

Matt Bowles: My guest today is Joel Balsam. He is a Canadian freelance journalist, author of 13 Teen Lonely Planet guidebooks, and has been a full-time digital nomad since 2015. With more than a decade of experience as a freelancer, he has reported from five continents on a wide array of topics, including travel, culture, language, environment, politics, technology, and business. Joel has written for *Travel and Leisure*, *National Geographic*, *Travel Time*, *The Guardian*, *BBC Travel*, *Lonely Planet*, *Atlas Obscura*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Vice*, *ESPN*, and many others that you would know. He speaks four languages and has traveled to 60 countries.

Joel, welcome to the show.

Joel Balsam: Thanks, man.

Matt Bowles: Bro, it is so good to have you here. We need to just set the scene and talk about where we are recording from today. You and I have just opened a beautiful bottle of Italian white wine from the Piemonte region of Italy.

Cheers to you, my friend. We are going to be drinking through this bottle throughout the episode, but we are recording this on a boat in the middle of the Atlantic en route to Brazil. We are on the Nomad Cruise, but we are destined for Salvador de Bahia in Brazil. I have never been to Salvador or anywhere in Bahia state. You have been there before though.

Joel Balsam: Yeah, it's the cultural heart of Brazil. Bahia is a spot, so vibrant, and so colorful, and it has a really intense history that everyone has to learn about, for sure.

Matt Bowles: I want you to share a little bit about it if you could. Yeah, I have been to Brazil three times, this will be my fourth. The first time I went, I lived in Rio for two months. And I was so enamored with Rio de Janeiro. I was like, how could anything be better than this? I'm not leaving for real for a single day. I don't want 59 days. If I could have 60, I'd take them all. How could anything be better than real? And then I leave.

And then other people start telling me, "Oh man, you got to go to Sao Paulo. It's my favorite city in the world". I was like, "You've been to Rio". They're like, "Yeah, I was like, what?" And so, then I'm like, I go back to Sao Paulo. And then I went back to some of the Northern beach towns, and I've been to Pipa and Jericoacoara and Recife and some of those spots, but Salvador, I have heard from everyone, it is amazing, and I have to go. It has been so high on my list for so long and we are going to land in Salvador in just a few days. But can you share for folks that don't know about Salvador, what it is like and give some context?

Joel Balsam: Sure. Yeah. I mean, I'm not super an expert, but I like you fell deeply in love with Brazil.

It's my favorite country in the world. I went on my first backpacking trip, and I also went to Rio, and you could see my mind exploding all over the place. Just like absolute amazingly in love but then I've traveled a couple of times. Salvador was the largest slave port in the Americas. Way more, sadly, slaves went through Salvador than all of the U.S. It's maintained a lot of that culture of Candomble, which is this beautiful religion, a fascinating tradition. So everywhere you go, it's just colorful buildings. They have their own food. It's like, it's like the Oaxaca of Brazil in a way. Like they have moqueca, they have acarajé, they have these, the women wear these beautiful dresses all the time. Yeah, you're going to have a great time.

Matt Bowles: And you did a story from Bahia State a while ago. Can you talk about what that was about and what it was like investigating that story?

Joel Balsam: Yeah, I heard about this guy saving, uh, deadly snakes. He had the largest venomous snake in the Americas. And he's like, people would call him, and there'd be like a gigantic anaconda, like, way bigger than this room.

And he would be like the snake saving guy, and he was like the local doctor, and he would come and save them. He cared about the snakes, and he started breeding them, so he had like, more than 60 on his property, but the snakes can't grow in captivity. So, he was really the one saving them, but all of his own, he had no like anti-venom and stuff. And then it turns out that the venom could be used to like cure cancer or whatever.

So, I wrote that for Time Magazine and yeah, that was a really cool one to report. The snakes were like coming at our faces while we were like taking photos. Like, holy shit. He's like, I don't have anti-venom or anything. Like you'll be, you'll be screwed. But yeah. Okay.

Matt Bowles: That is amazing. Well, you have done so much incredible travel and journalism. And I want to get into some of the stories that you've covered. I want to get into some of your personal life trajectory as well as your worldview, which you and I have connected on a lot of political issues and stuff and have some incredible conversations here, but let's just start all the way back.

Can you give folks some context? And talk a little bit about your family history, where your family's from, and then where you grew up.

Joel Balsam: Sure, yeah. I grew up in Ottawa. My grandfather was a Holocaust survivor. He was in five concentration camps. And, I mean, he never even talked about it, really, to my dad. He had his numbers removed.

It was something that he just did not want to talk about. But when I was, like, ten, I went with my brother to Montreal, and he, like, just poured out his whole story. Moments when he was in one of the camps and like a box broke. And at that moment, the soldier was going to kill him. But then his cousin, who was there too, was like a watch fixer.

So, the soldier remembered that his cousin had fixed his watch. So, he spared his life. And I always think like, oh, shit, that could have been me not existing essentially. He immigrated to Canada using his cousin's identity. His cousin went to Palestine at the time and didn't need the papers. My grandfather became him and didn't tell anyone at the time that his name was Krischer and even my dad was born with this name Krischer. He likes working in a shoe factory. Yeah. My dad grew up in Montreal and then moved to Ottawa in like 1980 because they were worried that about all like the language laws in Quebec, which is kind of a common story in that part of Canada. But yeah, my grandfather's story really like, kind of shaped my values in a lot of ways.

Matt Bowles: Can you actually share a little bit about the Quebec situation just for people who are not at all familiar with that? Sure, yeah.

Joel Balsam: Quebec is a majority francophone, but there was also, Montreal was a large English colony at one point.

There was a lot of animosity. The French were treated really poorly. Then they started having a nationalist movement and being like, we need to protect it. But also, they were trying to separate and a lot of anglophones didn't want that. So, they moved to either Ottawa or Toronto. And they're still kind of like a tip for tat there.

Matt Bowles: So, can you talk a little bit then about growing up in Canada and how your worldview developed, how you're interested in global politics developed, and your perspective on the world?

Joel Balsam: I guess for me, it starts at my kind of family dinner table. I had two older brothers and my dad being the son of a Holocaust survivor was quite angry at the world. I think he didn't want to be like his dad. And like, he felt like they were abused. And he wanted to come out of poverty, which he kind of successfully did.

He came and moved into the middle class, but he was angry at everyone. And it made me want to like, and then he would always like to antagonize us. And we were all like, my mom was extremely caring. So, we were all curious about the world and things like this. And he'd be like, kill them all or something. It would make us so angry.

But it'd make me want to like to prove him wrong. It would make me want to find the truth. It would make me want to like to speak and be like, no, Kerrig is better. So, I think that's one of the reasons that I wanted to speak and be a journalist.

Matt Bowles: You and I have connected about the role of hip-hop early in our lives in terms of raising political consciousness and the impact that played. So, can you share a little bit about how you came across hip-hop and what impact it had on you?

Joel Balsam: Yeah. I mean, my older brother was definitely into hip-hop. He could recite a whole Wu-Tang thing. I mean, I was super into conscious hip-hop from really, from as far as I can remember, you know, Blackstar. There was this wed group we can talk about more later, but they're called the Looptroop and they're from Sweden.

And for some reason they like the soundtrack of my youth. And they were like super political about all these things about the world. And I think they're still great. I don't know why they did get as big as they could have. But, um, anyway, I was always into that. Listening to it in the suburbs growing up and being like, yeah, you know, the world matters. Like oppressed people matter. It is super influential.

Matt Bowles: And then you went on to college and you studied political science and you got deeper into that stuff. Can you talk a little bit about how that came about? Your political interest in the world and your cultural interest in the world sort of dovetailed then with your interest in journalism and how you gravitated towards that profession.

Joel Balsam: We kind of have a weird story about Rage Against the Machine. So, I re-looked up to my brother and my brother had the Rage Against the Machine DVD and Chomsky was interviewed on the thing and it completely changed his life. I also like Chomsky, but actually, it made me not want to study journalism because it's propaganda and manufacturing consent and all that stuff.

So, I first went to school, and I just took political science after one year and then the second year I'm like, you know, maybe I should just like, starved Chomsky, but like, you know, maybe I can do, it's what I actually like, and I want to do. Like I knew that I always wanted to do that.

Matt Bowles: I think I have seen the specific one that you're talking about because I want to say that Zack de la Rocha interviewed Chomsky about the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas in Mexico.

I want to say if it's the same one that I'm remembering. And I was studying the Zapatista writings very closely. I was actually in Chiapas, in the autonomous communities back in 2000. And I celebrated the six-year anniversary of the uprising with them in Oventic and the Lacandon jungle and all that kind of stuff.

So, I have come across a lot of that as well. Incredibly powerful. Noam Chomsky's writings for people that are not familiar significantly influenced my life as well. Once I found Chomsky, I was just like, I just started reading through as much of his work as I could. And I think he is perhaps literally the most published intellectual currently still alive today.

He's in his 90s now, but he must be the author of 150-plus books and is one of the most influential intellectuals of our time.

Joel Balsam: But what's insane is he's usually not the author. Somebody just talks to him, and he has all of this off the top of his head. And it just, that's the book. Like you don't have to like normal people would have to like research it. Like he has it all in there.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, people should definitely look him up, we'll link Noam Chomsky up in [the show notes](#) and you should definitely check out some of his books and start reading some of his writings if you haven't. And there are Zapatistas as well, I would highly recommend reading some of their writings. I mean, incredibly significant and profound political writings there.

So, from. College, so talk a little bit about that you're majoring in political science, you're wondering if you should do journalism, and then how did the interest and the passion for travel come into play for you?

Joel Balsam: I kind of always wanted to travel, but I pushed it to the end of school, I kind of blitzed school, and then I was like, I went on a, going to go on a big backpacking trip, and I went to Bolivia. Kind of had an excuse to go there by volunteering at like an English language magazine called Bolivian Express. But it was, you know, something you had to pay for, but it was kind of got me a little bit of experience and people that knew Bolivia, which was a real culture shocking place. I don't know if people been to Bolivia, although I hesitate to recommend to people because sometimes like it was a really hard place. Like it is hard, but it's so worth it.

Matt Bowles: It is Perhaps my top recommendation and all of South America. And I have not spent more than eight days in Bolivia, but the eight days that I spent there blew my mind. And I have been telling everyone about it since. And I went to La Paz, obviously the capital city, which is like built into the side of the mountain.

And you are getting around by cable cars and your mind is just blown every day. The Valle de la Luna, the Moon valley, you're walking around there. And then I did a mountain biking trip down the world's most dangerous road, which was just so transformative, so spectacular, so unique, so

remarkable. This is a 60-kilometer downhill ride, down a road that is about one car length wide with no guardrail and a thousand-foot sheer cliff drop-off.

The reason why it was called the world's most dangerous road is because it used to be the only transit route for commercial vehicles to get from one place to another in Bolivia. So, they would try to pass each other on this road when there's two cars going in the opposite direction during the rainy season.

And one car would go over the edge and then slide out. And so, 300 plus people a year were dying on this road. Subsequently, they built a bypass road. There's now a highway. And those types of cars don't drive on this road anymore. And so, they basically turned it into a mountain biking thing that tourists can do.

And you go down with a professional guide and you can do it very safely. And we went with a group, and it was just incredible. And then of course, I went to the salt flats in Uyuni for a four-night trip. And just, I've never in my life anywhere on the planet seen landscape like I saw in Bolivia. It was just amazing.

Joel Balsam: Yeah. Like, about safety. It's almost like quotation marks. I mean, going there, I was 21 and like thinking about, you know, Canada has a ton of rules. I like to think of it as a, especially where I'm from Ottawa, it's pretty much a nanny state. And then I'm like flying down this road that you're skidding to turn.

Like you're saying it's safe, like if you don't skid, you're, you're done, you're off the cliff, and it's so dramatic. The cliff, like you can't even see the bottom, it's like clouds, and, but it was great, and for me, going to Bolivia, and just like, when you take the buses, there's a lot of roads like that. You get to the bus station, you don't know which one to take, it's so confusing, you know, and then, you do, and you get to your destination, and I found that so fulfilling, and then I was hooked on travel. That was really a key point for me.

Matt Bowles: So, talk a little bit about your professional trajectory and how you ultimately got into journalism, decided that you love it, and then were able to actually make money, traveling the world and writing about cool stuff.

Joel Balsam: So, after that in Bolivia, I heard about the end of the world celebration in December 2012. Isla del Sol, Evo Morales was there, the president of Bolivia. All these indigenous groups were there. They thought the world was going to end. Anyways, it didn't end. Spoiler alert. But I did a story for Vice, and it took photos. So, I was able to pitch it, get published. I was really key to kind of get those bylines.

I kept traveling. Then Brazil blew my mind, interned at Vice, quickly worked for 9 months at a weekly newspaper, found that way too local and wanted to see the world, traveled to Spain, taught English, did a remote job on the side, that sustained me for a little bit, then in 2017 or 2018, I guess I was back in Brazil and did that story about Bahia because my ex-girlfriend, she was a photographer, Stephanie Foden, and we were able to do a lot of these stories together. That was pretty cool.

Time, ESPN, Nat Geo. Uh, then I applied, did a test to become part of Lonely Planet's writer pool. And then I did that. I did a lot of freelancing and now I've done a bunch of those Lonely Planet

books. I did like five since last September in this new style, which is really cool. But I also like to do features not just about travel, but just like stuff that people don't know about.

I did a story about a river that became legal as a way to protect it environmentally. So, it's kind of just like changes our, man, I just want to change the way people think about stuff. And I spent a week with the indigenous community there and in Canada, that was for the Globe and Mail. I like doing that kind of stuff.

Matt Bowles: You have done a lot of incredibly interesting stories. I want to ask you about some of them. Can you talk about the Nat Geo story that you did in Oaxaca?

Joel Balsam: I mean, writing for Nat Geo is like such a validating experience. And this one was so good. It was so much more than what came out on the page just because of the whole reporting thing.

So, I'm, I'm walking in Oaxaca's, um, I think it's Vente de Noviembre market. It's like smoky things are going and I'm around October time and I see bread and it has faces in it, like little Jesus heads and Mother Virgin Mary heads. And I'm like, what is up with that? What's the story with that? Followed by curiosity.

And then I go on this like journey where like I going to little towns to like to find out where the heads come from or where this pan de muerto comes from because it's different from another than Mexico City where it looks like Los Huesos(The Bones). So, I'm going to, you know, one town, I go to this bakery over here and I go to the town where the faces come.

I'm asking people in the market, they like whisk me off in their car. And they're like, I find the place where they make it a little face. And it was so cool. And then I went to the cemetery where it's such an amazing way, tradition in Mexico, Día de Muertos, where they like, they celebrate, they drink and they have bread, this bread with their ancestors, which I think is such a really cool way of, of seeing death than I'd seen.

And also, I was saying that Steve McCurry was randomly taking photos there and he's like a really famous photographer. So, it was like. I don't know, just, I always remember that moment, like this is the validating for me, like the career that I want to be in. Just like, and the fact that this famous guy there. It was just like, okay, I made it.

Matt Bowles: You have gotten to write some incredibly fascinating stories. Can you talk about the one that you wrote in the Amazon about surfing of the tidal wave?

Joel Balsam: Yeah. So that was a big one because I hadn't done any stories since that vice story. So, this was back with Stephanie in Brazil.

And, um, yeah, we heard about this, this thing called the Polaroca. It's like a tidal bore wave. So once a year, sometimes twice a year, but it's biggest, I think once a year in March, the moon makes the Amazon River create a, like a tidal bore wave. It's called a big wave in the opposite direction of the sea.

And these guys, these crazy surfers want to go ride it. was like surfing with his dog on like a stand-up paddle board. So, we went to the Amazon for a week, sleeping in the hammocks, and waiting for the

tidal wave to come. And yeah, it did a story for ESPN, and it was really good for me and my career also to have that byline, but it was also just a cool adventure.

Matt Bowles: Well, we are going to link up all of these stories in [the show notes](#) because I want people to go and be able to read the full stories as well as check out, you know, your style and how you write and all that kind of stuff. You've actually also done some really cool stuff in the United States. Can you talk about the piece that you did about the Creole black cowboys in the U.S. just for people that have no idea about this.

Joel Balsam: Yeah, I'm excited about that one. I did a road trip, RV road trip from Memphis to San Diego through the deep south in August, which I probably wouldn't recommend, especially without air conditioning as I did it. Actually, the RV broke down in Mississippi in the Mississippi Delta in Yazoo City.

And we had it for five days and we watched an Anthony Bourdain Parts Unknown about Cajun Mardi Gras. And he mentioned the Creole cowboy tradition of trail rides, which I wasn't aware of. And it turns out a lot of people still aren't aware of it, and we found one and we went to it. And it's such a cool cultural tradition that people don't know about in the U S where almost every weekend across the South, they ride around these cowboys who are of Creole, often African descent.

They're the original cowboys. And they still do this tradition. They ride around, listen to music, some hip hop, some, uh, Zydeco and. It's really cool. I've been to two of them now, and that story was for The Guardian, and, uh, really cool photos in that one too.

Matt Bowles: Well, I also want to ask you about this Montreal melon story that you did because I had not heard about this either, and I'm sure a lot of other people have not. Can you talk about that?

Joel Balsam: Okay, thanks. This is great. This is like my favorite one. Probably my favorite. So, in the early 1900s, you could go to a skyscraper restaurant in New York and get a slice of Montreal melon. It was a green flesh melon, and you'd pay 1 for that melon. But today, that's like 40. Anyway, so it was a really expensive melon at the time. The Burpee Seed Company said it's like the best melon. And it was made right in, like, almost downtown Montreal, Notre Dame de Grasse neighborhood, NDG.

Then in the 1950s, it disappeared. It was just really too hard to grow. But then my former professor, Concordia, wrote about it for the Montreal Gazette, being like, why is my street called Old Orchard Street? And then he looked into it, they tried to revive the melon, turns out it's still really hard to grow. So, it's like, not around as much, but yeah, that one's on Atlas Obscura.

Matt Bowles: Well, you and I were both on the continent of Africa recently, and we both spent time in Kenya recently. We did not overlap, but I know that you did a piece while you were in Kenya. Can you share a little bit about what your experience was like in Kenya and then what the piece was about?

Joel Balsam: Yeah, I mean, a lot of people skip Africa, as you know, but I'd always wanted to go. I always been a dream of mine. And Kenya, I thought, was a place, a good entry point. And I actually knew somebody there and it was a really, really eye-opening place.

I also got the social justice center, took me on a tour of Madari, the, the slum there and devastating stuff. I mean, I guess you expect it, but when you see it with your own eyes and also just in the contrast to a lot of the rich people that are in the city, many of them, foreigners working for NGOs or things like this and just the contrast and kind of very depressing. But I wanted to go in and do some journalism, but I didn't want to do something that's so like I'm just parachuting in there. There's a lot to understand about that area and I spent the month that I was there trying to learn everything felt Gigantic except for kind of a quirky story that I thought that I could viably tell. And that people didn't know about, and the story is about in Western Kenya, there's something tradition or superstition, the real thing, apparently, I don't know.

I'm skeptical, but people, everyone I talked to says that they saw naked people running around and scaring their neighbors in the middle of the night and they maybe fart fire. Maybe they take you on a dream where you're jumping on top of hippos. I talked to a bunch of people who say they've heard them, you know, they haven't always seen them.

Sometimes they're like knocking and they open the door, and they disappear or they are ruffling in the, in the trees. It's funny, but you know, people seem to believe it, but I don't, I don't know if it's anyway, that's not for me to say, but it was fascinating. And every time you talk to people in Kenya, like, Oh yeah, yeah. As they know, everyone knows about it. Uh, that's on Atlas Obscura too. And they made really fun illustrations of like jumping over hippos of the bill of the night. So, I recommend that.

Matt Bowles: We are going to link up all of these articles. As I said in [the show notes](#), we'll put direct links. So, if folks want to go and read the full pieces of any of these, they will be there.

I also want to talk to you about some of your Lonely Planet guidebooks that you have written, 13 of them, now you have contributed to, and you have been to a lot of places that I have not been to. Some places we've both been, but a lot of places I haven't been. The first place I want to ask you about, I think is Morocco. Can you share a little bit about your experience in Morocco, the regions that you were specializing in and writing about and for folks that haven't been there, what were some of the highlights or things that stood out that you might recommend putting people onto?

Joel Balsam: Sure. Yeah. I mean, I grew up also, you know, my first backpacking trip was Lonely Planet, so it was a dream for me.

And Morocco was my first one. I'd been twice before, uh, when I was living in Spain, traveled a bit. So, they gave me a chance to do that. There's like five writers that do it. I didn't know all of Morocco. I did essentially from Tangier all the way to Algeria. So Tetouan, Chefchaouen, the North this is called the Reef Mountains and the Mediterranean Coast.

I love Morocco. You know, I love it. I'd been before. There's such like. When you're walking through, people are trying to like hustle you, but you could like have fun with it. In other places, like in India, they kind of get mad at you if you negotiate them low. But like in Morocco, like a burger prize.

And like if as long as you can kind of like go back and forth and like have fun with it, it's a lot of fun. I also had Souta and Melilla in my chapter, which are like pieces of Spain inside of Morocco, which most people don't know exists. I think it's like, what the hell is that doing there? But like, they've been there for a long time too.

And you go there and it's completely, it's Spain like you know it. But in Morocco, it's very weird. But for me, that's my favorite part of the Lonely Planet is talking to people, understanding the political, cultural history, and that's the best way to do it. Like, yes, reading books, but going there and talking to people is the best.

And I have an excuse too, to randomly talk to people there. I mean, usually I'd be like, I go to a bar and talk to people, but I wouldn't recommend the bars in Morocco. They don't have that many. You know, no drinking society.

Matt Bowles: Well, I also want to ask you about one of the places that you wrote about for Lonely Planet that I have not yet been to, which is Armenia.

Can you share a little bit about that? I was in the Caucasus. I have been to Georgia, have been to Azerbaijan, I have not been to Armenia. So, can you share a little bit about that and maybe some highlights or things you'd put people onto that want to visit there?

Joel Balsam: Yeah. Thanks. I mean, thanks for asking about that one. I've been, I've done two of the books now on Armenia. I first did it because they were trying to incorporate me more with Lonely Planet. They gave me that one, I guess. Nope. I don't know. Nobody wanted, I hadn't been, which, you know, normally they're trying to get somebody who's a local and has experience.

But now I really know Armenia. Like I thoroughly explored that country in that, in that first visit for two months. I like, I've explored way more than Canada, anywhere, like I'm going to the tiniest towns and the border towns and talking to people about it and then I just did it again now in the new style.

So, I completely rewrote it Armenia. I mean, it's the world's oldest Christian nation. I mean, it was the empire at the time, 301AD, so they have super old monasteries, but they're also a super resilient, you know, have a really strong national identity, really strong culture in terms of the food, their dancing, and then in every part of the country.

It's like really interesting, the natural stuff is, I know people go to Georgia more, but you know, like give Armenia, like check it out, you know. It's really interesting. And it's, and their political history is like, just fascinating and crazy. Should I get into that?

Matt Bowles: Yeah, I would love for you if you'd be willing to share. I mean, it's super important, but I would love for you to share a little bit about, you know, some of the nuances and what you found, you know, spending time there and researching it.

Joel Balsam: So, in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, there's a giant mountain in the distance. It is like their symbolic mountain Mount Ararat. It is like on their money. It's like everywhere for them. It's in Turkey. It's a constant reminder. They just look over and that's a reminder of what they lost, which is like heavy, man. Like, I get that. There was this genocide, a million to a million and a half. I mean, we don't know all the numbers, but we're pushed out.

They tried to make their own country. They ended up getting absorbed into the Soviet Union at the time. So, and then there were Soviet 1990. So, they have Turkey on one side, then they have Azerbaijan on the other side. And recently, from 1988 to 1994, there was a region called Nagorno-Karabakh. The Armenians call it Artsakh.

I didn't go there in the end. I kind of regret it because now I have no chance of going there. But I could have gone before when I did the book in 2019. But that group, it was mostly Armenian, but mixed. Lots of Azerbaijanis living there as well. During the Soviet Union, it was all one thing. But then it kind of fell in the territory of what looked like Azerbaijan after the Soviet Union.

And then that group wanted to join Armenia. And there was a war. 10,000 people died. Ethnic cleansing really on both sides. A lot of Azerbaijanis were kicked out. Armenians put down also a lot of landmines, which is not cool. And then they took a buffer zone area too. And then they kind of controlled that up until a couple of months ago.

And a lot of people don't know, but there was another war that happened. And another ethnic cleansing in revenge, what happened was 2020, everyone was distracted with COVID. Azerbaijan had been getting richer over years. Armenia was also quite corrupt during that time over those years and kind of squandered a bit of the money that they had.

They could have been prepared for this war. I mean, talking to Armenians about this, it's not necessarily my opinion, but it is what I've learned. And Azerbaijanis bought drones from Israel and Turkey, also military technology from Turkey and came in 2020. And they attacked Armenia and Russia had to come in and kind of, uh, but it buffers to stop to make a peace situation to stop the violence.

Armenians were able to maintain Stepanakert, which is the capital at that time, but they lost quite a lot of other territory. It was considered a defeat, but it wasn't really solved. Then in 2022, some environmental activists, they said, blocked the main road that brought food and aid and Red Cross stuff, all kinds of everything from Armenia into Nagorno-Karabakh.

But they weren't actually environmental activists. They were really Azerbaijan. And they blocked the road. Russia, who was distracted in Ukraine, didn't come in and do what they said they would do to protect the situation. And so over like nine months, I believe, nothing was allowed in. So, Armenians were starving in this area.

They still, you know, were able to grow their own food in their area, but they weren't able to get imports, aid, people couldn't get out. And then a month ago or so, Azerbaijan said it was doing an anti-terror operation, which, you know, whatever, we know how that word gets thrown around. And just in one day completely took over the whole thing.

And sadly, within days, 120,000 Armenians fled. So fully gone from where they lived for hundreds of years. Yes, Azerbaijan's also lived there and yes, they also have claims to the land and that's the situation. But what's also really scary is that the leader of Azerbaijan says that Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, is ancestral to Azerbaijan.

And they want to have a corridor between Turkey and Azerbaijan called the Leshin Corridor. And people don't know how big that will be. Like, is it just a road or is it just like half of Armenia. So, I mean, you know, as a journalist, I really, yeah, I want to see and expose the wrongs that have been done on both sides.

And absolutely Armenia has done wrong things too, but it's a new world out there. It's interesting. And people ask me like, why don't people know about this? Why do you think that no one talks

about it? It's really just simply people don't know where Armenia is or what it is. I don't think it's a conspiracy. I just think they don't know. And it's Russia's backyard, you know?

Matt Bowles: Yeah. I mean, I think there's a lot of places like that in the world. I mean, I did an episode a little while ago about the genocide in Tigray in Ethiopia. That has been happening over the last few years and a lot of people don't know about that at all.

And I had a podcast guest on who's a friend of mine who's Ethiopian and one of his parents from Tigray and we talked about it for a good portion of the episode. He and I had also gone to Rwanda together. And so, we talked about that context of that genocide and then what was happening in Tigray. But I mean, this is why we have these conversations, right?

I mean, this is one of the things I'm trying to do with the podcast is interview people who have traveled to different places, understood different things, and sort of raise awareness about some of these things so folks can look more into that. So, I definitely would encourage people to, you know, to Google and start looking into that situation for sure.

Another region I want to ask you about, which also is important to understand in terms of the recent political context, is the Western Balkans region. You have done a very deep dive into Albania and Kosovo, which I have spent a couple of months in the Balkans, but I have not yet been to Albania or Kosovo.

So, I've been to Serbia and Bosnia and Croatia and Montenegro, and I have not yet been to Albania or Kosovo, both super high on my list. I've had Albanians on the podcast, and I have standing invitations to come. And so very high on my list, but for me and others that have not been to the region, would love to hear about your experience and reflections as well as any highlights.

Joel Balsam: Hey, maybe there's a funny moment on this boat on [Nomad Cruise](#) where there was an Albanian, Croatian, Serbian, and Slovenian and they all took a photo and I was like, I want to get in here. Like, I just want to like, I'll get along guys. I mean, anyway, they were all chilly. It's all good. Yeah. I mean, as you said, it's really important to travel to not just the Italy places, the places that you know, to go to somewhere that go, I don't really know that much about.

And especially if you're interested in politics, which sounds like people have listened to your show are the Balkans is a key place to go for that. The first time I went, in 2015, I like randomly went to this music festival in Montenegro, and then I just backpacked the area and it's super small, so you can easily go from one to one.

And I went to all of them, Bosnia, Serbia, and Macedonia. And anyway, so I went to Albania and, and Kosovo. I had a car, drove around for, for over a month and people are so honest and nice. And I felt so safe. I could, you know, obviously walk around with my wallet in my back pocket. I had a rental car. I was trying to connect the places that I was going from Berat all the way to Gjirokaster.

I looked on Google Maps. I'm like, okay, I should take this road. But then people were like, oh no, you shouldn't take that road. So anyway, I looked it up and I quickly looked up and I saw a blog and it says this is the correct road. I get on the road and it's not the correct road. Anyways, I destroyed my car oil is leaking from the bottom of this car. I denting the front bumper is just like, and it happens like two hours on this awful road. Anyways, I'm like leaking oil. As I get into Gjirokaster and I take it, I

make it to the mechanic. So honest and cheap. I ended up paying like 200 euros for the whole thing. And six years of that was just the oil. No one was hustling me, it was just like, here, they're so honest.

Matt Bowles: So, what were some of the highlights for folks that want to go visit Albania, they want to go visit Kosovo, they want to travel there, what would you recommend for them?

Joel Balsam: So, like last year was the year of Albania. It was weird. Everyone was asking me; I'm going to Albania. Like, everyone in Europe wanted to go.

It's like they, I literally overheard a German say like it, I went, and I looked on a map and I chose it. It's like, I discovered it, but then I'm here. It's like what colonial mindset. Anyway, but it's like, you didn't discover it. Okay. It's been here the whole time. The problem was up until they had like a brilliant test dictatorship and Verkhoyansk who didn't let anyone in and or the people out.

And they, they weren't even like, he was getting in fights with everybody. He wasn't even hanging out with, with the Soviet Union. And then they were like, Oh, Mao, And then they ended up isolating themselves until he died peacefully. Interestingly. But then the people revolted. And then they sadly in like 96 had like this Ponzi scheme that like caused a lot of people to lose all their money.

So, it, you know, they've had a rough go in the last very recent history, but they're on it now. Everyone's going. So anyway, as a traveler, a lot of people go to, everyone's seen like an Instagram reel in like Samal or Saranda, which is easy place to get to from Corfu in Greece, the island. Everyone's seen the same video.

The beaches are beautiful in Albania, but like everyone else is going. So, if you don't want an insanely crowded beach, like rent, do yourself a favor, rent a Volkswagen or something from some guy and drive up the coast. There are really beautiful beaches. If you do go to that area, Ksamil and Sarandë, don't miss Butrint.

It's like a gigantic ancient city where like four civilizations lived and everyone's like, "Oh, I didn't even know it was there". It's like the key thing. But everyone just goes to the beach. I don't know. It's like, I don't know. I'm not the biggest beach guy, but it's part of the experience, but you can also go to the Butrint.

And then I would say the peaks of the Balkans trail is this like amazing trail that allows you to go from Kosovo to Montenegro to Albania in like two weeks, or you can do it even less. I think it's best to start with Pesia and Kosovo. You can easily get from one to the other. They're both Albanian people, but Kosovo was part of Yugoslavia, whereas Albania was in the Enver Hoxha thing.

So, they're a little bit different, but they still feel very similar. So yeah, I would say you could just beautifully hike, beautiful forests. Or you can go to Shkodra, which is this like bike city, like they're really into biking. Anyway, it's cool. And then you can do this loop, a few days loop, the Valbona track.

Yeah, you know, it's all there in the upcoming Lonely Planet book, uh, probably next year.

Matt Bowles: All right, well we are going to link up all of the Lonely Planet books that you have out already, and then folks can be on the lookout for your upcoming work. All right, we're going to pause here and call that the end of part one.

Everything we discussed in this episode will be in [the show notes](#), so you can just go to one place, at themaverickshow.com. Go to the show notes for this episode. There you will find direct links to everything we have discussed on this episode. And remember to tune into [the next episode](#) for the conclusion of my interview with Joel Balsam. Good night, everybody.