

Matt Bowles: My guest today is Conor Walsh. He is an SEO and content marketing expert and the founder of Banange Media, an East African based digital marketing agency and publisher. Originally from County Cork in Ireland, he has been a nomad since 2011 and is currently based in Nairobi, Kenya. He has been to over 40 countries, including spending over three years on the continent of Africa. Conor is also the founder of the *Digital Nomads in Africa* community on [Facebook](#), which now has over 2,000 members. Conor, welcome to the show.

Conor Walsh: Thanks, Matt. It's an honor to be here, man.

Matt Bowles: I am so excited to have you here, brother. We should just set the scene. You and I are in person in Nairobi, Kenya. And just by way of background, we actually met at the Bansko Nomad Fe earlier this year. You were from Ireland and you, and I just started talking. We had there's a few people talking and I just remember the conversation really struck me immediately because you and I very quickly got into a discussion about Irish politics and Irish solidarity with different liberation struggles around the world and then our nomad lives and all that kind of stuff. And I said, this is definitely a guy I need to keep in touch with.

And as it turned out, you were coming back here to Kenya, and I was coming to Kenya. So, we're now doing this interview in person today and it's really good for me to be back in Nairobi. I was here for about a month in 2018 and super, super special city. I was really enamored with it then and definitely had been wanting to come back. So, I'm back here for my second time. But you have spent a lot more time than I have here. I know you've been to Kenya multiple times and you've now been in Nairobi for over a year. This particular time in Kenya, can you share a little bit about what you love so much? I guess, first of all, about this country, because I know you've spent time in different parts of the country and why Kenya is so special to you?

Conor Walsh: First and foremost, the Kenyan coastline is one of the most beautiful places in the world. Just everything you want. Pristine white beaches, clear blue ocean, beautiful weather, green. Every time I go there, I forget just how vibrant everything is. And then also just the community, the culture and all of that. And then as I was spending time here in 2017, I met a lot of Nairobians and I just got the sense that there was a lot going on here. There's very creative, it's very international, it's very diverse, very entrepreneurial. So, I left Kenya for about a year, and then I got a remote job, and I had to stay in a European time zone. And I decided, well, I might as well just come back to Kenya. No one's going to notice.

Then I just kind of ended up in Nairobi. And what I love about Nairobi, the reason I ended up here, basically, for the last nearly two years now, actually, there's just a vibe here. There's just always something happening. You're really starting to see, like, a lot of things emerge all at once. Like a real kind of strong creative community, a lot of political things happening as well. Like, it's a society that I think, in some ways is really starting to find its own identity and to kind of reckon with its past in really interesting ways.

And then just this mix of entrepreneurship, the creativity, the kind of politics and the culture around that and how that all manifests in different ways, and there's always something happening. It's a bit hard to find. You got to scratch under the surface a little. It helps if you know somebody who's in Nairobi or you got to get into the right WhatsApp group and then the whole city opens up to you and there's all kinds of music, there's a big art scene, and then just the diversity, you know. Nairobi is the economic hub of East Africa. It's one of the main economic hubs of Africa in general. I have a huge Somali community, Eritrean Ethiopian, Rwandese, Ugandan Tanzanian, Congolese, and then all the international expats from outside of Africa. I keep thinking about leaving and then three months later, I'm still here.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, it's a super special place. One of the things that I noticed as soon as I got here in 2018 was just the entrepreneur scene, as you mentioned. I mean, just walking into a co working space and just seeing how this really is this incredible entrepreneurship hub. And then just the art scene and the nightlife is absolutely incredible. And the diversity to your point, you and I, this coming weekend are going to go to a Bollywood event in Nairobi. And there's this, you know, incredible Indian community here. I mean, it's just really, really an amazing scene. We went to a standup comedy open mic night. One of my buddies that's here with me performed at it. So, they've got that kind of stuff going on every week. Whatever kind of stuff you are into, whatever kind of music scene you're into, it's all here. I mean, this is a major, incredible, diverse international city that is just really exciting and electric to be in, I find even today.

Conor Walsh: You were at the Eritrean coffee shop that I love. Kesh Kesh. Shout out to Kesh Kesh. And then we met at a specialty coffee place where it's just all expert filtered coffee, all the fancy shit that you get everywhere else in the world. And then, yeah, on Saturday we're going to a big Bollywood extravaganza. Just this weekend I was at a deep house night in the basement of a shopping mall just down the road from us. And just every weekend there's something to do and it's completely different.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, it's a super special place, man. Well, Connor, I want to go back and do a little bit of your background and give people a little bit more context in terms of the journey that eventually brought you here, where we are today. Can you share a little bit about where you grew up and what sort of that context was in the cultural experience of your upbringing?

Conor Walsh: Sure. So, my upbringing, I grew up in a small town in Ireland, about 16,000 people, I think, just outside the second biggest city, Cork. The second biggest by our standards is, you know, a couple of hundred thousand people halfway between an airport and a harbor, which was kind of a defining aspect of my childhood because I was always yearning to be on a plane or a boat out of there. But in many ways, my childhood was in some ways kind of a classic, cliched tale of dysfunctional suburban family. There are a lot of arguments. My parents split up when I was 2. There's a lot of problems around that. A lot. So, I grew up in two very dysfunctional, unhappy households. But then at the same time, by Irish standards, it was quite atypical. I went to a very diverse school in my area.

So, at the time, the church was still a huge part of our lives and a part of the governance of society. And most of the schools were run by either the Catholic or Protestant church. And at the time, you could deny a child attendance in your school based on religion. I don't know how enforced it was because I was a child myself. But looking back, I realized that the school I went to must have been some kind of hub for the local immigrant community in Cork and also just mixed-race families as well. So, children of an immigrant and an Irish parent. And then it was the 90s, when the boom times in Ireland were just starting to take off. I know you were there at the same time, so you started to get the first real kind of immigration waves to a country that normally is the other way around. Everyone's leaving.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, exactly. I was there. 97, 98 was my junior year in college, and I studied abroad at Trinity College in Dublin. And I was based there for the whole year, which was an extraordinary year to be there for a number of reasons, not least of which that was the year that the Good Friday agreement was negotiated and signed. I was in Belfast the day that they signed that, which was quite remarkable. But the year was also incredible. It was my first real international experience by myself outside of the United States. So, it was my first national experience.

Conor Walsh: Oh, all right.

Matt Bowles: And then I'm in Dublin. And for people's context and for Americans context, the entire island of Ireland is about the size of North Carolina, which means that by train from Dublin, you can get anywhere in the island in a day. And so, you can just take the train and go somewhere. And so, every weekend, my roommate and I would go to a different place. And I remember, I think it was the very first weekend that we were at Trinity. We're like, let's do this every weekend. And it was the jazz festival in Cork, and so we went out for that. And it was one of my fondest memories. Going to your county, man.

Conor Walsh: Yeah. I mean, I left when I was 21, so I didn't really get to experience Cork as an adult. We had plenty of fun when we were teenagers, but maybe the less said about that, the better.

Matt Bowles: When you think back on your upbringing, what developed and inspired your interest in world travel initially.

Conor Walsh: So, 100% it was my mother. My mother loved to travel. She made sure that me, my two siblings, my brother and sister, because I'm the youngest of three, got to see as much of the world as we could. So even though she was a single mom from a pretty much working-class background, at least in the early parts of my childhood, the advantage, as I said, of living close to a harbor is that you could take the ferry to France. So, we would take holidays to France when we could. Later on, I found out that much of this was being facilitated by my grandfather and my uncle, who stepped in very much after my father left. And then as we got older and my mom was able to get a better paying job and start to work and start to save up, we started to branch a little bit further away.

My brother and my sister also studied abroad at different points. So, we visited my brother in the Czech Republic. I was able to do a school trip to New York at one point. And then, yeah, she just always wanted us to know that there was more to see out there and that we should go out and see as much of it as we could. And then my grandfather was the same. So, my grandfather was born in 1922, one of a dozen siblings. Was taken into work in the post office when he was 14. Just worked his way up to a pretty good position. And, well, you've seen the GPO in Dublin. Yeah, so he was managing the GPO at one point. That's the kind of career path he took. So, he was able to support us quite a bit.

And as he got older, just before he died, we would have basically the same conversation very often because he would kind of forget we'd already had it. And it was something along the lines of he'd just say, how old were you the first time you were on a plane? I think I was maybe 15. Ryanair was just taking off, so, you know, €20 flights to Tenerife or whatever, and he's like, that's amazing. I was 50 when I was on a plane. And then he would just have this whole spiel and it was basically that our generation was going to be able to do so much more than his and that we would, as a result, become much better people because we would be better educated, we would be exposed to more ideas, we would get to see more of the world and because of that, we should travel as much as we can and we shouldn't feel bad about it and we shouldn't stay in Ireland for our lives. We should get out as much as we could and travel as much as we could. And we would have this conversation a lot. And then I just decided that I would take his advice. So that's what I've been doing for the last 11 years.

Matt Bowles: And so, when you decided to leave and you were very young, you were 21, where did you go and what was that initial experience like for you?

Conor Walsh: So actually, the first time I really left, I was 20. I did three months in Southeast Asia. I was backpacking around Southeast Asia. This was 2010. I was still in college at the time, and I went to a college

travel agent. I had a little bit of money, and I booked a return flight to Bangkok. Because at the time Thailand was still pretty esoteric. There wasn't really travel bloggers that I was aware of at the time. It was about as far away from Ireland as I could get culturally and geographically. So, I booked a flight, and I bought Lonely Planet Southeast Asia on a shoestring, which I don't know if that even exists anymore. I did two months in Southeast Asia, and I just absolutely fell in love. I fell in love with the region. I can still remember the first day walking down the street in Bangkok and just everything about it was just so overwhelming, but it just felt invigorating. And I just knew then it's like, okay, this is me. I'm set.

So, my last day of my three-month trip, I was googling working visas for Irish people all over the world. Canada, Australia, Argentina. We're very lucky that Irish people can basically go and work anywhere we want. It's one of the many benefits that we enjoy as being part of the E.U. and other opportunities. So yeah, I went back to college for one year and I think one month into my first semester, I had booked flight back to Bangkok. Then I got a working holiday visa in Australia. So, nine days after I finished college, I flew to Bangkok for three days, got a visa to Burma, Myanmar, and then I spent about a month there, went back to Thailand, and then I moved to Australia for a year.

Matt Bowles: Well, I know you have now at this point, spent probably a good couple years in Thailand. And I know that that is a really special country for you. Can you talk a little bit about what some of your top highlights or memories or experiences have been in Thailand and why you love it so much?

Conor Walsh: Thailand is, as you said, for me, it's a very special place. I've been talking about it a lot recently to people because they're curious about it. I lived in Thailand and the rest of the region, like Cambodia, Malaysia, and that for about a year and a half when I turned 23 in Thailand, and I was volunteering at a backpacker hostel in Koh Tao. And you know, spending many of your formative years in Thailand is a very profound experience. Not in the way that everyone's thinking, like the kind of new Agey woo side of things, that cliché which is there and that's great and some people indulge in that.

But for me, coming from Irish Catholic society, there's a lot of shame, repression, judgment, all kinds of issues. And to get to Thailand, for better or worse, I was able to finally just explore every side of my personality and do so in a way that was safe and comfortable. You know, working in a backpacking Hostel when you're 23 and single can be a lot of fun, but it's also just a really interesting environment to learn about yourself. And then you're in Thailand and you're hanging out with Thai people. Like all my friends in Thailand at some points were Buddhist monks earlier in their lives. So even if you're like shit faced at 3 o'clock in the morning, you're just having the most profound conversations of your life. And if you've had a breakup or you know, you've come in from trauma or you anything and you just open up and you might not remember the conversation the next day, but you just, you're clearer, you feel better, you feel better about yourself and it's just a very welcoming environment.

It's a very open environment and society, obviously nowhere is perfect, but for me it was just a place to really kind of come into my own and to learn about myself and then also just have some amazing experiences. Like, it was a lot of fun. As I was saying, I got to learn to dive. I went diving with sharks at one point, which was just one of many incredible experiences. I got to go to Loy Krathong. I don't know if you've been to the Lantern festival in Chiang Mai, Songkran, you know, a five-day water fight for New Year's Eve. And like a whole country just turns into a playground. And the food and the culture and the history. Yeah, all of it. And I haven't been in Thailand in a few years, but it's always got a place in my heart.

Matt Bowles: Well, you've done a number of interesting side trips around Asia as well. You've gone to a lot of different places. One of the places that you went was to North Korea. Can you share a little bit about what that experience was like?

Conor Walsh: Yeah, Valentine's Day 2014. My girlfriend at the time really appreciated that I spent it flying to Pyongyang and left her behind in Kuala Lumpur, actually. But it was, yeah, 10 days in North Korea. It was a trip. It used to be a lot easier. I don't think it is so much anymore. But it was hanging out in Thailand. I just gotten a tax return for my year in Australia, so I had a little bit of money to burn. And I met a couple of people who had just been to North Korea, and they were telling me about it, and I was absolutely fascinated. So, they put me in touch with a tour company and away I went.

North Korea was the most memorable week of my life. Probably it's a trip where, you know, you have got to kind of leave everything at the airport and just be a sponge and just kind of accept it from everything that happens. And, you know, you can poke and prod and talk to people, but you're not only ever going to learn so much, but you're also basically in a George Orwell novel for about two weeks or a week. It's surreal. I was there at the time, so 2014, Kim Jong Il had just died very recently, and I was there for his birthday. So, we went and we. Like every communist state, they roll his body out and you go, and you bow down at his feet, and you pay your respects to one of the most evil men in history.

And then you go, and you go to all these celebrations in his memory, and you take part in. I went to a street dance, and we went to gymnastics demonstrations. And then they had just tested one of their first nuclear bombs, so that was a huge celebration. And then they had also just released a satellite into space that, as far as they knew, went very well. But I think in reality, it was not as much of a success as they had been led to believe. And you just spend your time in this surreal fever dream of what feels like utterly bizarre propaganda. They wheel you out too. You go to these factories that are meant to be the kind of pinnacle of production and economic activity, but you can tell they were just turned on an hour before you got there.

And by the end of the week, you just can't really tell what's the reality anymore. You're in a shop and you don't know if everyone else is in there. As an actor, you're going to eat out at restaurants and you're having the most delicious food you've ever had in your lives. In a country that's just a raging famine going on, and you're going to all of these events and 'spontaneous happenings'. And it's all pretended, right? You're looking at this society that has just been completely brainwashed in so many ways. And everyone thinks North Korea is this crazy outlier and it's just so bizarre. And how could it ever be like that? And how can a society live like that?

And honestly, in a roundabout way, the last year or so, I've been thinking a lot about Korea because inadvertently, it prepared me for a lot of what's going on in the world right now. I remember I would talk to North Koreans, and they would tell me things. And you just think, this is the craziest thing I've ever heard. How can anyone believe that? And then in 2022, you look around the world now, and the example I will use is QAnon. You look at QAnon and you think, how does anyone believe this? And how can an entire society. Because, let's be honest, great swathes of American society have fallen under the trap of the whole conspiracy theory of QAnon. And ironically, I was actually writing about QAnon on January 6, 2021, so while the U.S. Capitol was under attack.

And in the context of North Korea and seeing how you can manufacture an entire reality for an entire society, it's given me a grounding of sorts to kind of better understand trends that are happening in our own world. And again, crazy shit. I was at a quiz night in Bansko over the summer and this American guy joined

our team and we're chatting and then he starts very matter of factly telling me how and why Michelle Obama is a man. So, there is a huge part of the right-wing ecosystem that believes that the former first lady of the U.S.A. is a man. And I was familiar with this because of the work I've done writing about QAnon and writing about conspiracy theories in the U.S. I would have been a bit more shocked by that if I hadn't spent a week in North Korea eight years ago and just kind of already understood how a person can be brainwashed into just the most extreme ideas you could imagine.

Matt Bowles: Wow. Yeah. I feel like it's always important to take lessons from these things that we observe while we're traveling and then apply it to other things. I mean, I was just in Rwanda two weeks ago, and I went to the genocide memorial in Rwanda. And I always try to look into the political history of places that I go, and particularly when there have been events like genocides, I try to go, and I try to study those things. And learn about them as much as I can to understand how these things come about. And any genocide museum that I've ever been to will trace the lineage and the history of what it was like before and then how it evolved to the point where enough people were convinced to carry out this genocide.

Because when you hear about that, you're like, how it's the same thing you're saying with North Korea. How possibly could an entire society or this enormous segment of society be convinced to carry out this level of atrocity? And then you read about it and then you see it, and you see it in Europe, and you see it in Asia, and you see it in Africa, and you see it with all different religions, all different cultures, all different people. And you realize there's absolutely nothing religiously, culturally, racially, geographically or otherwise specific about this at all. It could happen anywhere, at any time, in any society, to anybody. And you really need to pay attention to the warning signs and to understand how it comes about.

Conor Walsh: Yeah, I mean, there's millions of people around the world right now that believe the entire world has been run by a secret cabal of child eating pedophiles who drink babies' bloods to stay young and that they're in control of every part of our lives. And that sounds crazy, right. But literally millions of people believe that or believe certain aspects of that conspiracy theory that they don't even realize. Like it's seeped into so many different communities and if you haven't, like you're saying, seen where it comes from, you don't even realize it's happening. And then all of a sudden everything blows up.

Matt Bowles: Yeah. And it's also was very telling to watch the last couple years through the COVID pandemic about how conspiracy theories were propagated by trying to get sort of a foot in the door with different types of communities, right? Like you and I were just talking about the anti vax conspiracy theories about the COVID 19 vaccine or whatever and trying to get the foot in the door with maybe the part of the spiritual and wellness community around that. And then once a certain segment subscribes to this particular anti vaxx conspiracy theory, pulling them in then down this rabbit hole into these other related right-wing politics and other conspiracies and things like that, and trying to sort of advance this larger thing. And it's just been really remarkable to watch that in motion to see how it unfolds.

Conor Walsh: Yeah. When I was in North Korea, one of the things you would hear very often is how the Japanese were kidnapping North Korean children and selling them to Americans. And there's so much propaganda around that you go to an art gallery, and they've produced paintings that are like tributes to the children that have been kidnapped by the Japanese and then sold to the Americans. And it's pinpointing the biggest concern many people will have, which is obviously the well-being of the children in your society. And you can see that same thing happening with Qanon. *Save The Children* is a pretty harmless hashtag, and I think it's also a charity, but that's also one of the biggest Qanon hashtags. Right. And then you start to see it in everything, and you start to like, just little by little. And you see it with a lot of politics at

the moment, especially, let's say in the us Like a lot of the divisiveness is around, they're coming for your children, they're coming for your children. And if you can tap into that fear, you can push people into some pretty dark places.

Matt Bowles: Absolutely, man. Well, you mentioned that when you went to North Korea, you were based in Kuala Lumpur at the time, which is a city that I've spent a lot of time and probably at least four months. You've spent more time than I thought in KL. And I know that city also has a lot of special meaning to you. And I know you were also involved in some really cool and significant projects while you were there. Can you talk a little bit about Kuala Lumpur? I guess first of all, maybe what you just love about the city, like for people that have never been there, why is the city so special? And then what you were doing there.

Conor Walsh: Yeah, so a lot of people don't understand why I've spent so much time in KL. And I get it if you've come from Bangkok, even Phnom Penh, Minh, Saigon, whatever, those cities are a little bit more accessible. But the key to KL, like many cities, even Nairobi, is a good example. You got to know someone who's grown up there. Once you have that connection, the whole city opens up to you. And it was the same. I was friends with a lot of expats in KL and I thought, okay, I know this city now. It's really good. And then I was in a relationship with a Malaysian woman, and then it was just a whole other level because she obviously, and she was in the Chinese community.

So, there was that aspect of it as well that I got introduced to. But KL, for me, it's the food. I mean, we could stop there for me, it's got the best food in Southeast Asia because it's got all the food in Southeast Asia. It's got every possible cuisine you could think of. You go to it metro station and there's a Taiwanese restaurant just on the corner somewhere. All the auntie and uncle stalls that I hope have survived the pandemic. I haven't been in KL in a few years is the diversity again. I'm always drawn to big international cities that have an already diverse community. So, we've got the Malay, the Chinese, the South Asian community, the international community and then there's just a lot going on.

And also, because it's a city that doesn't really have a big drinking culture, there's just so much happening outside of that. You can stay until 3:00 in the morning in KL but you're just sat in a tea house somewhere drinking iced tea or whatever, anything nonalcoholic because it's too expensive and just having the most delicious food of your life. I remember during the pandemic I couldn't sleep one night so I finally decided to watch *Crazy Rich Asians*, and I don't know anything about it. I was like, fuck it, I need something lighthearted. Whatever I've got insomnia, I don't want to watch anything serious.

And it made me miss that region so much just for one scene where there was just sat in a typical Singapore food court and everyone's on this crappy plastic chairs and there's just beers and tea and food and everything and you just sat there for hours and hours and hours just chatting. And I love that about it. But the reason I ended up in KL is just because I used to do a lot of visa runs to Malaysia when I lived in Thailand back eight, nine years ago, ten years ago even. And then eventually I ended up on a I suppose you would describe it as a social impact incubator. So, it was 10 businesses within Malaysia that had a social impact business model. But they were early stage and they were trying to become financially sustainable.

So, they were getting in consultants from Malaysia and also around the world to help them figure out their business models so that they didn't have to depend on donations and charity and philanthropy. And I was introduced because at the time I spent a lot of my twenties working in hospitality and there was a cafe that was trying to open that was paying as you feel. Restaurants were one of those places you just go in and you decide how much the food is worth. And also, a zero-waste restaurant. So, they were Trying to get food

donations from restaurants, retailers, all of that kind of thing, and then produce the food out of that. And then through that, supporting the homeless community. Because there is a huge homelessness issue in Kuala Lumpur and there's no support for them. The government and the police are very antagonistic towards that community, like in many places.

So, yeah, I was invited through a series of coincidences to join, to use my hospitality background to help this cafe reach sustainability. But it was very early, it hadn't even opened yet. And that particular project fell through. So, then I was tasked with creating a business plan for a walking tour company in Kuala Lumpur because there wasn't that many. But it's actually, again, if you don't know your way around KL, it's not very interesting. But once you know your way around KL, it's utterly fascinating. The history, everything about it, Chinatown, everything that, the background around that, the mining community, just the fact that it's only about 120 years old as a city, but it's just grown so much in that time.

So, we were building this walking tour company, and the idea was that we would hire members of the homeless community because many of them speak English. Malaysia, one of the official languages is English, train them as tour guides and then use it as an internship or something. Paid, obviously. And we were building this business model, and it was going really well. I was getting mentored by a former investment banker in London on how to build financial projections and all of these kinds of things.

There were two kinds of contradictory lessons from that experience, one of which was that you could build a social good into a very profitable business model. I had always thought in the past that philanthropy or charity or whatever is something you do once you're old and rich and you give it all away, or you donate to charities, or you donate to art galleries or whatever it is. I didn't realize that you could build a sustainable business while also having a positive impact on a community and particularly disadvantaged community.

The other parallel track to that was that I actually had a really negative experience on this because I have had a lot of struggles with mental health in my life. And that year I was about 26, was when everything kind of started to unravel. But also, I was with a lot of self-proclaimed change makers. And many of these self-proclaimed change makers, for reasons too complicated to get into on this podcast, decided that they were going to sabotage my experience on it. And they succeeded to some degree because the two projects I worked on did not succeed. And I learned that unfortunately that in the development world and the kind of social impact world, it's not always as rosy as people make it out to be, which has also prepped me somewhat for living in East Africa, because it's a whole conversation that's happening here at the moment.

And I just learned that you could portray yourself and your work with one narrative, and you can define that narrative, but that narrative can be utter bullshit. And one of the people who instigated this campaign against me at the time has since apologized. So, I do actually know that this was happening. But it was two conflicting but very important lessons that have kind of informed everything I've done since in many different ways. And definitely it was one of those inflection points in your life where you're going in one direction and then you're just zigzagged off to another.

Matt Bowles: Well, I know that soon after your Kuala Lumpur experience, you ended up moving to Kampala, Uganda, and that was also a really significant and pivotal experience for you. Can you talk about your time in Kampala?

Conor Walsh: Sure, yeah. So, first of all, I never had any intention of coming to Sub Saharan Africa. This was, what, 2017. It just wasn't on my radar. A lot of misconceptions that I didn't even realize I had, even as

someone who would identify as pretty worldly and progressive. But, yeah, I turned up in Kampala, and it was an intense experience. I was there for about six months. I was managing a backpacker hostel. And I remember one night, this is again, going back to almost like one of those inflection points. I was cooking dinner for my guests. And, like, a backpacker hostel in Uganda is not like a backpacker hostel in Europe, Australia, Southeast Asia. It's a very different crowd. You've got peacekeepers coming in from the DRC.

You've got development workers. You've got shady people. You've got guys who are just cycling around Africa by themselves. You've got people coming in from all of these countries that I just had no comprehension of. And I'm cooking dinner for everyone one night, and I'm hearing about Ethiopia. I'm hearing about the DRC. I'm hearing about Rwanda, Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, everywhere. Sudan. Sudan was the big one. I kept hearing about Sudan and how incredible Sudan was, and women who were saying Sudan and solo female traveler was the most incredible experience they had had. Which just, if you want to talk about cognitive dissonance, a woman saying they had this incredible experience in Sudan with everything that I thought I knew about Sudan just blew my mind, which is why I ended up there a few months later. So going back to the start of the conversation, kid from a broken home, all of that kind of thing. I had struggled with a lot of mental health issues.

So, I started drinking when I was 14 and didn't really stop. And then I got to Kampala and basically the combination of my job, the isolation that I was experiencing because I was very far from anything that was even vaguely familiar to me. And then also the expat community in Kampala. It's a lot of booze because you don't really have much else to do. And everyone's getting paid very well to not do much and pretend like they're doing a lot. And I just, over the course of six months, kind of basically imploded. And, yeah, everything that I had been avoiding dealing with for. I was 27, well, basically 27 years finally caught up with me and my life fell apart. I ended up full blown alcoholic. When you talk about addiction, everyone has a bottom. Kampala was my bottom.

Drinking every night, blackouts most nights, and then getting up and working. I was smoking two packs a day of cigarettes. Everything about my life is not going in a good direction. Physically, mentally, emotionally, everything else. And then I love movies. And at the time, across the road from where I lived, there was a legal movie rental store. So, you'd go over with a hard drive and a list of movies, you'd hand that over, and a day later you'd come back, and you'd pay them like a dollar per movie or something. TV shows, anything you want.

And the two big movies of my childhood were Indiana Jones and Star Wars for a lot of reasons but mostly escape. Escape from my childhood, escape from Ireland, escape into galaxy far, far away, whatever. And at the time, Rogue One, a Star Wars story, had come out, which is a spinoff. I don't know if you've seen it. It's a pretty good movie. It's not incredible. It's the best Star Wars movie, which I'm sure some people will debate me over.

But the whole point of the movie, without giving anything away, is that it's like hope in the face of hopelessness. Right? It's a very fatalist movie. So, yeah, one night I'm in Kampala, I'm drinking, I'm getting blackout drunk again. I go home; I've got nothing to do. I don't want to sleep. I had a lot of insomnia at the time. So, I sat down and put on Rogue One, Star Wars Story. I can't really remember what happened. All I know is I was probably crying for like 60% of the movie, even though I had seen it already, like two or three times. And then I woke up the next day, and I haven't drunk alcohol or smoked a cigarette since.

Matt Bowles: Wow. Reflecting back on that, what was the explanation for that? How did you do that?

Conor Walsh: I have no idea. Somewhere deep down in my subconscious, something was just saying, this has to stop. We can't do this anymore. Maybe it was just the right movie at the right time, but there was something about that night. There's something about that cocktail of experiences that, yeah, I just. Something clicked. And five and a half years later, here we are.

Matt Bowles: That's incredible, man. Congrats on that, bro.

Conor Walsh: Thank you.

Matt Bowles: I want to follow up on the Sudan experience. So, you learned about Sudan when you were in Kampala from folks that had been there, and then you decided to travel to Sudan? I have never been to Sudan. And for me and others that have never been there, what was Sudan like and what was your experience like there after North Korea?

Conor Walsh: You can't go any more extreme than that. Everything after that is just like, yeah, it. I'll go to Sudan. What's the worst thing that could happen? And I started to learn about it. I'm not such a trailblazer. People had been. There's plenty of blogs of people who backpacked there. As I said, I met a lot of women who had been there and had told me a lot about it. And it just sounded like this incredible country that had been completely overlooked. Obviously, it's very well known for Darfur and a lot of the history and a lot of the challenges that it's had.

But I was starting to hear about this whole other aspect, like, it's full of pyramids, for example. Older pyramids than Egypt. It's essentially the birthplace of human civilization. Like, if you want to talk about where we first stopped and started building things, you're talking about the Nubian culture and Sudan. Yeah. So, I went there the week I turned 28, got to Khartoum, and I was just immediately embraced by everyone who is there. You hear a lot about the friendliest people in the world. Everyone says this country, that country is the friendliest people in the world. But in Sudan, there's a warmth. There's just warmth and a generosity to the spirit of people there that is absolutely incredible.

So, on my 28th birthday, there's also a really big Muslim community there. I don't know if you know much about Sufism, so some people will be familiar with Sufism as the guys in Turkey who spin around in circles. And it looks very nice and refined, but Sufism is actually a lot more than that. It's basically like mystical branch of Islam, and it's very old, and it's very deeply embedded in many cultures that we wouldn't even realize. Like, there's Sufism in the Balkans, there's Sufism as far as Southeast Asia. They're everywhere. And their teachings are in a lot of Western thought as well that we just don't even realize. So, I was really interested in this. And Sudan has a huge Sufi community.

So, my 28th birthday, as I said, first time celebrating sober since I was 13. I go about 30 minutes outside of Khartoum with a Sudanese woman that was basically acting as my chaperone because she was a friend of the owner of the hotel I was in. And you go, and there's just hundreds of people coming to this graveyard outside of Khartoum to pray for the day. And there's live music, there's drumming, people are dancing, people are spinning in circles. But basically, they believe that to get closer to God, you have to separate yourself from the materialism of the world.

Spinning in circles is a way to get into a trance. Everyone's in colors. Men have jewelry and dreadlocks, and everyone's in bright colors and drumming and dancing and playing, and it's fun. And there's just hundreds of people there. Guys are literally, like, falling on the ground in a trance. People are running around in circles, and it's absolutely beautiful. And then they were taking me in, and they, like, let me sit in

the middle so that I could get photos of everything. They were bringing me to different areas to meet the religious leaders, all of this kind of thing behind my sunglasses, I'm just, like, bawling my eyes out.

One of the reasons that I struggled so much and one of the reasons I left Ireland is I was raised by a single mother, and my grandfather and my grandfather died on my 18th birthday. And then my mother died a year later, just before my 19th birthday. So now we go a decade ahead. I'm 28, and it's 10 years since the start of the worst year of my life. And I'm sat in a graveyard in Khartoum surrounded by, like, 400 people dancing and singing and drumming. And just one of the most profound, powerful experiences I've ever had. And then we went back to the hotel, and they've cooked dinner for me because I hadn't told anyone, because I didn't celebrate my birthday. I don't tell anyone about my birthday because it's not an easy time for me, let's say. And we go back and there's this big stew waiting for me and the owner of the hotel and the staff. And we all sit, and we have this lovely dinner together.

And then the next day. So about three hours north of Khartoum, there's this series of pyramids called Meroe pyramids. They're 2 or 3,000 years old, far older, I think, than anything in Egypt. Smaller, but much, much older. And they're just on the side of the highway three hours north of Khartoum. So, I decided I'm going to go spend the day there. And then I had heard you could spend the night because there's a hotel there. So, I got on the bus, get out of Khartoum. But there's an interesting counterpoint I learned in Sudan that as friendly as everybody is there, the bus driver's kind of balance it out a little bit. They're not the easiest to deal with. And okay, as an ignorant English-speaking tourist, there's some communication issues, one of which is they would not let me off the bus.

So, we're coming up to the pyramids. I can see them; I can see them. We've passed them, they're gone. We're 5km away, we're 10km away. And I just decided like, okay, I'm going to have to be that dickhead on the bus who's like banging and screaming and just being the arrogant tourist. And then they kicked me out of the bus. So, it works. But now I'm 10 kilometers away from the pyramids in about 45 degrees heat in the middle of the afternoon with my two backpacks and I'm stood on the side of the road and I'm looking at the pyramids in the distance and I'm thinking, the fuck am I supposed to do now? I suppose I just started walking. And right as I'm about to start walking, this car pulls up and there's this elderly couple in it with just enough English and like, young man, what are you doing? They're just driving and then they come across this white guy in the middle of the road in like the middle of the afternoon, in all black, just kind of looking around clueless, like, I'm going to the pyramids. Like, what pyramids? The ones off in the distance, like, oh, okay, get in.

They were a Syrian couple, and they were driving from Khartoum to Damascus. They were in their 60s, I think. And as we're Driving to the pyramids, they're just in guffaws of laughter at me. In between, they're asking me my life story and everything. And then they said, like, do you want any tea? Maybe. But how do you have any tea in this car? And then I look down and in between the passenger and driver's seat, they have a full ceramic tea set with fresh mint tea, glass cups, everything, steaming hot tea. It's the kind of thing that I love about, like, North Africa and the Middle East. Just, of course, they're just driving through the desert, drinking tea, picking up some rando on the side of the road and dropping him off at some pyramids.

So, I get to the pyramid and then we walk around. It's really nice. I met some other tourists from Khartoum and everything. We're all taking pictures with each other. And these pyramids are amazing. Like, there's no one there, so you have them to yourself. And then at the end of the day, I come back to the ticket office, and I say to them, okay, like the hotel. And they said, no hotel. There has to be a hotel. Not in September,

because no one's crazy enough to go to Sudan in September. So, there's no hotels open. But I wanted to spend the sunrise at the pyramids, so I needed to be close by. The closest hotel was three hours away.

Matt Bowles: Wow.

Conor Walsh: So that wasn't going to work. So, we're having this conversation. I'm like, where can I stay? They say you can stay here. Yeah, but there's no hotels. Yeah, but you are staying here. But where? Pointing at the ground, you can stay here. So long story short, they let me spend the night at the pyramids. So, I give my backpack to the ticket guy, he puts it in the ticket office, he locks the ticket office so all my stuff is safe. But I don't have any food or water. So, there's a camo guy there waiting for all the tourists who aren't even there. So, he takes me 4km to a petrol station where I stock up on all the water and the snacks that I can find for the night. Because Sudan's like 45 degrees during the day and a nice cool 39 at night. So, you're just huffing water the whole time. And then I take a camel back 4km. My first time on a camel, which was an uncomfortable experience, as I'm sure many people are familiar. And then the camel guy goes home, and then I just spend the night at the pyramids.

Matt Bowles: Wow.

Conor Walsh: By myself in the desert. Perfect. Clear blue sky. That kind of sky you can only get when you're in the desert. There's no way of saying this without sounding just cheesy as fuck, but it's like 3,000-year-old pyramids. The birth of human civilization. And then at the same time, you've got satellites going around all night and then the moon making its way across. I'm getting goosebumps just thinking about it. So, I spent the night there, didn't sleep a wink, got up the next morning, got my bags out of the ticket office, had to walk back to the highway, which is maybe a 20-minute walk. And then I realized, what the fuck am I supposed to do now? So only the second time in my life I just put my thumb out. I was like, fuck it, I'll hitchhike. And within five minutes, somebody had picked me up. I got in the back of his car, pass out. We get to the nearest town, three hours away, he lets me out. I'm like trying to pay for his fuel or just give him something to say thank you. He refuses to take any. And then I carry on with my holiday.

Matt Bowles: That is absolutely incredible, man. While I have never been to Sudan, I have been to the portion of Nubia that is in southern Egypt. So, Nubia was divided by that border. And if you go down to the south of Egypt into Aswan, this is Nubia. And I stayed in a Nubian village right along the Nile with the Nubians in Aswan. And I have been telling people ever since that they are perhaps the kindest human beings on the planet of Earth. And I just blew my mind with their hospitality and their indescribable sweetness.

Conor Walsh: And as I said, I've never hitchhiked. I'd been traveling, what, I don't know how many years at that point, I'd never thought to just put my thumb out and see how it goes. But in Sudan, I was finally inspired. Like, okay, I'm just going to see what happens.

Matt Bowles: That's incredible, man. Well, one of the other places that is super high on my list in Africa that I have not yet been to, where you have spent some time is Ethiopia. Can you share a little bit about your experience in Ethiopia and some of the highlights from that trip?

Conor Walsh: So, I flew up from Nairobi in January and I was coming up to the Ethiopian Orthodox. There were two holidays. I can't remember exactly which ones they were, but I think it was Easter and New Year, so big festivals and that's what I wanted to be there for. Hundreds of thousands of people travel. And the thing about Ethiopia when you're coming from the rest of East Africa, as everyone will tell you every day

that you're there, they were never colonized. It should be like the official tagline of the country. And it's kind of true. And it definitely informs your experience there. There's a lot of issues being a white guy in East Africa and parts of Africa and other parts of the world. I have just by definition experienced a lot of very toxic privileges and kind of benefit of the doubt.

And it can be a pretty easy experience. It's not something I'm very comfortable with, but it's something you just have to kind of reckon with every day. And then you get to Ethiopia, and they don't give a fuck about you. They do not care. I'm very used in Kenya and Malaysia and other countries of people coming up and taking a photo with me. I've had people take photos of me without even realizing. Like I was on my phone one day in KL and I looked up and I'm the centerpiece of a student photo with 20 people that they had just gathered around me.

So, then you get to Addis Ababa and people are coming up to you and like, take a photo. You'll take a photo. I'm like, okay. And I'm getting ready for the selfie, and they look at me and go, not with you. Do you take a photo of me? So, this was the first thing you noticed. It's Ethiopia. The history is very complicated, but it's just so much culture there and it's so old. They have so much pride in it. And unfortunately, that's not something you see very often in this region, that it's not being tainted by European imperialism in some way. I've been told it's inferior and been told like, you can't celebrate it, you can't speak your own language, whatever. In Ethiopia, with touches of nationalism and other issues, but there is just a genuine love for their culture. And I did get to experience quite a bit of it.

So, you're going around to all of just these incredible ancient sites, like 900-year-old churches, just spectacular scenery. It's a beautiful country. I was hiking, you know, 4,000 meters up in the Simeon Mountains, and you're just looking out at this expanse. Africa in general is huge, but Ethiopia, you really feel the expansiveness of it. Again, just I'm going to be constantly going back to the culture and how rich it feels. So, one of the famous places is Gondar. They have these churches built into the ground. That was what I was referring to the 900-year-old churches and they were built out of rock underground. So, you have just one solid rock, but they've carved a church out of it, and you go into it and at night I was there for one of the festivals, I can't remember, this was a smaller one actually. And because it's a very old orthodox branch of Christianity, there's a lot of praying but like slow, let's just say chanting and a lot of ULUS waiting as well. I've probably said that wrong.

But at night when they're have because their mass starts at like 6pm and it goes till 6am so at night in this town, because there's all these churches built into the ground all over the place, you can just hear this hum through the whole town, just this light hum coming from all the churches. So, I asked if I could be brought to one. It's pretty touristy, but it's pretty cool. So, you go into this church and if it wasn't for the generator and a little bit of electric lights everywhere, you could be 700 years into the past. And you go in and there's just people everywhere and the priests have incense going and. And everyone's dressed up in their traditional cotton, which is also very striking. It's absolutely beautiful. And then you stand there, you just feel transported. So, I'm in this 900-year-old church with these Orthodox Ethiopians. Everyone's praying and chanting, they've been there for hours. And then this guy walks in and I'm looking at him, I'm like, I know that guy. And it was Omar from the Wire. What, what's his name?

Matt Bowles: Michael K. Williams.

Conor Walsh: Michael K. Williams walks in way. Yeah. Just at like 3:00 in the morning. Every bone in my body is like, don't go up and say hello. But he just walks in with his crew. There's like four of them and

they're just kind of hanging out and he's taking pictures and I'm next to him. We kind of look at each other. I'm just going to leave you be. And then, yeah, I found out afterwards, you know, I go on Instagram and he's doing this whole big trip of Ethiopia is not important, but it was a nice little touch to just, you know, it's always nice to see a celebrity where you don't expect them. And especially as someone of that caliber, let's say.

Matt Bowles: Wow, that is incredible. All right, we are going to call that the end of part one. Be sure to tune in to [the next episode](#) to hear the conclusion of my interview with Connor Walsh. Good night, everybody.