking about how we met in person because we have hung out in person at the Nomadness Fest, which was last year.

It happened to be in Louisville, Kentucky last year. Can you share a little bit about, for people that have never heard of Nomadness, a little bit about what it is and your special connection with that community?

Vanessa Fondeur: I joined that community of about 12 years ago, the inception of that community, because I was craving to find a community where there were people of color that also love to travel and they're wearing any really back then I'm talking about 2012.

So 11, 12 years ago, I found this group and it was a blessing for me because it was people from all over the world who love to travel. And I was, Like, oh, I found my place. Most of my friendships are from there, by the way. Like currently the one of my brides' men is from there. I mean, I have so many friends from there.

Matt Bowles: Well, I feel like we need to tell at least one story from the Nomadness Fest last year. We linked up with an amazing group of people, including some of my podcast guests, by the way,

whom Maverick Show listeners know, like [Alex Jimenez](#) from *Travel Fashion Girl*, [Hannah Dixon](#), like a whole bunch of us just kind of wound up together one night.

And it was a pretty crazy and unexpected evening. I feel in terms of where it led us, because the vibe of Nomadness is typically like a very hip hop cultural vibe, Afro beat cultural vibe, this is the kind of music they're playing at the event. And this is kind of the cultural vibe that they're creating at the festival.

And somehow, our little handful group of people, one evening started kind of wandering around getting some food and we're in Louisville, Kentucky. And we end up at this cowboy bar with a mechanical bull and like a rodeo theme. And it was literally culturally the opposite of the places we had been to the whole evening.

And there we are. And when we walked in, do you want to tell the rest of the story, Vanessa?

Vanessa Fondeur: They wanted me to get on the bull, but I said, let's make a bet. If you find a hat for me to wear from anyone here, I will get on.

Matt Bowles: So, keep in mind, I would say a solid 50 percent ish of the people in this bar were wearing cowboy hats.

hats. And so, the deal was that if we could negotiate the cowboy hat for someone to lend it to you, you would then put the cowboy hat on and ride the mechanical bull, which was like the centerpiece of this bar. And so, it was [Hannah Dixon](#). Big shout out to Hannah Dixon who negotiated with one of the cowboys to lend you his cowboy hat.

And how was the ride?

Vanessa Fondeur: He was so quick. He was horrible. I am like, "Why did I agree to this?" And then I embarrassed myself because I felt right away in two seconds.

Matt Bowles: Yeah. I mean, this is like a rodeo bucking Bronco's simulation, which of course you had never done before. And so there you are with your cowboy hat on this bowl, mechanical ball. And it was just like two seconds, you were flying into the air and landing on the ground. But it was amazing. And I salute you for doing it.

Vanessa Fondeur: Yes. And by the way, know that the bet was in place to make it more difficult for them because I actually didn't want to go in the pool. And I'm like, okay, most people say no about giving you the hat. But then at one point, someone said yes.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, well, I think it's just the pure persuasion power of [Hannah Dixon](#), because I'll be honest, what happened was I went up to like three or four of them and I asked them, I said, "Hey, you know, she's willing to ride the mechanical bull, but she needs to borrow a cowboy hat". And people just said, "No". And I got turned down like four times. I was like, I don't think it's going to happen. And you were about to get out of having to ride the bull and then all of a sudden [Hannah Dixon](#) with her amazing powers of persuasion, you know, she's like, "oh, I think I can do this". And sure enough, she comes back in like 30 seconds. She's like, here you go. I found a cowboy and he's willing to lend you, his hat.

Vanessa Fondeur: He was hilarious.

Matt Bowles: It was amazing.

Vanessa Fondeur: And that was the best, too.

Matt Bowles: She is amazing. What an amazing group we had that night. Well, Vanessa, I want to go back all the way and talk a little bit about the beginning of your journey and just give folks a little bit of context on you. Can you share a little bit about where you grew up in the Dominican Republic and talk a little bit about what your upbringing was like there?

Vanessa Fondeur: I came at 17 years old here to the U.S. But while I was there, I lived with my mom. My mom is a single mom, and we have four kids. When I turned nine, she came to the U.S. to give us a better life, but we were left in the Dominican Republic with my grandmother and my uncle. So it was not only us four kids, but it was also three other cousins and one aunt and another uncle and there were about 10 to 12 people in the house plus people that come normally every day because we have, in Dominican Republic, we have an open door policy you can come in whenever unannounced. This family right so yes, I lived with my grandmother from 9 to 17 so the most important years, pivotal years, that affected me a lot because not only my father wasn't present, but my mother wasn't present either, but I know she was fighting to give us a better future.

So that part I understood, you know, then we came to the U.S. at 17. She worked really hard selling pastelitos. Do you know what pastelitos are? It's like empanadas. On the way with a supermarket cart going from a bodega to salon to all the little businesses selling those pastelitos so she can accumulate money and bring us here, which is incredible.

Matt Bowles: Can you talk about how that transition was for you at age 17 moving from the Dominican Republic into Settling in the U. S.

Vanessa Fondeur: When I came, you will think, "oh, it's going to be a culture shock". I actually came and it was a pretty easy transition. And I think it was more because I went to a school for immigrants.

So, the school that I went, it was only for kids who had just arrived in the country. So, there were kids from all over the world. There were no Americans whatsoever. So, because of my classes were in Spanish, that made me feel comfortable. The transition wasn't as harsh. Now, when I went to college, the transition was harsh.

Cause then everything was in English and then I didn't have any friends. I went to school away in upstate New York because when I arrived, I came to New York by the way.

Matt Bowles: So, you came to New York City and that was where you got your initial immersion. And what was it like? Interacting with, even though other folks spoke Spanish, they were immigrants from different countries.

Vanessa Fondeur: Everywhere.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, what was that like for you?

Vanessa Fondeur: It was beautiful. I had friends that were Polish, Russians, Haitians. I mean, cultures that I've never even interacted with ever. The cultural events at that school were amazing. I

learned so much about other cultures, diversity, things that I didn't experience in Dominican Republic at all.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, and then when you move upstate New York, it gets a whole lot different. I know that because I went to high school in Buffalo, New York. Both my parents went to college in Rochester. My mom's from Binghamton originally. So, we got all kinds of connections all around New York State. So, I got a sense of what that is like.

Vanessa Fondeur: Your mom is from Binghamton?

Matt Bowles: She's from Binghamton.

Vanessa Fondeur: That's where I went to school, SUNY Binghamton. I know you went to SUNY Binghamton.

Matt Bowles: I know, it's amazing.

Vanessa Fondeur: She's going to get a kick about this when she listens to the podcast.

Matt Bowles: I know, big shout out to my mother too, because I'm going to definitely tell her to listen to this episode.

So yeah, big shout-out to Binghamton. But I was there because that's where we used to go to visit my grandparents. My mom's parents lived there, and so we went to visit. So, I've spent a whole bunch of time in Binghamton, and I can tell you, it's amazing. It's very different from New York City. So, can you share a little bit about that transition from New York to some of these upstate areas where you spend time?

Vanessa Fondeur: Well, the good thing about me is that wherever I go, I always try to find community. So even when I first went to Del High, because I went to SUNY Del High first, I found the only 18 Dominicans that were in the entire school. And we form a little group. So, all the activities that we did were together. Then when I transferred to Beaconson, I joined a sorority and a Latino sorority. So, I was always like trying to find something that looked familiar to me. Even though I was in an unknown place that was very different than my normal.

Matt Bowles: When you think back through these different periods of your life and the different experiences and places where you lived, how did your interest in world travel develop? Like, how far back do you trace that? Where does that come from?

Vanessa Fondeur: Well, there was a little peek, the day I came to the U.S. Why? Because I met a guy from Norway at the airport. I just kept looking at him and I'm like, Oh my God. I've never seen someone like he was very tall, very white, blue eyes. And I was just staring at him at the airport.

I was 17 and I was like in the Dominican Republic coming to the U.S. He was coming to New York as well. And all of a sudden, we started talking. He spoke Spanish, by the way, too. And we exchange information, and we actually still are still friends. That's one of my longest friendships since then. And I'm like, oh, what does he mean?

He invited me to Norway one time. I couldn't make it. But I'm like, traveling is expensive. And I didn't know anything about traveling until he brought it up. to go to visit him and I knew that I couldn't

afford it. And I'm like, oh, traveling is for rich people. It's something that is not for me. I cannot really jump on a plane and go to Norway, you know?

And that's when I knew, oh, you need a visa to go there. I'm like, "What? You need a visa?" Because I had a Dominican passport, remember? Then when I went to college, I saw my sorority sisters and they were traveling to Senegal to study abroad. And I asked them questions and it piqued my curiosity even more.

I'm like, okay, what is this thing, study abroad? I didn't even know what that was. And once they explained it and they told me, look, there are scholarships that you can apply to that can help you. And I'm like, really? So, I mentioned it to a professor, and I did more research, went to financial aid and I figured it out.

And I was able my senior year to go to study abroad in Spain. And then I took two weekend trips to France and Portugal as well. I'm like, I'm going to graduate and I'm going to make it, you know, haha.

Matt Bowles: Talk a little bit about that experience. Where in Spain where you based and what were some of the highlights for you? What was that experience like at that age for you?

Vanessa Fondeur: I was in Madrid. And we were actually staying in a convent, which was very interesting. Of course, when I get there, the first thing I do, I find the Dominican neighborhood there, started meeting a whole bunch of people from there. And they were taking me out to different places.

Oh, see this place, this other place. And I had a blast. The best experience of my life up until then. And that's what sparked my interest. I started traveling since that moment. I have never stopped because I enjoyed it so much that I'm like, I need to do this.

Matt Bowles: So, what were your next moves when you came back from the study abroad experience? Can you talk a little bit then about the impact that it had and then how that shaped the trajectory and where you went next?

Vanessa Fondeur: So that was in 2006. And after that, I went to grad school. I had a friend from college. She's also a sorority sister and she was living in Miami. So, I started with, you know, when people are young, Miami is the spot.

So, it was great that she lived there because she was attending college there. So, I went often to Miami. And one day we decided, what if we go international? And we did. So, we went to Russia. Yeah. Egypt and the UAE. I'm like, how did you jump from traveling to Miami to jump into Russia?

Matt Bowles: What were those experiences like? Can you talk about those? And what was the UAE experience like for you?

Vanessa Fondeur: It was beautiful. It was in the middle of Ramadan and experiencing Ramadan while they were going to the dinners that they had. It was hot. Like as soon as you came out of the hotel, your glasses will fog and, and the food was delicious.

Abu Dhabi, Dubai, like incredible cities. I mean, now they have developed even more. But back then, it was so interesting to learn about how different they live. Like, I've never really interacted like that with people of that culture.

Matt Bowles: Well, the thing that I also find super interesting about Dubai, and I've been a couple of times, is how diverse it is among recent immigrants from countries all over the world. I mean, it is amazing. It's what I love, of course, about New York city, obviously, is it's the whole planet condensed into one city, which is amazing and magical and beautiful in every way. And Dubai is obviously a much newer city and the immigrants they've moved there much more recently than many of the people in New York, but it was unbelievable in terms of just the types of people you encounter, the conversations that you have.

And if you're a traveler, you have been to so many of the countries that these folks are from. And then you can just start talking to them about their home country, which they were in maybe just a few years ago, and now they're there. And I just found it to be like a super fascinating place with really interesting conversations.

Vanessa Fondeur: Yes. I met their, uh, guy from Lebanon and the stories he was telling tell me about Lebanon. I was like, I want to go there now.

Matt Bowles: I also want to hear about your experience in Egypt because I have spent a whole bunch of time in Egypt. I've been a few times. I lived there for almost a year consecutively in Cairo. Can you share a little bit about what the first trip to Egypt was like?

Vanessa Fondeur: So, we went first to Alexandria. And it was beautiful. The people were amazing. The beach, incredible. And then we had to take a train to go to Cairo. No one spoke English. And the language barrier was, I don't even know how we bought the ticket.

We just figured out at some point that, oh, tickets to Cairo, I guess. Even inside the train, talking to people inside who were also traveling, was very interesting. When we arrived there, we noticed how much security. It was like a lot of dogs checking the cars. You couldn't really drink. We had to do things hiding, in a way.

But other than that, I had a beautiful time in Egypt, and that's why I decided to go back. Because I'm like, I need to see this again. This is beautiful. And I took the opportunity when a friend of mine was teaching there to go for like about a month. And that was great because then I got to go to other cities more south of Egypt. So, and, and actually learn about the history and, and experience the Valley of Kings and things like that. Right?

Matt Bowles: Yeah, it's amazing. If you can spend a lot of time in Egypt, you really, first of all, I feel like it takes you a while to just sort of acclimate to Cairo because it can really be overwhelming if you've never been to a city like Cairo.

I mean, it can kind of be an overwhelming sensory experience in terms of like how intense and frenetic and seemingly chaotic everything is. And so, it takes you a little while, I think, to acclimate there, at least for me it did, you know, but once you live there and you're able to sort of immerse yourself in that and just be a part of that, and then you start to understand.

That it's not quite as, or maybe it is as chaotic as it seems, but it's, there's a level of organization to the chaos and things move in a particular way. And if you can just move with them, you start to understand how the city works and then you can just find amazing and magical things there. And then, as you said, to go to other parts of the country, right? And to go down to Luxor and to go down

to Aswan. And did you get all the way down to Aswan? Did you stay with the Nubians, and did you get down to that part of Southern Egypt?

Vanessa Fondeur: Yes. The good thing about traveling to these countries that you said could be chaotic is that it's the same as Dominican Republic, and I grew up in it.

So, when I go to it, it's like, "Oh, I'm coming home". It feels like that to me.

Matt Bowles: Exactly. And that's why I said if you haven't been to something like that before, because once you've spent extended time in a place like that, then when you go to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, or you go to Delhi in India, or you go to these other places, you know, you're like, okay, I have a reference point here. Like I understand what's happening here. Like this is, you know, I've seen this before, but when you go to your first place like that, I mean, I can remember, because I went to Phnom Penh, Cambodia with a bunch of people. I was on a Remote Year program, and I was traveling with these other remote professionals and some people had never been to a city like that before, right?

And it was just, it was very overwhelming. Cause it was, there were places in the city where like, you can't walk, the motorcycles are driving on the sidewalk. There's all, I mean, it just seems to be like, there's no traffic lights. You can't cross the street. It just appears to be very different from anything that you've seen before.

But I'm like, "Oh, this is just like Cairo:. Like I don't know how to do this. Like not a problem.

Vanessa Fondeur: Streetlights are just a suggestion.

Matt Bowles: Yeah. Streetlights are a suggestion. If that, they're more decorative than functional, but you know, hey, you know, if you walk across the street, the cars will, you know, probably stop for you.

So, you know, you just kind of do it. That is amazing. Well, the other thing that I definitely want to talk to you about, I know has been a huge part of your life is being an educator. Can you talk a little bit about, first of all, how that decision came about, how you decided to pursue that profession of teaching, and then the amazingness of how you integrated travel with your students into your teaching?

Vanessa Fondeur: Of course, I'm excited. So, teaching came about, I was an undergrad at Binghamton, and I saw my sorority sisters going to grad school, doing masters and PhDs. And I was like, I'm smart. I think I'm pretty smart. If they're doing it, I think I can do it too. So there comes the representation part. When you see yourself represented in other people doing things that you aspire to, you feel it is attainable.

That's why I fight so much for representation in travel, because if you can see yourself, then you feel you can do it too. So, seeing my sorority sisters gave me the idea that. I can do it too, you know, and I am applying to both SUNY Binghamton and SUNY Albany to do a master's in Latin American Literature. When I was in Spain, because it was the summer of graduation that I went to Spain for the study abroad, and both schools accepted me for their master's programs.

And I was like, “Oh, so what am I going to do? Stay in the school that I already know or go to the school that I don't know yet”. And I said, “I'm going to go to the school that I don't know yet. So, it could be a new adventure. A fresh start”. So, I went to SUNY Albany and the thing is they pay for my tuition if I taught a class.

And I said, okay, I can teach a class for the undergraduates. It was like a stipend kind of thing in exchange for me teaching because I had experience, because I was the assistant of a professor at Binghamton. So, I had a little bit of experience with teaching and assisting teachers and professors. So that's why they offer that at the university level for me.

So, I did it, loved it. And I said, when I graduated, I said, what am I going to do with this degree? What is there to really do? Latin American Literature degree. And the founder of my sorority said, well, you can teach Spanish. I'm going to recommend you for a maternity leave position at an independent school in New Jersey and tell me if you like it.

So, I did it for a year. I loved it. To tell you the answer, I became a teacher almost by accident. Because they gave me the position in SUNY Albany, and then I'm like, what am I going to do with this degree? And since I love the experience, I said, oh, since I'm going to become a teacher, I am going to get my license then.

So, I applied for the New York City Teaching Fellows Program. Which is a program that you go to schools to acquire your master's degree in education at the same time that you're teaching. So, it was great because I was earning a teacher's salary while attending school at the same time. And then from there I started teaching and I love, absolutely love my experience teaching.

I started teaching at Pace High School, which is in Chinatown in New York City. My students were incredible. I love them so much. I have so many relationships that I formed with them. When they graduated, like literally crushed my heart when they graduate, cause I'm like, they're not going to be here anymore.

After I traveled to Spain, I spent literally all of my money on travel, all of my money and including my teaching money, I worked extra hours on weekends in the summer, and every single break I had, I traveled and I will bring little candies or little toys to all 160 of my students and I will prepare a presentation for them of my experience and I will share it with them and I will tell them one day I'm going to take you with me.

And one day I asked my principal can I take them on a trip because there was another teacher who was hosting trips, but he didn't want to host it anymore and I said can I take over hosting the trips. And the principal said, go ahead, take it.

Matt Bowles: That is amazing. So where was the first trip that you organized to take your students? And what was it like?

Vanessa Fondeur: So, because I am a Spanish teacher, I say, I'm going to take you to Spain since it's the first country that captivated my heart. And we had an extension to go to Morocco as well. And it was so magical. I had about 20 students come on that trip. It was so magical because it was not only me experiencing the country all over again but sharing it with them and seeing them experience a new country completely.

Tasting like paella and people dancing and flamenco and it was just beautiful like the warmth of the people there. We went to so many different cities too. Each city was different. We did scavenger hunts. They learn about history. It was just beautiful. And many of them kept traveling the next years, too, because they loved it so much, they wanted to come back.

Matt Bowles: One of the things I love about what you did is instead of just taking students to the same place every single year, you diversified the places that you took students all over the world, which is entirely amazing. The next place I want to ask you about is a place I've never been, which is mainland China.

I know that you have been there a couple times, and it was one of the places that you ended up taking students. Can you talk about your first experience in mainland China, where you went and what it was like for you.

Vanessa Fondeur: So, the reason why I went to China is because in order for me to host the trip with the students, I needed to use a specific company, EF Tours. I'm not sure if you have heard of them, but they offer the teachers that host the trips training, and the training could be in different countries. And I said, "Oh, can I go to the training in China?" Because I've never been. And they said, "Of course, it's only four days". So, I flew all the way to China for four days to then come back.

And I say, I don't care. I'm going, I want to see this country and I want to see what it's like. And, who knows, maybe I can host a trip there in the future too. I went one of my favorite countries ever, it became. It's just such a different culture. The food is so good. Even though I work in Chinatown, it's still totally different.

And it made me feel so much gratitude when I went. It was the first country ever that made me cry. I was at the airport up on my return sobbing and I even recorded myself because I was like you're so stupid Vanessa look at you are crying right here in the middle of the airport. I was on the floor in the airport just crying because I was feeling wow look at you, Vanessa. Look at you, not only do you live in New York, this actually makes me choke, a little makes me tear, but now you're here in China. No one in my family ever have even dreamt about going to China, let alone be in China. And it was just that moment of, wow, look at where I am. Look what I have done. Look what I have accomplished in my wildest dreams, or even my mom's wildest dreams, because she came here, yes, to give us a better future, but she never thought that I was going to take it this far.

And then from there, I said, I need to come back because these four days was not enough. So, I'm like, okay, so I'm going to plan a trip for my students. And I planned a trip for my students, and I also brought my mom on that trip.

Matt Bowles: Wow, that's so amazing. Okay, so talk about that. Where in China did you go? What was the itinerary of the trip? And then what was it like to be there with your mom and with the students?

Vanessa Fondeur: So we went to Beijing, Xi'an, Shanghai, and then we went to Hong Kong as well. I mean, each city is completely different. The food is completely different as well. And it was just experiencing all of this, seeing my students open up their eyes to, wow, this is incredible.

They are allowed to go to lunch outside the school. Meanwhile, they never even taste any food in Chinatown, but here they are in China, loving the food. And when they returned, told me, look what we're buying now, because we taste it there. So, it's opening their horizons, showing them that they can try things. If they like it, they like it. If they don't, they don't, but at least try it. I always like to push them out of their comfort zone so they can grow as humans, grow as people.

Matt Bowles: You have taken your students to several countries. Now you've taken them to Greece and Ireland and Rome and Paris and London and all of these places.

Can you talk a little bit as you go on these trips with your students? And oftentimes I'm sure for many of them, it's their first time. Out of the United States and experiencing a really different culture. Can you talk about the impact that you've seen on your students? Cause I know you have kept in touch with a lot of your students as well over the years. What impact do you think those trips have had on them?

Vanessa Fondeur: It just makes them think bigger. It gives them the perspective of their place in the world and what they can do. It opens their mind to understanding that we are not the only ones and we're not the best ones or the worst ones, but we are part of the larger picture.

And that's, like, I think one of the most important things, I think, because sometimes we create a society that is very individualistic and we don't think about the other and going there and interacting with people, with locals, gives you that perspective of how other people live. And like, we are all the same in a way, even though we're different, we're still the same. We're human beings who are looking to just live life and be happy.

Matt Bowles: Well, I also want to ask you about your love story, Vanessa.

Vanessa Fondeur: Oh, we're switching to that now.

Matt Bowles: We are diving into it because it's an amazing story. I think it dovetails with a lot of different themes. We've been discussing everything from your involvement with the Nomadness travel tribe to your solo adventure travels and everything else. Can you talk about, I want to add to ask you about Australia. And then I thought, you know what, this will be also a good time to ask you about how you met your husband?

Vanessa Fondeur: So, in the group Nomadness, I posted, I want to travel somewhere, but I'm thinking Australia, is there anyone there? So, when I get there, we could meet up.

And two guys responded, "We're here. We're in Sydney. When you get here, let us know". And I'm like, "Okay, great". So, I make my first stop, which is in Auckland in New Zealand. Then I go to Cairns to dive, even though I don't know how to swim.

Matt Bowles: Yeah. Talk about that. Well, let's, let's tangent here for a moment. You wanted to go to the great barrier reef to experience it, but you don't swim. I have to hear this story. So before, let's, let's go there for a minute, what happened?

Vanessa Fondeur: So, I am a risk taker, as you can see, I was traveling solo again, and I went to the Berea Reef and they said, do you know how to swim? And I said, no, but I still want to do it. So, they tell me, well, as long as you pass the test.

So, the test is you have to take off your How do you call this thing that you put in your mouth when you go dive in?

Matt Bowles: Your regulator you put in your mouth that attaches to the oxygen tank of your scuba tank.

Vanessa Fondeur: Yes. You have to be able to submerge yourself in the water, take it out, and be able to put it back in without panicking or dying.

Because the goal is if you go down there, you need to be able to do that. I said, okay, I'm going to try it. The first time I freaked out. I was holding myself from the stairs that came down from the boat. I just came right back up. I'm like, oh my God, no, I don't know how I'm going to do this. The second time, again, I couldn't.

The pressure of the water. I just couldn't. It was too much for me. And I just went back up. The third time I'm like, Vanessa, the third time is the one. You have got to do this. So, I told the guy, model to me the pace in which I should be breathing after I put that piece that you mentioned, in my mouth. This way I'm not breathing crazily. I'm just like following your pattern and I can calm myself down and he was like, okay, so I went down. We are there, I said one two, three, take it off, put it back in, follow his face. I'm all good I'm like, "Yes, I did it". So, I held his arm in one arm the other one I had the GoPro because I'm like if I'm going to do this crazy thing and it proves and it was so beautiful.

I was able to touch the largest fish that is there. It's like a blue fish. And it was just magical to see. Wow, look at me doing things that I never even thought I would ever do. Sitting on the ocean floor touching different like animals that are down there, plants. And it was just like, wow, this is wild. This is crazy. I kept looking all around everywhere. I kept looking because it was so mesmerizing. And I just loved that experience. And after that, I went snorkeling because I'm like, Oh, we'd a life jacket though.

Matt Bowles: So, then You ended up connecting with your husband, how, what was the path-crossing dynamic that occurred?

Vanessa Fondeur: Are you ready? So, in Cairns, when I was on my way to go to Sydney, In the airport, they said, we cannot find your flight in the system, and I said, "what do you mean you cannot find it?". And they said, "Well, do you mind finding your confirmation number? Maybe we can figure it out this way". At the end, I had booked the wrong date.

I thought I was flying Thursday, 16th of February, and I was flying actually March 16 of February, so a total month difference because apparently when February has 28 days, it looks like the calendar exactly the same as March and I didn't catch that at all and they say well you bought it through a third party and that's the first and last time I ever bought a ticket through a third party because they say, "Oh we don't even have that class available you will have to call them and they will have to rebook you". And I didn't know about travel insurance back then either, so they said you can buy the brand-new flight but it's going to be 5.50. Mind you, Auckland-Cairns-Sydney was 3.25, the whole kind of round trip. And for that piece alone, they charged me 5.50. So I started crying. I was so upset with myself. I'm like, how did you make this mistake? And I'm like, well, I need to go because, at five o'clock, I have an appointment to climb Sydney Bridge.

I'm like, I see that bridge every year on New Year's Eve when they light the fireworks, and I need to be there at five today to climb that bridge. So I bought the flight, got to Sydney, met with the guys eventually, told them the story, and they said, "Well, what credit card did you buy it with? Maybe you can fight it". And I said, "Oh, I can". So, I had just gotten a Delta American Express card and I needed to spend 2,000 to get the miles and they were offering to get the signup bonus. So that's why I did the trip with that card. And they said, well, my homeboy just moved back to New York, and he works in American Express.

So, when I got back to New York City, I asked him, "Can you connect me with your friend? Maybe he can help me". And the rest is history.

Matt Bowles: The rest is history.

Vanessa Fondeur: So, my husband says, that's the best mistake I've ever made.

Matt Bowles: It's amazing. And you two are so cute together. You have written coauthored blog posts about the entire romantic trajectory from then on, which is amazing.

And I think it's really one of the most amazing ultimate travel stories too, because you had that path-crossing experience in Australia. You met in person in North America, you got engaged in Columbia, and then you got married in Thailand. So, four continents between meeting and getting married with all these significant events, which has been amazing.

Can you share a little bit about your wedding in Thailand, why you chose it, and what it was like there?

Vanessa Fondeur: I chose it, short answer, because it was in my vision board. Long answer, my husband wanted to get married in February because I normally have a break for teachers during February and I wanted a summer wedding.

So, we were looking for destinations that had summer weather, warm weather during February months and I looked at the board and I said, "Hmm. Let me check Thailand what's the weather there?". And is there a warm season? So, I said, Thailand it is. So, I picked a destination without even knowing the country, never been there. Nothing. I told everybody was going to be there. And then, when I finally went to visit to do the planning of the wedding, I was like, this might be too difficult, but people had already purchased flights. So, I'm like, I came back out now, and I did it. I hosted it there eight months later. So, it was fast. I planned the wedding really fast, and it was beautiful.

Thirty-five people came who had never even been to Asia at all. So that was also an experience for our entire families. They loved it. And it was a beautiful wedding. We had two ceremonies, a Western ceremony and also a Buddhist ceremony. Cause we wanted to pay homage to the place that we were staying, that we celebrated.

Matt Bowles: Well, your wedding video highlight that's in your blog is absolutely amazing. I am going to encourage everybody to go and check it out. We of course will link up your blog in [the show notes](#). I want to ask you about one more travel experience to a place that I have also not yet been, which is Antarctica. Can you talk about that?

Vanessa Fondeur: Again, it was in my vision board. So, I am very big on allowing myself to dream and not letting anyone or anything or societal norms squash my dreams. And one of the things that I've been doing for many years is making vision boards of what do I want for myself? And in my vision board of 2017, I put up penguin and I say that I want it to be in one of the best ships and join it with great friends. I'm like, I'm not sure how it's going to happen because on a teacher's salary, yeah, Antarctica is not really on my budget, but the universe, you know, has a plan. And someone was raffling for one space in one of their trips.

So Haitian Nomad is a company that hosts many trips around the world. And one of their trips was to Antarctica. Their tickets were \$99 each. And I purchased two tickets. There were over 200 people who purchased tickets and I won. I was crying like a baby. You don't understand what it is to manifest a dream. This happened in 2021. So, it was four years later and for \$99, I won a 17,000 trip for 12 days in the latest ship of Quark Expeditions, which is the ultramarine that has two helicopters. It's literally like their latest ship. And to go in 2023, I mean, I can't even tell you.

Matt Bowles: Describe what it was like for people like me who have never been to Antarctica. Both the experience of getting to Antarctica and then what was it like when you were there? What did you do?

Vanessa Fondeur: So, I first arrived in Buenos Aires from New Jersey. Then I explored the city. It was gorgeous of course, Argentina is beautiful. And then we went to Ushuaia. We caught a plane to go to Ushuaia. There, we transferred onto the cruise, an expedition cruise. So there, there is a difference. There are cruises, like Carnival now has cruises to go there, but you don't get off the boat.

But then there are expedition cruises. As long as they're 125, I believe, or so, or less, those are the ones that you are actually allowed to get off. So, make sure that when you're doing your research, that it's a smaller kind of boat that actually gets off on the Zodiac. So, you can actually step on the land and see up close the wildlife.

So, we saw killer whales, I mean humpback whales, different kinds of sea lions, leopard seals, and penguins. I was dying when I saw the penguins. They're so beautiful and they're so clumsy, just like me. And I just love them. The whole trip I was like, I just wanted to take a video of a penguin jumping from an iceberg into the water. Almost on the last day I was able to catch one like that. But one where another one kicked a penguin and it fell in the water. And it was so funny. They are hilarious. But their poop smells so bad. Yes. When you see that the snow is not white anymore, that means it's all of their poop.

Matt Bowles: Well, I also, of course, want to ask you about founding the [Latino Travel Fest](#). And maybe before we talk about the fest, can you just give some context and talk about the community Latino world travelers, which you founded first and talk a little bit about what that community is and what the origin story was.

Vanessa Fondeur: I mentioned that I joined Nomadness 2012 because I wanted to travel, connect with people of color, but even though I love that community and like literally most of my friends are from there, I always felt like a void because I couldn't really speak Spanish. And that's my first language. And I couldn't really feel, I didn't really feel represented back then there. Now there are more people in the community, but back then I didn't. So, I said, I wonder if something like this

exists for Latinos. And when I looked out there, it didn't exist. And I'm like, my people need to know about all of these flight deals.

There was one flight to Dubai that they had for \$187, I don't know if you remember. There was like a glitch and there was another one to South Africa and there were just so many glitches happening people purchasing them and I'm like oh my god my people need to know about this that there are ways that you can travel that don't have to be that expensive.

There are tricks you can learn, there are ways you can maximize your credit card or get points without having to use credit cards. I mean, I've gotten points to the point where I went to Guatemala and paid 69 cents for a hotel per night without having to use credit cards because there are so many different ways of earning points and miles and all kinds of things, right?

So, I'm like, my community needs to know this. They need to know travel is accessible to them because when I was in college, I didn't think travel was accessible to me, but then I found a scholarship and I made it accessible. So, I'm like, how can I start sharing these resources with people so they can see themselves represented and also, they can see that travel is accessible for them too.

I started the group on Facebook in 2015 and then evolved into me hosting trips for adults because they were like you travel with your students why don't you do trips for us too, the adults. And I started hosting trips I was able to host one to Spain I always go back to Spain because I love Spain, I've been about six times already and then I took them to Mexico for Dia de los Muertos which was amazing, the second country that made me cry tears of joy.

Matt Bowles: Talk about that. What was so impactful about the Mexico trip?

Vanessa Fondeur: Well, every year I thought about Dia de los Muertos as a Spanish teacher in my class, and I always said one day I want to be able to experience it in real life and go there with them and experiencing it in real life. When I was entering The Pantheon, seeing all the flowers, the colors, the people, just joyful to be there.

And it made me feel like, wow, I wonder what my ancestors are feeling. My grandma, my grandpa, what they're feeling and how they wish they were remembered. It was just beautiful seeing how they celebrate their ancestors. That is not something to be scared about. That is not something that you should hide. It's just like, oh, celebrating the life of this person, even though they are not here with us anymore and connecting with them in a deeper level.

Matt Bowles: Yeah. I've interviewed a number of people on the podcast that have been to the day of the dead celebrations in Mexico. And they have all just talked about how incredible they are, and I understand they're a little bit different in different places around Mexico, depending on where you go and where your experience and I've interviewed some people that have gone intentionally to multiple different places to experience it year after year in different ways because it's just so profound and impactful.

Okay, [Latino Travel Fest](#), can you talk about your decision to create a conference and what the first one was like last year?

Vanessa Fondeur: Because I had expanded the community, now I'm on Instagram. I have a lot of creators that are part of the community, influencers, and just different thought leaders and attending different conferences myself. I saw that there was no representation of our community, not only attending the conferences, but also being speakers at conferences. So, I'm like, okay, so this presentation goes deep. There is none anywhere. So, I said, okay, since they don't want to invite us to the table, I'm going to create the table.

So, in the middle of the pandemic, I decided to launch the fest virtually as a testing to see, "Oh, is this something that's really going to take off or not?". And to give them a platform to ultimately reach the audience that I want to reach, which is the Latinos that are not traveling, and how to get them involved in this movement.

So, it was incredible. It was a two-day conference back then. Beautiful, like incredible panels about any and every topic I interviewed 300 people, and I asked them what are the reasons that you do not travel, and I created those panels to answer those questions that they had to demystify all of those beliefs that they had.

It was a labor of love, let me tell you, a labor of love. And then this year, this past year, 2023, it was the third year. And I said, "You know what? I'm going to challenge myself and I'm going to launch it in person for the first time". And I did it in New York city. I invested sweat, tears, all of my financial resources, everything, all of my network.

I brought everybody in, and it was super successful. It was incredible. I am so proud of the work that I did. We had two days, well, three days, technically three days with panels and workshops, and incredible conversations. People made great connections, and relationships that are now like people are working together now in different projects because they met there.

And I'm like, that fills me up seeing my community engaged, seeing them thriving, seeing them connecting with each other. Uh, I just love that. And, and I said, "Oh, I'm going to launch it next year again". And here I am planning it and I'm going to do it in Elizabeth, New Jersey, which is pretty much my backyard is 10 minutes from me because my goal is to bring you from where I used to live, which is New York, to where I live now, which is New Jersey.

And hopefully I can bring you to Dominican Republic and host it there too, which is where I come from and have like that full circle moment.

Matt Bowles: Well, I want you to know that [Latino Travel Fest](#) has, of course, been discussed before on The Maverick Show. I interviewed [Alex Jimenez](#) from *Travel Fashion Girl*, who was one of your keynotes from last year.

And we opened up The Maverick Show, talking about her experience at the [Latino Travel Fest](#) and how amazing and impactful and powerful it was. And so that really put it on my radar and put it on a lot of other people's radars. So, talk about the 2024 event, when is it happening and what can people expect from it?

Vanessa Fondeur: It's happening from May 31st to June 2nd, but we've been working on it all year round, by the way. We're going to have hands-on workshops. It's going to be for three days. The first

day is going to be for creators, people who want to enter that arena, become content creators, monetize their brand, are already travelers and just want to take it to the next level.

On Saturday is for all travelers. We're going to have four different tracks for families, community, for travelers who are, and for travelers who are starting. So, we're going to have a little bit of everything for everyone. And then on Sunday is an inspiration brunch and we also have an after-party.

So, get ready because it's going to be a lot of people there from every walk of life celebrating our Latino culture and meeting with other travelers, and it's going to be incredible. There is no other conference like that in the whole world. Not even the U.S. In the whole world, this is not a conference targeting leisure traveler in the whole world. This is the first one ever.

Matt Bowles: I am so excited about this event, and I understand it is open to everyone to attend. You don't have to be Latino in order to attend. It is open to allies and anybody who wants to immerse themselves in your amazing community for a weekend, as I am very excited about doing. And I understand that you are willing to even offer a discount to Maverick Show listeners who want to come and hang out at the [Latino Travel Fest](#).

Vanessa Fondeur: Absolutely. So, you can go ahead and head to our page, www.latinotravelfest.com. Buy your ticket and use the promo code **MAVERICK** and you're sold. You get 15 percent off your any ticket.

Matt Bowles: Amazing. We are going to link all of that up in [the show notes](#), by the way, folks, so, you can just go to themaverickshow.com. Go to the show notes for this episode. We're going to have the direct link there with your discount code.

Vanessa, I want to ask you, just reflecting back on all of the travel that you have done now in your personal journey, what impact do you think all of it has had on you as a person?

Vanessa Fondeur: It has made me a more compassionate person. It has made me just a person who understands global issues because sometimes in the Dominican Republic, I had a very sheltered life, especially not living with my mom, living with my uncle and grandma who protected me from a lot. We didn't really watch TV like that. Education is not necessarily the best. So going out there and actually living in history and meeting other people from other cultures, it just opens up a world of possibilities for me.

Tasting other foods made me a more risk taker. Like, it made me want to open up my horizons, get out of my comfort zone. It helps me in other facets of my life, literally. And it just started because I'm like, let me travel solo because no one wanted to come with me. And I'm like, I'm not going to wait on people. I'm just going to go.

So, because I'm a risk taker and I like to just do as much as I can, I inspire myself in the process. I'm like, look how far you have come. You can do more. Let's do something else. And you can do more. So it made me kind of continue challenging myself to step out of my comfort zone. I read more and many different books.

Now I will explore more. So, what I want to do next is connect with the people more in the countries that I go, to because sometimes I feel like I go to the tourist route, which is, "Oh, let me go to all the

sightseeing and all of this". And yes, I'm going to try all the foods and all that, but now I want to travel differently.

I want to like, talk to business owners, especially now that I'm a business owner too. Talk to them, see what their journey is like. How is it different from country to country? If there is a difference or do, we all have the same struggles? I really want to connect more with people now. So, in my next phase of travel, that's what I want to do.

Matt Bowles: Well, I also want to give you the props that you deserve and let folks know that you were nominated this year for a Bessie Award at the WITS Travel Creators Summit. Where you and I are both going to be hanging out yet again. So, if anybody wants to come and hang out with you and me, they can also come to the WITS summit, but can you share a little bit just for folks who have never heard of this?

What is the WITS Summit, what are the Bessie Awards, and what were you nominated and recognized for?

Vanessa Fondeur: So, the Bessie Awards are awards where they nominate women who are taking the traveled forward. And because of the creation of my community and how I am pushing for representation, someone nominated me, I don't know who, because I don't nominate myself, someone has to nominate me.

Um, for my work and they thought that I was deserving of being nominated for the inclusion award and there is other two people that are nominated finalists among me and I'm excited because I'm like, I'm going to put it in my vision where I need to win this thing, right? Since everything in my vision materializes.

I'm not here for the accolades, really. I'm just here really because I believe in this and I'm passionate about it. And my goal is to one day open a magazine and see Latinos in the magazine. I've never been able to do that. I've never been able to watch a show and it being a Latino on the show. On a travel show on a channel. I've never been able to do that.

Matt Bowles: Well, you are very much deserving of this nomination. And for folks that do not know about the WITS Summit, it is put on by Wanderful, which is an amazing organization. I've interviewed the founder, [Beth Santos](#), on The Maverick Show. Tons of amazing people were involved with that organization.

And the WITS summit is happening in Utah. It's happening in April. You and I are both going to be there hanging out again. I don't know if we're going to find another mechanical bull cowboy rodeo situation, but I'm sure we'll get into something though. And there's going to be a bunch of Maverick Show podcast guests attending the WITS summit as well.

So, if anybody listening wants to join Vanessa and myself and other Maverick Show guests, and hang out in Utah there, it is really going to be an incredible event. I will also put a link where you can get a discount on your ticket in [the show notes](#) for this episode as well. And we would love to see you there. And of course, at the Latino Travel summit, your link with the discount code will be there as well. Vanessa, I think this is a great point to end the main portion of this interview. And at this point, are you ready to move in to the lightning round.

Vanessa Fondeur: I maybe. Let's see. Let's go.

Matt Bowles: Let's do it. All right. What is one book that you would recommend that people should read?

Vanessa Fondeur: I also have a book club, by the way, that I host. And one of the books that we read there is [The Universe Has Your Back](#). I love that book because it kind of like makes you believe in like divine guidance and it makes you reevaluate and connect with the your ancestors. And I love everything that has to do with connecting with my ancestors.

Another book that I'm going to recommend that I'm currently reading, just so I can recommend a travel one, is called [Just Us by Melissa Balmain](#). And it's about adventures with your and travels with your mother, mother and daughter travel. It's a beautiful story, by the way, of them just traveling the world together, getting to know each other.

Because sometimes we don't really know our parents. We knew them as kids, but we don't really know them as humans, as people. And it takes us to become adults to really get to know them. And I always said, when our parents come here as immigrants and they work hard so we can have a better life, how are we paying it back to them?

How are we bringing them on the journey that we are on? So that's why I took my mom to China. She came to Spain as well on that trip. After that, she has been with my brothers in multiple cruises, and she has been to Mexico. So, I just want to bring my mother in that journey with me. And next she wants to go to Dubai, by the way, And I'm going to take her because I'm like, one day she's not going to be here.

I won't be able to do this with her. So, this book, [Just Us](#) is just like really affirming because this is something that I wanted to do with my mom for a while and reading this book and how they did it is like, Oh, I feel like I can do it. I can do a solo trip with just my mother and I and make it about her, not about me.

Matt Bowles: All right, Vanessa, who is one person currently alive today that you've never met that you'd most love to have dinner with? Just you and that person for an evening of dinner and conversation.

Vanessa Fondeur: Well, if anybody knows, I have an obsession with J Lo that you don't understand. That woman is such a fighter. She's incredibly inspiring. She works really hard. And I just feel like as a Latina, she is the epitome of the American dream, which is like coming here, working hard, making a living, the life of your dreams, and just inspiring people along the way. That's who I want to be. She represents to me who I want to be. A person who lives a good life and inspires other people in the process.

Matt Bowles: All right, Vanessa, knowing everything that you know now, if you could go back in time and give one piece of advice to your 18-year-old self, what would you say to 18-year-old Vanessa?

Vanessa Fondeur: I would say, be more vulnerable and connect with more people. Because I was very closed off. Even in college, I was very closed off. Very timid, very I mean, now I am all open, but I wish back then I would have been because I think I would have experienced life a little bit differently. But then again, everything happens for a reason, right?

Matt Bowles: All right, Vanessa, of all the places you have now traveled. What are three of your favorite destinations you would most recommend to other people should definitely check out?

Vanessa Fondeur: Absolutely Mexico, hell, Mexico, Lord Jesus, beautiful. I love Mexico. I will go back in a heartbeat. I most likely will retire there.

The second destination, well, I always select this destination because I go so many times and I love it so much, Spain.

My third favorite. I mean, Antarctica, of course, is up there. It's like the trip of a lifetime. Of course, if you can in your lifetime, go there.

Matt Bowles: All right, Vanessa, what are your top three bucket list destinations? These are places you have not yet been highest on your list you'd most love to see.

Vanessa Fondeur: I want to go to Rwanda because I want to go gorilla trekking. That's one. Two, I want to go to the stand countries like to make a stand. All of those. I want to go, but I want to go solo. I really want to immerse myself in the culture that is completely different from mine, where they don't speak my language at all, and, and just see what that is like, experience it.

So that, and the other country that I want to go, I've always, which is going to sound insane because it's right there. I've always wanted to go to Peru, and I still haven't been able to go to. I've planned that trip so many times. I've even applied for teacher scholarships to go, and I've never been able to go.

Matt Bowles: All right, but as a last question, what advice would you give to Latino and Latina travelers today who might be at the earlier stage of their travel journey?

Vanessa Fondeur: I will say find community because sometimes our family stops us from doing what we want to do. They are the first ones to tell you that this country is falling apart, whatever you're traveling to, don't go there. And they are the first ones to scare you just because they have never experienced that before. So, find other people that are going to inspire you and provide you with resources and tips on how to be safe, how to travel well, and how to be confident about traveling. Because sometimes you can't rely on family, unfortunately.

Matt Bowles: And come to the [Latino Travel Fest](#), in New Jersey, in May, we are going to link it up in [the show notes](#). Again, folks, we're going to put the discount code there so you can go grab that and come hang out with an amazing community. Vanessa, I want you to let folks know how they can find you, follow you on social media, get involved with your communities and learn more about what you're up to. How do you want folks to come into your world?

Vanessa Fondeur: I post the most on my Instagram. So, follow me, a Latina world traveler. So, it's very similar to my community, Latina world traveler. And then, I lost my experiences there. I'm very active in stories.

Matt Bowles: All right. We're going to link everything up in [the show notes](#) that we have talked about, how you can find and follow Vanessa, how you can get more information about the [Latino Travel Fest](#), get your discount, learn about her communities and all of the recommendations that she has made on this episode, everything is going to be linked up in one place, just go to

themaverickshow.com. Go to the show notes for this episode, Vanessa. This was amazing. Thank you so much for coming to the show.

Vanessa Fondeur: Thank you so much, Matt. This was a wonderful experience. You're so great.

Matt Bowles: Well, I am also super excited about hanging out in person again, hopefully, multiple times this year in different cities. It is always a blast. I think you're amazing. I think you're doing amazing things, and it was great to have you on the show, Vanessa. So, thank you for being here, and good night, everybody.