

Matt Bowles: My guest today is Derek Earl Barron, aka ‘*Wandering Earl*’. He left home in 1999 shortly after graduating from university and wanted to travel around Southeast Asia for three months before starting his career back in the US. Somehow, he never stopped traveling. Derek has now been traveling the world for 23 years and has been to 133 countries. He runs the popular [Wandering Earl](#) travel blog, as well as [Wandering Earl Tours](#), which organizes unique small-group trips to some of his favorite countries. The tour company has been in operation for over 10 years, helping travelers explore fascinating destinations in a style that you won't find with a typical group tour. He regularly appears in the media to share insights and adventures from his travel life. And he has been featured in publications such as Time Magazine, The New York Times, and many others.

Derek, welcome to the show.

Derek Baron: Ah, thanks so much for having me, man. I'm looking forward to it.

Matt Bowles: Man, I am so excited to have you here. Let's just start off by setting the scene though and talking about, first of all, where we are doing this interview, because this is totally crazy. Unfortunately, we are not in person today, but you and I are not only in the same country, the United States, we are actually in the same state, which is completely wild.

So, I am actually in the Blue Ridge Mountains in Western North Carolina. And where are you?

Derek Baron: I'm in Downtown Raleigh, not too far away. Yeah, pretty wild indeed.

Matt Bowles: That's incredible. If it was less than a seven- or eight-hour drive, man, I would have just taken my bottle of wine and come over there and we would be sitting next to each other. But instead, we've agreed to make this a virtual wine night. So, I have just opened a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon from California. And what are you drinking tonight, my man?

Derek Baron: I have a bottle of Sangiovese from Italy.

Matt Bowles: Well, played, sir.

Derek Baron: There we go.

Matt Bowles: I salute you. Well, I want to start off by giving folks a little bit of your background and what led up to your now 23-year and counting travel journey. Can you just share a little bit about where you're originally from, where you grew up, and how your interest in travel initially started to develop?

Derek Baron: Sure. Yeah. I mean, I grew up just in a small town south of Boston. Pretty normal. Everything was all set. They got into university. Everything was planned. I eventually decided I was going to be a sports agent. So, I studied some business law and some business management classes, sports management. And then I just somehow at university, I felt like I needed to move around a bit. And there was an opportunity to study abroad in Australia for a semester. And I just jumped on it. I said, what the heck I'd really apart from a family trip to Europe, hadn't been anywhere.

And I just jumped on that opportunity and craziest six months of my life, just from the standpoint of having so much fun and also meeting people from countries that I had never met anybody from before. And this was, we're talking Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, or other students from those countries. And it just fascinated me so much. That I said, you know, I'm going to go home back to the States, graduate, and I got

to take a trip to Southeast Asia that I've learned so much about now from all of my fellow students. And I need to see what it's about before I get into my career. And that was exactly what I did.

According to plan, graduated back in the US, took off Christmas Day, in 1999, took off to Bangkok, and started my three-month trip around all these places that I'd heard about.

Matt Bowles: I want to talk about the beginning of that trip because I know it was life-changing and transformative for you. You actually spent the millennium at Angkor Wat in Cambodia, and I want you to give a little bit of background on just Angkor Wat in general for people that don't know about it, maybe have never even heard of it, or haven't been there at least. Because I can tell you when I first went to Angkor Wat, which was in 2016 and I had been traveling full time but had no base for about three and a half years at that point, I was absolutely blown away.

I mean, it was unlike anything I had ever seen in my life. And since then, I've literally been telling people like, okay, there's a lot of places in Southeast Asia that I really deeply love. But if someone were to say to me, I have four days to do a stopover anywhere in the Southeast Asia region, what should I do with my four days?

Not even a question. I would say, go to Siem Reap, Cambodia, get the three-day temple pass, and just do that. But can you share a little bit about context of Angkor Wat, and what it is? And then what your experience was like at that time and the impact it had on you.

Derek Baron: Sure. It's basically a massive, and when I say massive, massive ancient city and temple complex that was discovered in the jungles of central Cambodia.

And I can tell you when I went in 1999 - 2000, it was still pretty untouched. It was a long road to get there from the closest town. And once you got there, there was nothing. Now there are restaurants and all kinds of stuff, like right up to the temples. It just goes on forever. You could drive for hours and still be seeing new temples everywhere you go.

And they're surreal. Some of them have trees growing over the walls, as you might've seen in the photos. Some of them have incredible faces carved into the sides. It's, it really is unlike anything else I've seen anywhere else. And that is indeed where I ended up for the millennium. Yeah. Back then, literally it was a huge celebration. I don't know. They, I think they estimated like 50,000 Cambodian people, almost no foreigners. I saw just a couple of other foreigners there. It was the first and probably still, I would say, I could say it's still the biggest life-changing night of my life.

Matt Bowles: So, what impact did that experience have on you and how did it change the originally planned trajectory of that trip?

Derek Baron: Yeah, so it was only about a week into the trip and for the millennium, I got out to the temple complex in the jungle and had no idea what was going on. I was staying at some hostel in the closest town in Siem Reap and they just organized transportation and said, yeah, we'll take you out there and there should be stuff going on.

Next thing I know, local people invited me to sit on this ancient wall and they're sharing their food, they're sharing their drink. We're watching Buddhist monks release lanterns into the sky, chanting and singing and dancing and all 50,000 people. It was one of the most spectacular celebrations I've, I still have ever been part of.

And as I'm sitting on that wall after a few hours, I'm just thinking, I was like, wow, I've just learned so much in one day here in Angkor Wat. I've met so many incredible local people, so kind and so generous. And it's just something clicked inside that made me think this was one day. Like what would happen if I traveled for longer and then I was thinking, well, you know, the last week has been pretty cool too since I arrived in Southeast Asia.

So that's in one week what I have done and what I've experienced and the people I've met. Imagine if I did that forever and that just idea popped into my head and obviously, it was an absurd idea, but the idea was there and that's where it was planted. I was like, what if I did this travel stuff forever? That was about as far as I got. Had no idea how it was possible, but that idea from that day forward was implanted.

Matt Bowles: You were not independently wealthy at the time that you did this Southeast Asia trip. Can you share a little bit about your financial situation at that moment when you were there and when you were making this decision?

Obviously, you then needed to figure out how to finance this life of epic world travel that you were envisioning. So, can you share a little bit just about your journey and some of the different ways over the years that you've ended up financing your travels?

Derek Baron: Sure. Yeah. I mean, at that time I left home with \$1,500. So, I figured \$500 a month. Southeast Asia, perfect three months. Come back, completely broke. Get into my career. I'm all set. So, when I decide that perhaps 'll travel forever. Well, at that point, I probably had 1400 bucks and no idea how to travel forever. That's for sure. I mean, there was no, you couldn't jump online and find ways to do it.

And you couldn't, it wasn't a ton of people doing it. It was very hard to get information. So, I remember, I just thought to myself, I was like, well, There has to be a way to do it. I just need to keep my eyes and ears open. Talk to as many people as possible. Learn what other people are doing. And honestly, that's what I did.

And that led me on a crazy journey to teaching English inside of Dunkin Donuts in Northern Thailand, to groups of university students, like teaching them slang and everyday English. To work on cruise ships as a tour manager, to eventually start the blog and eventually [the tour company](#). And all of those things were literally from meeting people and hearing what they've done and figuring out, I could do that.

Or even people saying, oh, you know, it would be great for you. You should get in touch with this person. They can hook you up with cruise ships. That would be great to make some money and save. And it was all just from talking to people and putting that stuff together. One thing led to another led to another. And before I knew it, after I say 10 years or so, then suddenly I started the travel blogging and then it went off in a whole, whole different direction.

Matt Bowles: Well, the travel blog is amazing. [The tour company](#) looks incredible. We're going to get into that. I want to talk a little bit about some of the destinations where you've traveled, and some of the places where you've chosen to spend a lot of your time.

And I think I want to start with India. This is a place where you've been something like 40 times to India. You spent an enormous amount of time there. And I have been to India only twice. Both times were incredibly impactful, really meaningful. I've been to Delhi and Agra and seen the Taj Mahal and I've been to Mumbai, and I've been down to Kerala, and I've been to Punjab.

I was in Amritsar for Diwali, which was amazing, and saw the golden temple and did all this stuff. So, I've had a handful of experiences in India. All were amazing. I mean, I am thoroughly enamored with the country, but each time I go, one of the things that is very apparent to me is number one, just how absolutely massive and how remarkably diverse this country is.

And I think it's almost for people that haven't been. It's almost misleading when we talk about it as a country, because saying that you've been to India, I explain to people, it's kind of like saying you've been to Europe. You know, like where in Europe have you been? Oh, they are all different countries. They speak all different languages. They have all different cultures, different types of food, all different stuff in India, I feel is kind of the same, right? I mean, for people that don't have context, there are over four times as many people in India as there are in the United States. I mean, it's absolutely enormous.

And the more places I go to, the more time I spend, the more incredible experiences I have, the more diverse experiences I have, and the more time I want to go back and spend in other places in the country. And I just feel like I've seen so little of it overall. So, for you, I totally understand going back 40 times. I mean, it makes a lot of sense to me and I'm curious having spent so much time there, if you can share a little bit in terms of what you love about India and also how you approach, and structure your travel experiences in India when you're deciding what to do and how long to spend and where.

Derek Baron: I guess for me, the first time I went there was the first time I sort of felt that I was in a destination with infinite possibilities. It just never ended. And even if I just would take one day from the minute, I woke up to the minute I went to sleep, the amount of just impactful or fascinating or even challenging, which I look at as a good way, things that happened to me in this one day were just, were so overwhelming that I couldn't compare it to any other place.

And I think what you mentioned is very important is that diversity, because every time I would go to a new state in India, or to a new region, suddenly I was like, wait a minute, there's different food? Like, I just, you know, grew up thinking, oh, Indian food, it's this. Different food, people dress differently, different cultures, different religions, different landscapes. It just never ended.

And I think that's what drew me back. Cause obviously I couldn't stay forever on the first trip. So, I had to keep coming back. And the more I learned, the more I wanted to explore. And then it started to get down into the people and the places I would end up with. Still to this day, my absolute favorite place in India is a town where I was in India once with two friends, we were in Mumbai. Had no idea where we were going to go next, and we literally did the throw something at a map. And that's where we went. And it is my favorite place in India to this day. We take almost all of the tour groups that go to India to this town and the people are amazing. I just feel very good when I'm there. That's what's brought me back quite a bit.

As for how you structure the trips, that's that, honestly, when I, when people ask for advice about India, I pretty much tell them fly into Delhi or Mumbai or something. It doesn't matter. It's not the kind of country where you can really try and cover it all. You can't, it almost doesn't matter where you go.

Everywhere is going to lead, whether you go South, whether you go North, whether you go into the mountains or you go into the desert, whether you go to the big cities or the small villages, everything is going to lead to quite a fascinating travel experience, and you're going to meet some incredible people anywhere you go and that's basically what I did. I would just pick a random corner of the country every time I went and would just go explore that, go up to the mountains, go to the different mountains, go to the

Northeast corner of the country, go South, go here. And somehow, like I said, after 40 trips, I still haven't covered half of it. Not even a third of it, a 10th of it.

Matt Bowles: So, for full-time travelers like me and there's a number of other full-time travelers, obviously to listen to the podcast, if I were to say, okay, Derek, you know what? I think I'm just going to take a year of my life, 12 consecutive months, and just go spend it in India. Because I feel that India just deserves that much of my time, and I want to really experience and immerse in India. What tips might you have for thinking about how to structure a really long-term, extended, slow traveling experience through India? Maybe any particular places you think would be great for longer-term, immersive stays, some of your favorite spots, or any other advice you'd have for longer-term travelers?

Derek Baron: So, for longer term travelers, I would honestly say, what month are you showing up in India? And that determines where you start. That's it. If it's the summer, go to the mountains. If it's not summer, go south and start there. Honestly, my initial general advice would be just to get to the first place.

Because it's the kind of country where you really just want to let the stuff happen because you're going to meet people. They're going to invite you here. You're going to hear about places that aren't on any website that are going to be fascinating. And you're going to end up going there because people want to take you there.

And the trip is going to completely unfold on its own. With that said, if you were going to stay in one particular place for a long time, I mean, I will say, if you want, sort of, the most common places would be, for example, up in the mountains during the summer, especially up in like, uh, McLeod Ganj, which is where the Dalai Lama lives.

It's a very comfortable little mountain town up there with, uh, good infrastructure. So, if you do have to, for example, work online or something, that's very friendly. It's a very peaceful place. And then the beaches along the South are another great place to sort of set up in terms of a base. Some of the cities, like I personally like Kolkata, I find it quite a good city, but sometimes the cities can be a little bit overwhelming to spend a long time there.

So, it kind of depends on what kind of Indian experience you're drawn to. I know a lot of friends who stay in, for example, Varanasi for extended periods of time. But then I also know a lot of people who would like to leave Varanasi after two days. And that's a sufficient amount of time. So, it really depends on what parts of India you're drawn to.

Matt Bowles: Well, I got to ask you about one of your India stories, man. Didn't you end up getting into a Bollywood movie somehow? And not just as a background extra, but you actually had speaking lines. Can you tell the story?

Derek Baron: Yeah. I was actually in Mumbai at the guest house where I was staying and my friend from Australia was flying in. And I got ready, I had breakfast, I'm waiting. I'm like, oh, I got to leave for the airport in about an hour. And just, it just occurred to me, oh man, she's not coming until tomorrow. I just messed up the dates. So, I was like, huh, what the heck am I going to do? So, I went to the guy who was at the front desk, and I was like, "Hey man, like, I thought I, my friend was coming. but not, what should I do today?" He's like, "You want to act?" I was like, "What?" He's like, yeah, "We want to be in like a movie or something". It's like, "what are you talking about?" He's like, just hold on. Next thing you know, he makes some phone calls and he's like, in one hour, come down here, meet me here.

All of a sudden, some guy shows up. He's like, go with him. And off we go. And we go to this Juhu beach neighborhood, quite a wealthy upscale neighborhood of Mumbai, right on the water. Next thing you know, we show up at this mansion that's been turned into a movie set basically and they start to explain to me that I will be playing a British police officer. It was actually not a movie. It was a like a series. Like a soap opera. They gave me a uniform. They actually had hired, hired will go with me and another guy to have two British police officers. The problem was the other guy was French and he actually didn't speak very little English. So, they gave me all the lines and he was just standing next to me.

And it was wild. I mean, of course, I messed up many times and the rest, everybody was very nice. But I ended up acting. I had a couple of lines. I had to inform this poor family that their daughter was in a car accident. It was a dramatic scene, and it was such a fun day. I did get paid. I got paid 500 rupees, which at the time was like 10 bucks plus lunch. They gave me a free shave because I was not presentable when I arrived. So

Matt Bowles: Hahaha, that's amazing, man. Well, I want to also ask you about a number of other places. Really excited to ask you about places that I have not yet been. That I know you have been and that you really appreciate. Can you talk next about Romania? I know this is another country that you've been to like 40 times and has a really significant place in your travel journey and in your heart. So, can you share a little bit about Romania? Why do you love it and what it's like there?

Derek Baron: Yeah, for sure. Like this one, I was actually on a Ural train trip across Europe and the trip was supposed to finish in Istanbul. And I just crossed over from Budapest into Romania and the plan, I gave myself three days in Romania.

The next thing I knew I was in Bucharest and somehow just through like online, a reader of my blog was like, "Oh, Hey, you're in Bucharest. Do you want to meet up tonight? I'm going out with some friends". So sure. I have a night. So, I went and met up with them. Next thing I knew, they invited me to, "Oh, we're going to the countryside this weekend. You should stay longer. Come hang out with us". It's like, oh, I'm supposed to go to Istanbul. I'm like, I was just like, screw it. Like what, like, this is awesome. Let's go. And next thing I knew, I ended up spending a month in Romania. At that time, I had a pre-planned trip to South Africa that I literally went to South Africa, did the trip for two weeks, and then flew back to Romania.

And then just like that, it started to become my home base. It's a fascinating country. It's the best in Europe without the crowds at the time. The people are extremely intelligent people. I will say that. And it's the easiest country that I have been to, to make friends, especially with local people. Just met some really amazing people. And that sort of was where the foundation of the connection started.

Matt Bowles: Well, another place that I want to ask you about is the African island of Mauritius. I have spent probably about two and a half years on the continent across different countries. I have not yet been to Mauritius, and I have heard you recommend it among your top five places in the world for a long or medium-term extended stay. Can you share a little bit about what Mauritius is like?

Derek Baron: Yeah, I think it's also part of that is because the place not many people think to go to. It is in all honesty, slightly inconveniently located out there in the Indian Ocean. It's a large island, there are a couple million people, so there's actually quite good infrastructure.

It's beautiful with, uh, whether you like nature, hiking, gorgeous beaches, small little towns, the food is wonderful. It's one of those places that feels super remote, probably because it is, out there in the middle

of the Indian Ocean. But it's gorgeous and it's very affordable. So, for somebody who wants to work online, or a long-term traveler just wants to plop down for, say, a few months, it's a great place to go because you can do something.

I mean, when I was there, we rented a car, super drive around, we went hiking, went to all different beaches, went to every corner of that island, explored every town on the island, and it's just, uh, it's just a friendly, beautiful place that not many people think to go to. Honestly, it's not the beaches rival the beaches in the much more.

Popular destinations that you hear about. It's a cool vibe. It's just as a really cool vibe. Again, has the infrastructure and, and it's affordable enough for people to spend long term there. And they do actually have a digital nomad visa that people are stars. I was looking at the numbers the other day, actually, as a decent amount, considering how you inconveniently located is there's a decent amount of people taking advantage of that visa to go and live there for a year.

Matt Bowles: Well, you have moved it up on my list quite a few notches. So, I am super excited about that one. Another place that you've been that I have not been is that you went to East Timor and I'm curious about your experience there and just for folks that aren't familiar with East Timor, can you share a little bit of background on that where it is? And then what your experience was like going there?

Derek Baron: Sure. Yeah. It's a very small country, relatively newish, I don't know the exact date, but I guess in the last century that was once part of Indonesia. And it does share an island with the Indonesia side of Timor. It's interesting because I knew about the country for a while when I was at university, the university that I went to in the US had a very active program with the East Timorese government, and actually, the leader of East Timor came, and I had dinner with him when I was a university student. And ever since then, I was like, wow, I really want to get to East Timor. And he was part of the team that led sort of their revolution to become an independent country. So, it always kind of stuck with me.

Finally, it was just a few years ago that actually went and it's a hard place to describe because the infrastructure is quite poor, wonderful people and really gorgeous. It's like an Indonesian. I have it like what you would expect with gorgeous, lush jungle and, and beaches and really beautiful, but quite interesting. I actually flew there from Bali and to see the difference in such a short distance, it is unfortunately a struggling country in terms of just they don't have much in terms of income and industry at the moment, but it was quite fascinating to go. If you really know about it and want to learn about it firsthand, it's worth visiting.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, I think that's really important. And I also was in college in the 90s and then starting in 1999, I did a master's degree in international peace and conflict resolution.

And the genocide in East Timor was still going on in the late nineties. And I think officially ended around 99 or so, which is exactly the time period that you're talking about. And so, I think it's really important, you know, going to places like that, to read that history and really understand. Why things are the way that they are.

And I feel like that's the case with a lot of travel. Like this past year, I just went to Rwanda for the first time, and I went to Kigali and, you know, there's a lot of amazing stuff to do in Rwanda, obviously, you know, but I didn't actually do any of the guerrilla trekking or that kind of stuff on this particular trip.

I just wanted to have the urban experience of Kigali and really just study the history of the genocide and go to the memorials and, you know, really kind of immerse in that because I had read a lot about it, and I had studied it and it was just sort of important to me to go and at least have an experience reflecting on that.

And then I'm sure I'll go back because Rwanda of course is an amazing country, and the people are incredible. And I'd love to hang out with the gorillas and see a lot of the beautiful landscape and some of the other things that Rwanda has to offer. But a lot of my travel, I really try to pay attention to political history and try to understand what the history was and then what the situation is today and then connect with people with that context. So, I think those kinds of trips are important to

Derek Baron: Hundred percent. And I think, you know, it's also very important. I find travel is amazing, obviously, but not all travel has to be beautiful, wonderful, and happy.

You know, experience is like, you know, part of the reason why I travel is also and go to places like East Timor, there are people there, you know, there are real people there that are struggling living lives and try to live their lives just as like anywhere else. And all we hear, you know, you go on Instagram, you go on anything or blogs, you hear just about sort of the more popular destinations, but there's people there with stories.

Things to share and things we can learn from and people we can learn from. And I think it's important to go and be able to go and obviously super small scale, but I can write about it a little bit and tell other people that I, that I meet about the experiences there just to, you know, so they're aware there is a country there, there are people there that important people and yeah, they should, they should, they deserve our attention as well.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, I really appreciate that about your travels and your blog and the priorities that you have as a traveler. And I want to ask you about some more places that you've been and especially places that I haven't yet been that I'm really interested in. One of them is Pakistan. Can you share a little bit about your experience in Pakistan?

Derek Baron: Yeah. That was another one where I had, it was funny. I planned to go for two weeks. I just was like, okay, I'm going to Pakistan. I was in India. I crossed the land border at the time, and I had two weeks that should be good. I think I stayed for six weeks in the end. It was beyond remarkable. Started off in Lahore, which was just incredible food, and incredible people.

And then I went up to the mountains and even as a traveler, my naive self had no idea what I would find when I headed up to the mountains, which are more mountains over 7,000 meters than any other country in the world. And it's probably the most spectacular mountain landscape I've seen in me Anywhere on the planet, without a doubt.

And just had some incredible experiences. I kept on going, kept on going. And that led me to one corner of Pakistan where some people were like, "Oh, you should go check out this corner. It's super remote". And I had to actually hitchhike on the back of a Jeep, standing up on a Jeep for two days. Uh, along a dirt road, we took a break at some disgusting government guesthouse in the middle of nowhere.

It was so dirty and stuffy, but, uh, it was worth the experience and continued the next day standing up at the back of this Jeep to arrive in this town called Chitral. And Chitral used to be quite popular back in the

70s with travelers and even 80s with people coming through on the old hippie trail. Kept going and when I arrived, I was the fifth visitor of the year.

And this was in like September, I ended up having dinner at a local, just local restaurant in the town and a village elder approached me and started talking to me, asking me some questions and sort of broken English. And by the end of it, he basically said, you need to come and meet my friends tonight, let's come and hang out with my friends.

I agreed. And the next thing you know, after I finished dinner, we walked out of the back of the restaurant along a path into the mountains. And eventually, we reached a clearing where there were seven members of the Taliban with their guns and everything. And they had literally just returned from Afghanistan the day before.

Matt Bowles: And what happened when you got there? What was the evening like?

Derek Baron: It's a tricky situation. When the elderly guy did ask me where I was from, I was smart enough to tell him I was from New Zealand, just because I knew that this was a region where potentially Osama Bin Laden was at the time and stuff like this.

So, I did mention that. So, he told everybody I was from New Zealand, and everybody said, that's our favorite part of Europe. So, I was like, okay, I chose well 'cause there we go. It was a fascinating several hours. Basically, what happened is they were young, they were like 20. And they would repeatedly say things like America's the devil.

We want to kill all Americans. We love Hitler. We want to kill all Jews. I'm also Jewish and stuff like this, but I would question them. I say, "Oh, why do you love Hitler?" And he would say, "Oh, you know, he killed the Jews". And I would say, well, why is that good? And they would say, "We love Hitler". That's as far as it went.

Like, we want to kill all Americans. Why? America's the devil. Why? We want to kill all Amer like, that's it. They had no idea. Like, because they probably never met anybody. And, honestly, if any of us grew up in that town, so remote, without going to school, and that's all we were taught, we would all pretty much be saying the same thing.

So, that's how I kind of separated it. If you take away that they were very nice. I mean, they were joking around. They were very nice. They shared their hashish and opium joints with me. I initially refused and, uh, they said, "Oh, you can't refuse. We're offering this to you as our special guests and you need to partake".

And they would joke around. They were sticking like two huge joints in my mouth at the same time and laughing. And I'm sitting there like, I mean, I don't do that stuff really ever. And I was like, "Oh, this is going to be interesting". I started pinching myself. As soon as I noticed that I was leaning towards passing out.

I started, like, I'm pinching myself, I'm like, do not pass out, I was like, do not, this is the worst place to pass out, don't pass out, and I'm here, and like, you know, America's the devil, we want to kill all the Jews, and then I passed out, so, after, yeah, oh, I totally passed out, and the next thing I know, I woke up eventually, and they were just dying laughing, luckily, and, they were like, "Oh, I think you need to go to sleep", and I was like, "Yes, sir", And they greeted me goodbye with, you know, the usual kiss on the cheeks and pat me on the back and off I went and went to my hotel.

Matt Bowles: So, was this in the North-West Frontier Province?

Derek Baron: So, this is just north of that. I think we were about 10 kilometers from the border with Afghanistan. So, this was like, it was just north of that area. The funny thing is I did eventually later on in my trip, go into the tribal regions, the frontier province, where I ended up going to the town where they manufacture all the guns. And I was there also while like Taliban were walking into these gun shops buying guns and stuff.

Matt Bowles: What was it like? What was going on?

Derek Baron: So first, in order to get into that tribal region, you had to get a permit from the government. So, I was in the city of Peshawar, and I went to the government office. They were like, hell no. I was like, uh, I need to get a permit. They're like, you cannot get a permit. So, what I did is I made the decision that after Pakistan, I was going to go to Afghanistan. So, what I did is I went to the Afghan embassy in Peshawar, and I actually got a visa, which was surprisingly easy. Like I don't need, I think it takes less than 30 minutes to get a visa.

Then I went back to the office. I said, well, now you have to give me the permit because that's the road to get to Afghanistan is I got to go through the Khyber Pass. I got to go. And they gave me the permit. Yeah. So, I managed to go, it took a while to find a taxi driver that would take like hire for the day to take me in.

And then eventually I did. And we went to this village called Dara Adam Khel. Which is known for its gun manufacturing, and they make like replicas of everything and it's these little concrete shops like dozens of them and you show up and like people are building guns in their little concrete shop and people are just like grabbing them take over to shoot them into the mountains tested them out. It was freaking wild and like they're trying to sell me on like they had got like pen guns. It looked like a pen all the way to AK 47s and God knows what that was nuts.

Like it was nuts. Just every two seconds. Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. And I'm like, this Yeah, I probably shouldn't be here.

Matt Bowles: And then what was the Khyber Pass like and going into Afghanistan?

Derek Baron: So, the Khyber Pass part was quite smooth. Tech took us to the border. I walked across the border and went to the little hut on the Afghan side. And they were kind of like, what the heck are you doing here? But I guess you have a visa. So, there you go. And then, the only way to get from the border to Kabul was by a bus that comes eventually. They're just like, you stand there and there'll be a bus eventually. And I got on this bus, it was like a minibus with maybe 20 people.

I mean, I'd done research. I obviously was experienced by that time. So, I was wearing actually local clothes, like a shalwar, like the long baggy pants with a long shirt, traditional vests, and I also had a thick mountain blanket covering my head. And I had also grown a beard as much as I could anyway.

Because, oddly enough, in Afghanistan, I mean, it's quite diverse for those who don't know. So, you find people with very pale skin, blue eyes, all the way to darker, I mean, quite the range. So, I was in the back of the bus, and we're driving to Kabul, and two times on the trip, the Taliban did come running out of the mountains. You can see, like, sort of bunkers on the side of the road, with people behind them with guns, and those were not the army, for the most part. It was mostly Taliban, and two times they came, running out of the mountains and would surround the bus. I don't know what was going on, but they were, you

know, yelling back and forth at the driver and the couple of times they came out with their guns onto the bus and I made eye contact.

I'll never forget this guy's face. I made eye contact through the back window with the one guy who was standing outside looking in. But honestly, I don't think they thought that I was a foreigner because. With the beard, with the clothes, like, honestly, I didn't look any different. So eventually the driver paid them off and we continued to Kabul.

I only stayed about 10 days in Afghanistan, mostly in Kabul with a couple of daytrips to some outskirt regions, but it was pretty wild at that time. At the hotel where I stayed in the center, there was a car bomb, I think a week before I went there, right on the street. So, the whole street in front of the hotel was totally demolished and it was pretty wild.

Matt Bowles: All right. So, I've got to ask about your experience coming back to the United States through customs after having these experiences.

Derek Baron: Yeah, I probably should have thought that through. So, after Afghanistan, I flew back to Delhi and from Delhi to the U.S. You know, I was in Afghanistan, so I was just like, I cannot believe I'm in Kabul. This is nuts. Like, so I'm just grabbing a few souvenirs, if you will. One of them was a box of, that they sold Osama bin Laden, called like kulfi candies. They're like, like, what do we call it? Like the little balls that you just suck on.

And they had a picture of Osama bin Laden on the cover of the box. So, I bought one of those. At one point I was walking around a neighborhood in Kabul and all of a sudden, a kid came up to me and he's like, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no". I was like, "What?" And he kind of motioned to show me that there were landmines where I was walking.

So, he walked me around a different way to this top of the, to the top of the hill, to give me a view of the city. And at the end, I was like, he gave me a gift and the gift was a bullet, like a used bullet that he had found. And he gave it to me like, "Oh, you have", like, so I just put it in my shorts pocket and I didn't wear the shorts anymore during the trip.

And then I also picked up a burka just because it was really my first time somewhere where I saw the burka that basically had almost no, it wasn't even a slit for the eyes. It had mesh over the eyes. So, like, really, I was like, wow, like that. I can't imagine. So, I had those three items in my luggage and obviously I got back to the U.S. and went through customs. And the guy I got was a young customs officer who immediately upon asking where I had been. And when I said Afghanistan and Pakistan, he thought he got somebody. I saw the look on his face. He was like, I got a terrorist, or I got somebody like I got it. And he started to get super nervous.

He called over to his supervisor. They went through my stuff. I was like, I just traveled there. Obviously, that made no sense to them. They went through my stuff. They even read my journal that I had. I missed my connection flight because they kept me for so long. But, uh, they let me go because they even let me go with all the stuff.

So, I still have the bullet to this day. But we did figure out later we found that they were tapping my mom's phone. And possibly watching my movements for a while after that. We did have a friend who was sort of ex FBI who was able to help figure that out for us. And for a few years, I was then on a watch list.

So, every time I left the country or came back into the country, um, I definitely got pulled into a separate room to have a thorough check. But after a few years, it was eventually dropped because I had nothing to hide and off, I went.

Matt Bowles: Another experience I want to ask you about is the time that you got kidnapped in Bangladesh. Can you tell that story about how it happened, what the experience was like, and then how you escaped?

Derek Baron: Sure. Yeah, that was, uh, that was definitely my fault. At the time I was flying from Bangkok to Dhaka, Bangladesh. And if you read anything online or anywhere in any guidebook, it would say, that if you arrive in Bangladesh after sunset, do not leave the airport until sunrise.

My flight was super delayed. I think arrived around midnight. Well, I went outside, I left the airport, and the next thing I knew, a group of taxi drivers surrounded me, and they were all sort of fighting for my business. And eventually, I chose the one who spoke a decent amount of English and they grabbed my bag, and they walked me over to a taxi in this dark parking lot.

And the next thing I knew, they told me to get in the back and five of those taxi drivers got in the vehicle with me. So, I thought it was a little bit odd. A few miles outside the airport, they stopped for gas and made me pay to fill up the car. I was like, okay. Then when I told them again, the name of the hotel that I wanted to go to, they told me that I was not going there.

So that was my clearest indication that something was awry. And they ended up taking me to this really big sort of slum area where we pulled over to this building that had a metal, sort of like a metal garage door thing, and they knocked on it. It opened up a few feet. We all went under and that was the beginning of my kidnapping.

They basically put me in a room and locked me in this room for the night. So, it's gross with cockroaches. It was a pretty bad place, just a bare concrete room. And, uh, they had somebody out, uh, guarding the room out front. Next morning, they came and picked me up. And basically, it turned into a three-day kidnapping where they would try and take me to the bank or to ATMs for me to take out money.

And every time we would go to the ATM, I would type in the wrong pin number and tell them that it didn't work here in Bangladesh. They did not have weapons. They were not very experienced. They didn't even take my backpack but had things like my camera and stuff. In the end, I gave about 200 of the cash that I had on me to the people.

They moved me to a couple of different places, right? So, a couple of different buildings where I spent the night. And on the third day, we came back from another failed attempt at an ATM. And the guy who was sort of the leader said, go up to your room, get your bag, and come downstairs. We're taking you somewhere else.

Okay. I go upstairs to my room on the second floor. I grabbed my bag, and my backpack, and before I went downstairs, I saw that down the hallway was just an exit, like just an exit. I go run down there. I see the exit. There's one of those metal staircases just leading down to the street and the side of the building. I literally just went down the staircase and I jumped into a rickshaw and had the rickshaw driver take me to the hotel that I wanted to go to three days before. And that was it. So, it cost me 200 bucks. They were not very experienced, and it was probably the most absurd kidnapping ever.

Matt Bowles: What was your mentality? What was going through your mind during the course of those three days? How were you handling and processing in thinking about escape or exit strategy, et cetera, while this was going on?

Derek Baron: So, the first night I was confused but extremely exhausted. I mean, it would have been a long day. I was like, well, I can't do anything now. I'm in this concrete room. Like I just need to wait until tomorrow and see what happens.

And so, the next day I saw, I was like sort of suss it out. I'm like, okay, they're not armed. They want money. So, I gave 200 that day, the money that I had. I'll be to the guys like, here you go. And I just kind of over the course of the day, I realized, okay, I don't think this is something super serious. So, I could probably get away from this.

Like they haven't threatened me. They haven't taken my camera that they don't seem to know what they're doing. So, the next night where they moved me somewhere else for that second night, and basically the third day is when I started thinking, okay, like I, how the heck do I get out of here? At the same time, it was my first time in Bangladesh.

Dhaka is a super intense city. Like I was like, I had not been to India before. So, this was my first trip to that region. So, I was just like, "Oh my goodness. Like, this is so intense". I don't know what is going on here. So, I was a little bit too nervous to just take a break for it while they were around, because I don't know.

I just didn't know what was going on. It was, it was quite overwhelming at the time. And it was only when eventually they told me to get the bag and I was like, you know what, screw it. Like the third day. I was like, what's that? I saw the exit and went for it. And I thought I could, I can just do this. Like me. What are they going to do?

You know, they haven't harmed me. They don't, I don't think they're going to do anything. They're definitely not going to find me in this city of however many millions of people, that's for sure. So that was that.

Matt Bowles: And what lessons did you take from that experience that informed your future travels with regard to safety precautions or anything else?

Derek Baron: So, I mean, this is what I always say. I've been traveling 23 years and that's pretty much the only thing that's happened to me. Common sense. I totally botched that one. Common sense was to not leave the airport, because literally everything that I read said, do not leave the airport if you arrive late at night.

And just common sense would be like, that seems fair. I will stay in the airport. And I just walked outside the airport. So that's what I kind of tell anybody and what's got me, common sense. You just feel it. Like, you just feel it. If something doesn't seem right, you know, people generally aren't aggressive.

That's pretty rare for that to happen. It's just, if something doesn't seem right, you just walk away. Like, that's it. I mean, you just kind of, and the more you travel, I'm sure you know this, the more you travel, the more you just pick up on things, like, the more you just sense something is going on, you know, there was a time in Mumbai where I was walking down the street.

And I'm just, you know, just looking around the street and something, I'm just like something I feel like just with the way people are near me right now, something's going on. And sure enough, I turned around and

caught a guy with his hand extended to my pocket. So, you just start to sense it. So, it's not like practice, it's just experience, and your brain just starts to pick up on signals and things that might indicate, be a little bit careful.

Matt Bowles: So, I've got to ask, what was the rest of your Bangladesh trip like, and your overall impression of Bangladesh today?

Derek Baron: Rest trip was great. I had a fascinating time in Dhaka, uh, in the capital. And then I actually went out to the countryside, and it was beautiful. It's the beautiful little town called Sree Mangal, tea plantations and beautiful forests with monkeys everywhere and super nice people.

I met wonderful people everywhere I went in the country after that. Oddly enough, I am looking at returning in November. I'm traveling with a friend. I'm actually going to India in November to lead a tour. And then afterwards, a friend of mine, yeah, has not been to Bangladesh. So, we're, we're looking at going, so it'd be cool to go back.

Matt Bowles: How do you think about places based on your traveling experiences that you've had there. Cause I feel like a lot of times, especially if you only go to a place once, or let's say your first time going there, a lot of the impression of the place is very much based on the experience that you happen to have there at that time, the particular people that you interact with, the particular things that you do, and that can give two different people, two very different impressions of the same place.

And so, for you now having traveled to all of these places with the, um, overall vision and understanding that you have when you go to a place and your initial experience is a negative one as happened with you in Bangladesh. How do you process that in terms of your overall impression of the place?

Derek Baron: I mean, I think at this point I look beyond just the place.

So, like even at that point, I look at all of my travels together because if I actually average it out to all of the places I've been, all of the people that I've encountered, not only after 23 years but even after five years of travel, the overwhelming majority of situations are quite positive. So, I kind of take all of that into account that I think you learn pretty quickly.

No country's just full of bad people trying to do bad things. I mean, it's no different anywhere. I will always say the overwhelming majority of people in any country want the same things they want, you know, just to live a simple, happy life and, and hang out with their family and friends, take care of their loved ones.

And they don't want enemies. They don't want to harm other people. This is like 99.99% of every human being in every country. So, I take that into, into account and bad shit can happen.

Matt Bowles: All right, we're going to pause here and call that the end of part one. If you enjoyed this episode, be sure to tune in to the next episode for part two of my interview with Derek Barron, where he talks about his experiences traveling in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.

And he reflects on the impact that 23 years of travel has had on him. We talk about dating in the digital nomad lifestyle. We talk about how lifestyle design choices change in different seasons of life and why Derek does not have the goal of traveling to every country in the world. All of that and much more in the next episode. So be sure to tune in for the conclusion of my interview with Derek Barron.

In the meantime, everything that we discussed in this episode will be in [the show notes](#). You can just go to [themaverickshow.com](#), go to [the show notes](#) for this episode, and there you will find everything that we discussed on this episode linked up right there for you.

All right. Good night, everybody.