

**Matt Bowles:** My guest today is Tammer Abiyu. He is a self-taught software engineer and co-founder of the software startup [Bedrock](#). Born in New Jersey to Ethiopian immigrant parents, he has a degree from Yale and has been a full time Digital Nomad since 2017. He has now been to over 57 countries and he speaks Japanese, French and English in which we'll be conducting this interview today.

Tammer, welcome to the show.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Hey Matt, thanks for having me.

**Matt Bowles:** So good to have you here, my man. Let's just start this off by setting the scene. You and I are together in person today in Nairobi, Kenya.

**Tammer Abiyu:** That is correct.

**Matt Bowles:** And we have been hanging out together for a few months now. We are on the Remote Year program, the first ever of all Africa itineraries. You and I have both done a Remote Year before for a full 12 months and we are now back for this four-month program and hanging out on the continent. So, let's just start off with first impressions of Nairobi, Kenya.

**Tammer Abiyu:** I'm loving Nairobi so far. I mean I've only been here like a couple of days as you know, got here a bit late. But so far it looks like a super vibrant city. I've walked by just like cafes, bumping music and like a lot of street food and that kind of thing. And it's a very different vibe than the first two cities. We were in Cape Town and Arusha, Tanzania. But I can't wait to explore more.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I want to hear about this side trip that you just did because you just got back from the African island nation of Mauritius, which I have heard only amazing things about. I have not yet been but what was your experience like in Mauritius, man?

**Tammer Abiyu:** Man, I love Mauritius. Yeah, it was total coincidence that I even went there. I initially was traveling in Europe a few months ago and I met a couple of Mauritian guys in Italy, and they wanted to show me pictures of Mauritius and stuff. I was like, great, like show me what you got. I'm going to be in the region. I knew I was going to be in Africa. And they showed me photos of an underwater waterfall and just beautiful trees lined with beaches and all that. And I'm all right, this looks pretty good. I can make do with this. They were like, yeah, if you're ever in Mauritius, like hit us up. So, I ended up being close enough.

So yeah, I went to visit them and another friend of mine that was there and it was amazing, man, there were just beautiful beaches around every corner. I rented a scooter. I hope my mom doesn't listen to this part. But like I was driving around the island all over. Two hours north, two hours south, just seeing the mountains and the beaches and everything and it was great. The people are super friendly, super safe. Mauritius, you should check it out.

**Matt Bowles:** Amazing, yeah. Super high on my list. All the pictures that I've seen and everybody I know that's been there are just the amazing things about it. So definitely on my list. Well, I want to go back Tammer now and do a little bit of your background and give folks a little bit more context on you. And I feel like before we even do your background, it would be really great to start with your parents' background. Can you share a little bit about your parents' story and how they eventually got to New Jersey where you were born?

**Tammer Abiyu:** For sure. My parents were in Ethiopia during the communist regime there, the Derg, which were a tyrannical, extremely oppressive communist government that had no qualms about purging dissidents and taking political prisoners, random kidnappings, that kind of thing. It was widespread for at least a couple of decades, I think. And so, in the 70s, my mom and dad are a bit different in age. In the 70s my mom was like 12 or 13 when she joined the rebellion, I guess you could say as a cadre, like a messenger and someone who aided the freedom fighters and that kind of thing. And she went into, they call it the jungle. Like if you talk to any of the Ethiopian parents in our community, it's always like the jungle, like when we were in the jungle. So, they basically were just moving from city to city, engaged in guerrilla warfare and trying to undermine this oppressive regime.

And so, at a very early age like 11, 12, 13. She was involved in that. And then once that became untenable, she had to leave alone via Sudan. So, she walked from where she grew up in northern Ethiopia through Sudan and found a refugee flight to Germany, where she was taken in by some family friends. And I think she spent like two years in Germany and then made her way to the U.S. Once they finally admitted her as a refugee, and then had an entire saga in the U.S. where she had a family that took her in, but she was made to work every day and had to endure not that much food and, like, generally mistreated as a young person and a refugee. But eventually she made it to DC where she properly claims as where she's from in the U.S. where she met my dad. And then eventually they moved to New Jersey and settled down. Now, my dad's story.

So, he was a bit older. He was in university when the rebellious fervor against the Derg regime was reaching its head. And he was one of the founding members of the student organization that fought against this government. So, he left university to fight as a freedom fighter for many years in the jungle. And as I learned later on in my trip to Ethiopia, like, he played a very prominent role in that period and for that group. But he fought there for probably 10 years. He was at various points taken prisoner and had to escape. Eventually he made it to the U.S. he said that he landed in New York, and the first thing that he saw when he walked out of JFK was the hot dog stand, the way he tells it. And he was like, what is this disgusting tube of meat? And he didn't have a penny to his name. So, I think he just managed to scarp together, like, a couple of dollars and buy a hot dog. It was pretty rough for him in the beginning in New York, but he met my mom in D.C. and then they moved back to New Jersey, New York, that area to start a family.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I lived in D.C. for about seven years, and for folks that don't know, that is, I think, the largest Ethiopian immigrant community in the United States. And really is where I got a lot of exposure to Ethiopian culture, Ethiopian food, just meeting a lot of Ethiopians there. And it was an amazing part of my DC experience. When people ask me, like, oh, I'm going to DC, you know, what should I do? I'm like, first of all, look up the best Ethiopian restaurants. Go to them all.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yeah, you can't go wrong looking for Ethiopian food in D.C. the running joke that I've heard is that Addis Ababa the capital of Ethiopia is the largest city in Ethiopia by far. So, the joke is that when Ethiopians come to the U.S., they think the capital is the place to be. So, everyone goes to D.C., but I don't know if that is actually true or not, but that's the experience of D.C. I just walk around, and I see people that look like me.

**Matt Bowles:** So, what was your experience growing up in New Jersey? Can you talk about where in New Jersey you grew up? And then as you were coming up there, what was the Ethiopian immigrant community like? And how did you sort of come of age? And how did your Ethiopian American identity dynamics develop?

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yeah, so I grew up in Northern New Jersey, 30 minutes outside of New York City, a town called West Orange. And I personally thought that my community was very diverse. Not necessarily even just having a large Ethiopian population, but just people from all walks of life. There were people from Latin America, from the Caribbean, East Asia, African, et cetera, et cetera. So really wasn't that uncommon to find people from different countries and, like, hear about their life stories and eat their food if they were friends of mine. But with respect to the Ethiopian community, my family felt like it was so large.

Obviously, we have a nuclear family, and then we have my younger sister, my two parents, and we have all our cousins and uncles and aunts and that kind of thing. And some of them are second cousins or uncles of cousins or something. And you never really know where the line is. So, as you grow, the tree just expands so much that I can't even tell where the family ends and the broader Ethiopian community starts. But I would say that it was a very vibrant community, like weddings with, like, hundreds of people and that kind of thing, or not uncommon. So, I enjoyed growing up in that area.

**Matt Bowles:** So how much Ethiopian culture, in terms of language, in terms of the history, in terms of all that, did you come up with through the community and through your family? And how did that sort of, for you, interact with the New Jersey, slash American multicultural dynamics that you were also immersed in? How did you navigate that?

**Tammer Abiyu:** What was interesting was that when you're growing up as a child of immigrants, and any child of immigrants will say this is that you have two identities that you're simultaneously trying to cultivate. I was in an Ethiopian family. I was absorbing the food, the dance, the different ways of interacting with family members and that kind of thing, being generous, trying to fight for the tip and all of that at the end of a meal. But at the same time, you want to fit in with your friends and all of you are trying to share some kind of identity as an American, even if it's not in your mind explicitly. I'm trying to be American. You also are just trying to fit in.

So, I would say that at home, there's a dividing line. At home. I was an Ethiopian kid, and I grew up eating Ethiopian food reluctantly and that kind of thing. And like, it was just who I was. But then it never really bled into school. Like, it was a rare event for me to have my Ethiopian side come on display. I remember in high school, one big thing for my family, which my mom was really proud to be able to take part in, was the international dinner and wherein every kid would bring in a dish from their respective culture. And my mom was just so excited to go all out and create the tastiest injera with the different what's and stuff like that and the sambusas and everything. I used to fight with my Indian friends about, oh, it's a sambusa, it's not a samosa. Like, now I get to finally show off my culture. So that's probably the rare occasion where they mix. But otherwise, I had it pretty compartmentalized. I would say it was interesting.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, man. Ethiopian food is one of my all-time favorites. And you and I have actually had some really cool experiences here on the continent. Finding Ethiopian restaurants in some of the different African countries and going into those and seeing some of the similarities and differences. It's so cool rolling with you because I remember we went in Cape Town, we found this Ethiopian spot and we went there and it was really interesting because you were super familiar with a whole bunch of things and there's like a couple things where you're like, wait a minute, I never seen that before.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yeah. The restaurants that we went to on this trip, the Ethiopian restaurants, were pretty high quality, I think, but sometimes they add their own flavor into it because the entire staff isn't Ethiopian. I would guess that most of the cooks are probably. It's hard to tell, but the waiting staff weren't, especially in

Cape Town. So, for me it was just like, let's see what you're doing. I'm open minded. I'll try your baklava type dessert, whatever. Even though I've never seen baklava at an Ethiopian dinner at my house. But I'm open to some variety.

**Matt Bowles:** Right. So, when you think back, how did your interest in world travel start to develop as you were coming up?

**Tammer Abiyu:** I wasn't that interested in traveling before college. And then once I hit college and I started Learning Japanese, which is not even my first foreign language. Like, I had learned Spanish from, I think, second grade until maybe 11th grade. So, I had been exposed to foreign languages, but it was just not something that I really found much interest in. But once I picked up Japanese in college, I started to think about how different it would be to live in an environment where I was adhering to all of these different cultural norms. And you watch like videos of Japan just to learn the language, right? And you start to see, wow, like, this place looks so different. Like, I need to experience that. And eventually I had the opportunity to study abroad there in summer after my sophomore year. And I had been out of the country before, but never to the point where I felt like I was immersed in society.

So, like, this was a two-and-a-half-month trip. And that trip really kind of like, was the catalyst for me in terms of I like this. Like, I need more of this. I want to feel like I'm exploring the world. I want to feel like I'm learning about different people. I want to be in an uncomfortable situation. You start to learn more about who you are as a person when you cannot just adapt to different situations but grow in them and see what aspects of your personality blossom in new environments. It's like, what do you do? You know, you're like searching around for answers and then eventually you come upon them and you're like, okay, there are things in this world that I don't know about that are interesting and that I want to find out about. And yeah, it came upon me a bit later in life and it's only grown since.

**Matt Bowles:** So, I know that Japan has a super special place in your heart. And you have been there four times now and you keep going back. Can you talk a little bit about Japan? And maybe let's just start with that very first study abroad trip when you got to Tokyo. First impression. And then over the course of those two and a half months, what was that experience like for you?

**Tammer Abiyu:** Well, very first impression, like walking out of the train station after I had gotten in from the airport. It was, I think maybe 10:00 at night. And this is in the middle of Shibuya, if you know Shibuya, the neighborhood in Tokyo that has some of the brightest, most flashing lights. And it was like I had walked into a video game. Yeah, I was like, what is this? You know, I had no idea I was disoriented, but I knew that I liked where I was. And even though I had taken two years of Japanese at that point, it felt so bizarre to walk into a grocery store and have to use this language and not be able to just switch to English and ask my professor what the correct answer is.

So, put it simply, if you took a fish out of water, but the fish you had pulled it into space or something. Completely foreign experience but was also beautiful and enlightening at the same time. And so, I spent the next two months in Tokyo, the first month of which I was living with a host family who were just the nicest family I had ever met. They had two young kids, and my host mom would make me meals every day and we would walk around the city together and go to fireworks shows, et cetera. This is just such a rewarding experience beyond just what I would later learn to be Instagram type travel experiences, like going to restaurants and like that kind of thing, and taking photos at beautiful natural landscapes and stuff, like all of that is rewarding.

But when you're really immersed in a new society and you feel like I'm almost like on a different planet, that to me is a peak travel experience. So, it's hard to recreate that, especially if you're not living with a host family in every country. But it helps when you slow down a bit and when you take it maybe a month at a time, a couple months at a time in whatever place you're in, and actually Remote Year reinforced that for me. So even though that came many years later, something that I start to appreciate more, like just slowing down, becoming a part of the place that you're in as much as you can as like a 6 foot 3, like Ethiopian guy in Japan, but you try.

**Matt Bowles:** Absolutely, man. I absolutely was completely enamored by Japan the first time I went as well. Tokyo, I feel, is almost its own planet, which, if you've never been there, there's really not anything that I could compare it to. You just have to go.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Exactly. I'm really glad you said that too, because I think we bonded over Tokyo a while back. And it's hard to describe why Tokyo is my favorite city on Earth, but it's just to have that combination of extremely high population density, extremely safe, very organized. Like, I cannot stress enough how well that city runs itself, given that it has like tens of millions of people in the metropolitan area. Plus, it's just like a freaking interesting and unique place. There's like the flashy lights, the maid cafes, the cat cafes, like all these little bars with two seats in them that you can only get in if you know the owner or whatever, and the diversity of food, the high-quality food. It's such a weird cross section of things to find in one city, and it's amazing.

**Matt Bowles:** Totally agreed. And then when you went back to Japan again, what were some of the additional experiences that you had elsewhere around the country? And what have been some of your highlights from Japan and maybe some things you'd put people onto that haven't been to Japan and want to go and experience some really amazing stuff.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yeah. So, I was fortunate enough to be able to travel pretty much up and down the entire country. And some of the places that I stopped in, I would recommend for cultural reasons. For example, Mount Koya is this mount, this very religiously significant mountain that has, like, monasteries on top of it. It's a very holy place where you can go and see practicing monks and take part in some of their rituals or at least observe them. You can, like, spend a night in a monastery. You can walk through those cemeteries with the temples and that kind of thing. It's beautiful. Just explore that area.

That's one place I would recommend. But then there's also things that I would recommend for, like, historical reasons. I went to both Hiroshima and Nagasaki and went to the museums there. And I'm talking about the result of the two nuclear bombs that were dropped on those cities. You see the impact that they had on those societies and just how devastating, like, war can be. Like, the pinnacle of human tragedy is what you can witness in some of these museums and some other places that we've seen, like there's Rwanda and there's Cambodia. But when it comes to how much pain humanity can inflict on itself in a singular moment, there really isn't a comparison. Right. So, Americans should know what we did. And I feel like it's our responsibility to educate ourselves, at least on the things that we played a part in, if not as much of the world as we can.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, totally agree. I went to Hiroshima when I was in Japan as well and had a really similar experience. They have what they call the Peace Museum there. And you go through, and you see the history and you contend and sit with what that means, that the United States government just nuked the civilian population and what that actually means and the scope and scale of what actually happened there. And

then the thing that was just so amazingly inspiring to me was the response and the political lessons that the people took from that, which was just a complete commitment to ending all nuclear warfare and dismantling all nuclear weapons and moving towards a nuclear free world. And it was just so incredibly remarkable for me to just be in the presence of people that were saying this is what happened to us and to our relatives and to ours. And what we're taking out of that is that we are working towards world peace and nuclear disarmament, which was amazing.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yeah. Their MO is that this can never happen again. If there's any chance for us to be able to stave off that kind of apocalyptic scenario, it's by keeping these stories alive and that kind of thing. And it's on us to educate ourselves, similar to how we need to keep telling the stories about the Holocaust and that kind of thing. And it's always a warning to future generations. So, they do a good job of that.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, it's amazing. I think it's really important for certainly every American to go and see that and just understand the history there, but also important for everybody in the world to see that kind of stuff because obviously there's a lot more countries now that have nuclear weapons and are threatening with nuclear weapons and stuff like that. And so, it's just amazing what they're doing there. And completely inspiring.

I know that after your first study abroad trip to Japan, you took another really meaningful trip, which was your trip to Ethiopia. Can you share a little bit about what that first trip to Ethiopia was like for you?

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yeah. So, I had not been to Ethiopia for the first 20 years of my life. So, everything I knew about Ethiopia was from my parents, from my environment. Growing up in New Jersey, when I finally went, I didn't really have any expectations, but I wanted to see what it was like to be in that society, to grow up there. I wanted to see my parents' birthplaces, that kind of thing. I got to see where my mom grew up and I got to see what living in the capital was like. And that was one side of my experience, was just to see what the society looks like because I had no concept of it other than music videos for Ethiopian music.

The other aspect of it was very unexpected, I didn't know anything really about my father's experience in Ethiopia before he left to come to America. He was pretty tight lipped about what he went through growing up, which I think is understandable because it's hard to tell a kid about what war is like. I guess that's my interpretation of it. But when I got there, there were so many people that I met that would even just like come up to me and be like, hey, you're Gera's son, aren't you? That's his nickname in the war, they all had nicknames. So, he was Gera. And they would be like you're Gera's son. Like I know your father, like we fought together in the war and blah blah, blah. There would be like high-ranking government officials that would come up to me, ministers I met the vice president, etc. That would be like, I know your father and like this and that. And I was traveling with my uncle, and he knew all of this already. He knew my dad's backstory and he was just like, all right, now you're finally going to learn what your history is.

So, it was a very important experience for me because I feel like any kid really, it's not just children of immigrants. Any kid grows up kind of with the assumption that their parents' world like revolves around them really. And so, when you're able to see the side of your parents' lives that came before your birth, it's almost like a mind-expanding experience. You're like, wow, I have history beyond just me going to school and growing up as a child. There's a legacy that I've inherited and this is it. And so that was my moment in Ethiopia at the age of 20.

**Matt Bowles:** And then after that experience, I mean, what do you think the impact of that was? The study abroad in Japan followed by the Ethiopia trip in terms of sort of your future trajectory towards world travel.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yeah, so at that time that was halfway through university, so I closed out my studies there and then I moved to California, and I worked in Silicon Valley for a bit. So really travel wasn't on my radar as a long-term lifestyle just yet. But I did have a couple of trips towards the end of my time in California. We're talking about 2016 where I started to venture out of the country more. Because mind you, to this point I'd only been to like three or four countries. I think Ethiopia might have been the fifth country I'd ever been to. So those trips were very meaningful to me as well. Just getting to go to Japan a couple more times and then Italy and New Zealand and et cetera. And then that's what I kind of experienced in terms of catching the travel bug.

**Matt Bowles:** And then can you talk a little bit about your transition into the nomad lifestyle and eventually your decision to join the 12-month Remote Year program?

**Tammer Abiyu:** Sure. So, at the end of 2017, I'd kind of had enough living in California. I was kind of getting the itch for a change of scenery and I decided at the end of 2017. Well, really throughout 2017, I'd been saving up money. I knew that I wanted to travel eventually. So just in case I'd been doing that. And then I quit my job right about October of 2017. And I decided I like canceled my lease. I put all my stuff in storage. I decided to travel. I think at that time I envisioned it being like a three-to-four-month thing. I went to Australia and Thailand and Hong Kong and Japan again.

Obviously, I was like, this will get it out of my system. It's like a little mini sabbatical and then I'll get back to the business of, I don't know, working in society. Yeah, as you know, that's not how that went. So, I came back to the U.S. after a couple of months just to see my family again and I started working on a video game. Actually, I'd had the inspiration for a video game traveling on a train from San Francisco to Chicago. Anyone who's listening to this definitely take the California Zephyr overnight train. You will not regret it. And just do it between San Francisco and Chicago. It'll be the trip of a lifetime. So, on that train I just came up with this idea for a video game and I started working on it. I didn't have any place to be, obviously, so I just camped out in my parent's place for a couple of months and worked on this thing.

And it was going pretty well. But at some point, you start thinking to yourself, why am I geographically here and not anywhere else if I'm working on something like, does it really matter that I'm sitting here in this coffee shop in New Jersey? So, my friends and I have this recurring joke slash prank. So, there's three of us, one or two of us will show up in a country that the other one wanted to go to and just send a photo from there. And this had been a pretty like low stakes prank for most of the past couple of years because we didn't really travel much. But at that time, I think some morning in April or something of 2018, I woke up to a photo of my two friends in a club in Barcelona. And I had told them for weeks we'd been discussing going to Barcelona for a while.

They knew that I wanted to go to that city very badly. And so, they sent me this photo. And they're like, where are you at, man? And I was furious. And within about 20 minutes of seeing that photo, I got an email, which was a follow up marketing email from someone at Remote Year who said, hey, you made a profile on our website a year ago. Are you still interested in traveling for a year. And then I had one of those moments where you just like, think like, okay, I guess this is a crossroads. Like, that was that moment. I was like, yeah, I'm still interested. So, 24 hours later, I had paid my deposit and a month later I was in Lisbon, Portugal, to start a year of travel.

**Matt Bowles:** That's amazing, man. And what a great group that you had. It was really interesting because you and I did not meet each other until this trip that we're on together. But I was in Lisbon the night before your program started, and I was hanging out and having dinner with your program lead, who I had also hung out with in Valencia, Spain, when she was there doing her training, because I happened to be there as a remote U.S. citizen plugging into another group that was there. And I knew that she was amazing, and I knew that the group was going to have an amazing time with her. And I was having dinner, and I remember that that night. And she was like, yeah, it all starts tomorrow. Everybody arrives tomorrow. And I said, you're going to do great. I'm sure you'll have a great group. All this kind of stuff. And then of course, he kind of followed along through social media or whatever. And I knew that you guys had an amazing squad, but you and I were actually in Lisbon on the same day. Yeah, but we didn't meet until this trip, man. But how was the Remote Year experience for you? What were some of kind of the highlights that you took away from that year?

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yeah, so like I said, travel has been pretty sporadic for me for the past few years, since I've developed an interest in it. Really short trips, we're talking like a week, two weeks, whatever, to Europe or Asia. And you try to pack in as much as you can into those short periods of time because it's very expensive to get out there. And you're a broke college or postgrad kid and you're like this; I've got to make the most of this. But. But in Remote Year, it was different because the program is one city per month for 12 months. And so, I was able to slow down a bit and actually breathe, enjoy the neighborhoods I was in, do things that a tourist, quote, unquote, would not normally do. Just have a day where I only sat in a coffee shop and read a book or something like that. I would never do that if I had a week to explore France or something like that.

So, I was able to slow down. I was able to think about things outside of what I want to do in a given location. And so, when you have the ability to brainstorm and think and daydream and imagine whatever problem that you're working on, just noodle on it for a while as you're sitting in a coffee shop in Lisbon. You'd be amazed with how much creative juices start flowing when you're not burdened with seeing everything as fast as possible. And yet you still have a change of scenery to benefit from in terms of drawing inspiration for whatever it is. Like, whether it be projects that you're working on, political ideas that your kind of fiddling with, or whatever it is.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, man, absolutely. I totally agree. And you and I both did. We were not on the same Remote Year program, but we Both completed a 12-month Remote Year program. And then we both decided to do this for four months all Africa itinerary, which is the first time Remote Year is doing these cities. And you and I jumped on that immediately and have been having a lot of really incredible experiences together so far on this trip, which I want to talk a little bit about. The first one is that you and I both signed up to hike Mount Kilimanjaro, the tallest freestanding mountain in the world, in Tanzania. And since this is Remote Year's first time doing these cities, that was one of the options that you could sign up for in the month that we were in Arusha, Tanzania, but we didn't have the options available to us to select from until three weeks before the Kilimanjaro, if you can. So, it's like, here's the things to do in Tanzania. And you have three weeks to.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Prepare to climb the tallest mountain in Africa.

**Matt Bowles:** Exactly. Which is one of the seven summits. It's super iconic. And it's the tallest freestanding mountain in the world because it's a volcano. Right. You and I both signed up for that. So, by the way, did [Dani Dirks](#), Maverick Show listeners know [Dani Dirks](#)? She jumped on that as well. And then our other

friend, Hilton. So, it was the four of us that signed up for it. And then we were like we got three weeks to prepare for this.

**Tammer Abiyu:** It was a whirlwind.

**Matt Bowles:** It was. And so, I would love to kind of go through that experience and share a little bit about what it was like first in terms of the preparations for what we did in only a three-week time. Because a lot of people train and prepare for this thing for months in advance. You know, I'm like hearing all this stuff about like three-month, four-month training regimens and stuff. Like I got three weeks, so how do we condense?

**Tammer Abiyu:** Well, the worst part was you texted your friends who had done this mountain before and you gave us their recommendations for training regimens. And these people were saying that they had been running half marathons, they had been hiking up mountains regularly. Like we're talking about 6 to 12 mile hikes every day or something like that. This is what I remember from your messages. And I was just like, okay, well, I've definitely played myself for a fool, but we'll see what happens. You're already in it. You paid. I wasn't going to back out. But at the same time, you know, you start to wonder, are we really going to be able to do this?

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, exactly. And there's multiple factors to it because we signed up for it first and then I started retroactively researching it after I signed up for it.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Correct.

**Matt Bowles:** And I'm like, what did I get into exactly here? And so, the highest elevation that I've probably been to would be I've been to cities like Cusco, Peru. I've been to cities like La Paz, Bolivia, which are 11,000, 12,000 ish feet around there. This mountain is 19,500ft. This is incredibly significant, much higher than that. And so, one thing you need to contend with is the altitude situation and the level of oxygen that's up there, as well as the potential for altitude sickness and loss of appetite and sleep and other things that come along with entering a dangerous altitude level, if you will.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yeah. And I'd personally been to 15,000ft before in Ecuador. I think there was a hike that I'd gone on, not even like a multi-day hike, just a day hike between 13,000 and 15,000ft or something like that. And I was like, if I can get to that level, hopefully I should be able to push past that for a couple more thousand feet. And I was feeling pretty confident. But then you introduced me to the concept of altitude sickness, which I had known very in a cursory way, but I didn't realize how it works, is that in some cases, no matter how fit you are, even in terms of cardiovascular fitness or certainly muscle strength and that kind of thing, you don't necessarily know how altitude sickness is going to affect you until you are at that altitude. Right, right. For example, if I were a marathon runner and I'd done everything to prepare for this trip, but for some reason, genetically, I was not built to endure 19,000ft of altitude, I could get up there on summit night. If you're caught in the dark getting Altitude sickness. What do you do about it? There's nothing to do at that point. Like, you either can cope with the symptoms and continue, or you get pulled or worse.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah. And so, one of the things that I did was get the altitude sickness pills, the Diamox, and eventually we all got on that.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Eventually. Yeah.

**Matt Bowles:** Which I think was really important for us to be on that, because who knows what might have happened if we weren't on that.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yeah. If you're listening to this and you're planning to climb Mount Kilimanjaro, don't listen to what anyone says. Just bring Diamox with you and start taking that. Unless you have some serious adverse reactions to it. Like they say to test it out a couple days before, which is a good idea. Test it out. And unless you have, like, some serious reaction to it, I would recommend it because it helped us.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah. Big time. I mean, obviously, consult your doctor and test it out a little bit beforehand, because you just want to make sure if there's any side effects that you're experiencing or whatever. And you can just do that in a controlled environment. It's kind of good to know. Okay. Like, my body responds this way to it. Like, I know what to expect while I'm on this regimen, and then to start it before. Before you actually begin your ascent and then stay on it consistently. So that is one thing I think that helped. And then our physical training regimen. You and I were pretty much working out every day for three weeks.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yeah, it was funny. I signed up for the gym the day after I signed up for Kilimanjaro. They had a Stairmaster in there, and I would just. I got on and went until I couldn't. And then the next day, I added five minutes, and then next day, five more. And that was pretty much my working plan, other than normal weightlifting stuffs.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah. I was just like, man, I don't even know what my fitness endurance level is because I don't necessarily do, like, super long-distance runs, but I really need to start pushing the endurance thing. So, then I was like, all right, let me start with trying to do a 5k and see how long it takes me. And then I'm going to try to do a 6K and then a 7K and then an 8K, and then just keep trying to go faster and then. And the technique, I think that's actually really important was I was like, all right, let me go until I feel like I can't run anymore, and then just go a little bit further Cause I feel like a lot of the Kilimanjaro thing for me was like being able to push through after you think you've given it all you can do and then just like keep going was the thing. So, yeah, we just did that for three weeks and just got in as good physical shape as we could get and then got on the Diamox regimen. And then the other piece of it, though, that I think is really significant is the mental game. Because I feel like being able to summit Kilimanjaro is as much mental as it is physical, for sure.

**Tammer Abiyu:** And I think one trick that really helped me was that I didn't ask for other people's experiences, aside from the initial regimen that you shared with us in terms of how to prepare. There were people that we met coming down the mountain once we started, and I did not want to know what they had gone through. And I appreciate that because if you have no expectations, number one, you're not going to be too afraid. You're just putting one foot in front of the other. And some people come down from that mountain in like pretty bad shape and it could psych you out. Right. And you're not necessarily going to have the same experience as that. So why let it burden you? So that was my mindset.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah. And you actually came up with a really good idea that I hadn't thought about because I've never climbed a serious mountain before. I mean, I've done like small hikes or climb like Table Mountain in South Africa or things like that, but I've never hiked like a really super high mountain before, like a multi night overnight camping thing and all that. So, my impression of hike was like, oh, we'll just all kind of go up as a group and we'll be talking and chatting along as we go up. Which was the case for a number of days, except for the summit hike. And so, what. But you mentioned to me, which turned out to be an incredible idea which I hadn't even thought of.

And you just casually said it in passing. You were like, I'm going to make a playlist on Spotify with the most motivational inspirational music for me to get me through the hardest part of this hike. And I hadn't even thought of that. And I was like, wow, that's a really good idea if that's the case. But it shifted my mindset to like, oh, there's going to be parts of this hike where it's just going to be complete solitude and we're just going to be internally mentally focused and just trying to propel ourselves forward in whatever way we can. And to be able to have music to help you through it would be a really good thing to have on hand.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yeah, I mean, for me, music is already kind of a performance enhancing drug. If I'm at the gym or whatever, it'll always help you with a few more pounds on your lift or a few more minutes on your run. So, if you apply that to this, where I get that we were chatting and having a good time the first four days, which is great. Otherwise, it could have been pretty boring. They're very long hikes. We talk for like six to eight hours a day. So well, maybe that's not very long for some people, but for me that's a very long time to do something. So, it was good to have good conversations for the first few days. But like you said, summit night is you wake up at 11pm after hiking that day, and then everyone packs up and gets on there, multiple six, seven, eight layers of clothing and we start hiking through sunrise. So, it's seven, eight hours plus of hiking in darkness. There's nothing to see. It's just what would you call it, like loose soil.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah. Like gravel, silt and gravel

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yeah. And so, it doesn't really lend itself to conversation when you're walking up like a 70-degree incline at negative 20 degrees Celsius. So, I figured I might, I would probably rather listen to music doing that.

**Matt Bowles:** I mean that's the thing is that the route that we took anyways, there's six or seven different, eight different ways to get up the mountain, of varying degrees of difficulty. But the route that we took, which is the 'easiest route', which is not easy, but the easiest way to get up there. The first four days, if you took any one of those hikes individually, it would be not too extreme. It would probably be like a hike that you've done before. If you've ever done a six- or seven-hour kind of day hike, it would be like that. And so, we were able to just have great conversation and fun and chat and get to know each other and talk about all different kinds of stuff on the way up for those first four days. And any one of those hikes wasn't crazy strenuous.

Now when you hike for four consecutive days, for eight hours a day, and you're increasing your altitude every single day, there is a cumulative impact of that. But then the summit hike is the thing that you really need to be prepared for. Because you're talking about one ascending to the altitude of whatever it is, 19,500 ish feet. So, you're going up to a very dangerous altitude level. You are also, after the seven-hour day hike, you take a nap and then you get up at 11pm and then you prepare for the summit hike to leave at midnight. And you are hiking pitch black. It can go down to 20 below zero in difficult soil. And you're at that 70-to-75-degree incline angle pretty much the entire way. So, you're hiking through the pitch dark in this incredibly cold weather. I had nine layers on top. I had four layers on the bottom. I have three layers of thermal underwear. And then the snow pants I had.

**Tammer Abiyu:** You were warm.

**Matt Bowles:** A Bali Clava ski mask. I had two winter hats, and I had a hood.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yeah, I figured I would warm up as I was, you know, exerting myself, so I was leaning on that a little bit. I'm glad it turned out all right because I didn't have any other options. Like, we didn't go into

it, but looking for clothing like that actually turned out to be one of the hardest parts of this experience. Right. You show up in Arusha on a week's notice before the actual hike. And I couldn't find much for me because I'm a big guy.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, I mean, you have like, what size 14ft?

**Tammer Abiyu:** 13. Yeah. I didn't have boots when me.

**Matt Bowles:** Right.

**Tammer Abiyu:** My friend mulled a pair of boots for me when she came to climb Kilimanjaro.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, exactly. I mean, because that's the thing. Because when you're traveling, you obviously are not carrying with you a sufficient amount of gear to hike kills you. Now, some of my gear I was able to use base layers and different stuff, but you need a lot of layers, and you need serious warm weather gear for this. And so, you go to a rental shop, and you need to find the right stuff in the right size and.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Hope they have your stuff and, like, it's available because obviously their supply is circulating people coming up and down the mountain. So, you just came back on a different day and like, did anybody come down with size 13 boots?

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, exactly. And you have got to shop for that and then pick out all this stuff. But we eventually did get everything that we needed, and we were all four situated for that. And we did the first four days of the hike and then the summit night came. And do you want to describe sort of what the experience was like? Because just for context, you hike seven hours in the day up to the base Camp, you take a nap, then you wake up at 11pm and you leave at midnight. You hike all the way up to the summit, which you get to after sunrise. We got there around like nine in the morning or something.

And then you can take your pictures at the summit and then you have to hike all the way back down, not just to the base camp, but to the previous camp below that, which is where you're going to sleep for the night. So, in 34 hours, let's say something around there, you're hiking for like 24 out of 34 hours. And it is just an incredibly intense experience, which is really where I think a lot of the mental part of it comes in. Because you are just going to be exhausted. It's physically draining, but you're also just going to be so tired cause you're not sleeping and then you're in these extreme conditions. And so, you just have to have your adrenaline and your mental focus to propel you through.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yeah. So, if you're asking about my experience?

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah.

**Tammer Abiyu:** I have to be frank. I preferred the uphill. Like the uphill part of the summit night. I felt like I was mentally prepared for just, you know, grind through it one foot after the other. Had my playlist, right. And that helped me a lot. I did run out of water though at one point, which is a little sketchy because there's not an infinite supply of water going up with you. It also freezes. So, we had to have two sources of water, right. One was the Camelback, which is the larger, what is it, two-to-three-liter bag. That one freezes. So, you also need to have a smaller Nalgene style bottle that doesn't freeze. So, my Nalgene, which I had bought thinking it would have been foolproof, turned out to freeze, I think three hours in or something like that.

And in addition to the Camelback, that was freezing, so I pretty much ran out of water with like two hours left on the uphill. So that was a little sketchy. Luckily, we ran into a different group, and they shared their water with us, which is great of them. But other than that, I didn't have any problems really on the summit going up. Going down at that point I had mentally used up my source of adrenaline and that kind of thing in my mind. I got to the top, I'm done. But you're not done because 20 minutes later you're done with your photos and your videos. You got to walk down this like slippery mountain for two straight days. And so, I already have bad knees Like, I'm. I'm not a runner, which is. I know I'm an embarrassment to my Ethiopian ancestors, but I hate running and my knees hate running, and so that was, like, 10 times worse for me. What about you?

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, I think it was also very difficult. And a lot of people, I think, don't prepare for the downhill because, one, it uses totally different muscles than the uphill. You and I were both training on the stair stepper going up, or I put the treadmill on the maximum incline, and I'd be, like, walking uphill the whole time. And so, you're sort of training your muscles and preparing for, like, this uphill thing because as you said, once you get to the summit, then you've won your victory, you made it, but you haven't, because you have got to go back down. And the downhill was difficult because it was very loose terrain.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yeah. And also, I had to run to keep up with Hilton, who was being escorted.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, I mean, that's an important thing to say, too. Right. Like, we had people with us that had challenges with altitude. I mean, it really hit them hard.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yeah. So, like we were saying, like, you don't know how it's going to affect you until you get up there. And a couple of people in our group had different versions of altitude sickness. I think [Dani](#) had pain like she was experiencing, right?

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, she had an incredible number of things. She got sick going up. She had, like, a bronchial infection. And then she got her period on the night of the summit hike, and she just pushed through like, her dude. It was, like, unbelievable.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yeah. So, I was very impressed by her. She was just visibly in pain, taking it one step at a time, making it to the top, and then they're like, you have to come down immediately. So, they pulled her. I don't know why they didn't pull Hilton. Hilton was not in pain, but he was very drowsy. He said he was trying to fall asleep multiple times, and he looked drunk. Kind of like, his movements. Obviously, he wasn't drunk, but, like, this is one manifestation of altitude sickness. And I don't know. I had read previously that when you see symptoms like that, like, in terms of being unstable and, like, maybe slight loss of motor control, like, that is serious, and you probably should not keep going.

**Matt Bowles:** Falling down and all that kind of stuff. Yeah.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Just like [Dani](#), he made it to the top to his credit. I don't know where he found the strength to do that.

**Matt Bowles:** He willed himself to the summit, man. I mean, he was so determined.

**Tammer Abiyu:** He was half unconscious. And then he gets up there and he's like. It was weird. Like he got up there and then a switch flipped, and this guy looked completely normal. Taking photos, having a great time, laughing and everything. And then we went back on the downhill and he was back to being a zombie. So, yeah, so it's kind of scary at times.

**Matt Bowles:** So, then they raised him down.

**Tammer Abiyu:** I don't think we mentioned the porters yet. These guys are just legends. They're superhuman.

**Matt Bowles:** Just for people's clarity, for the four of us hikers to go up the mountain, it took 13 professional climbers to take us up the mountain. And this includes guides, medics, cooks, and porters that carry the majority of your stuff. You carry a day pack. The porters carry the rest of your stuff plus their stuff. And so, it takes 13 professional climbers to get four people up to the top of Kilimanjaro.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Correct. And so, they were with us every day, actually, they were ahead of us every day. They would run our stuff up, set up for camp, cook the food and stuff. We would arrive a couple of hours later and then they would take care of us with the hot water and stuff to wash up. To their credit, these guys are doing something like would never be able to do something like this. And they're not paid well. Generally, depending on the company, as in relation to what you would expect to be paid to do something like that, they are not, not paid well.

So, it's on the hikers especially to tip them and stuff at the end. So hopefully people that are listening to this and considering that, please do tip the port as well. In that moment. There were three guides for us on summit night, and one of them took [Dani](#) down. And then one of them was with you, just walking. And I was in the middle with Hilton, and Hilton was getting dragged down by one of the guides and they were running faster than me. I was unencumbered, trying to keep up with a man half my size that was dragging another six-foot man with him. And that's how strong these guys are.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, it's amazing. And so, they were racing down because the idea is that they need to get you to a lower altitude as quickly as possible because Hilton's oxygen level got dangerously low, and they needed to descend and get him down to a lower altitude as quickly as possible. So, they just raced him down the hill. And then you and I were sort of behind and you were in between me and Hilton, and you were like, oh, I'm just going to try to keep up with these guys.

**Tammer Abiyu:** And then the fog came. We had no weather for the entire uphill part of this hike. For four and a half days, we had clear skies and sunny weather. Then all of a sudden, this thick fog descends on us. While I'm in between a guide that's running farther and farther away. You who are like 100ft up. And I can't go back up for. So, I guess I'll run after this guide through this fog. And it was by far the most painful part of that hike, was keeping up with that man, dragging up and down because, you know, like, your toes are starting to hurt going downhill. Your knees are starting to hurt. Everything is sore. You have no water. Like, it's just like you're running on fumes, essentially.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, it was incredible, but it was an amazing accomplishment because I feel like at different points along the way, different people struggled with different things, and we were all able to support each other. Everybody, I think, did the mental preparation where they basically just said, I'm getting to the summit no matter what.

**Tammer Abiyu:** There will be no backing out.

**Matt Bowles:** There will be no backing out. I will get to the summit. And at different points, different people were struggling with different things. And we're all able to come together and support each other and encourage each other and get to the summit as a group. And then we were able to take our picture, which

was very cool because our Remote Year group, which is the first all Africa itinerary Remote Year ever done. The name of our group is Uhuru. And the name of the summit at the top of Kilimanjaro is also called Uhuru.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Sheer coincidence.

**Matt Bowles:** And we were able to create a Remote Year Uhuru group banner. And the four of us summited together. And at the Uhuru Peak summit, we held the Remote Year banner. And the four of us got a really amazing and special picture. And it was an incredible thing. And then, of course, we sent it to the rest of our group, and everybody was super excited about it.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yeah, I think they were just happy that we were alive because I didn't talk to them for six days, right?

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, and other people that we knew were going up the mountain at the time in the week before us, not everyone made it to the summit. A lot of people didn't get there and stuff like that. And our group back in Arusha knew that. And so, they're like, well, how's our group doing? You know, they didn't hear from us. And then all of a sudden, they get the pictures.

**Tammer Abiyu:** I think that was the first picture we sent them, was on The. Yeah, well, the first video we sent them was of the car breaking down on the way to Kilimanjaro. I remember that. Yeah, our car overheated 10 minutes into our drive. But then the next photo they got was on the same summit.

**Matt Bowles:** Right? Yeah. It was amazing overall, I think, the sense of accomplishment that all four of us had.

**Tammer Abiyu:** A 100%.

**Matt Bowles:** We went through a lot to do it, and we were feeling the effects of it for days afterwards. It's kind of. I was just kind of hobbling around for like a week.

**Tammer Abiyu:** We had a workspace that we were working in that had an elevator that stopped working at 6pm that's the schedule. And if you were not down by 6pm you had to take the stairs. And I didn't get down by six the first day after killing, I had to walk down seven flights of stairs. I'm not exaggerating that I was on the verge of tears. I was like, this is the most pain I've ever been in. So yeah, there were some effects.

**Matt Bowles:** Your muscles will feel it. Take some ibuprofen.

So, Tammer, reflections. For anybody that is thinking about hiking Kilimanjaro or wants to plan a trip to do that, what would be any lessons, tips, reflections or takeaways that you would encourage people to consider if they want to hike? Kili.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yeah, so a couple of things. Some of them were told to me by some friends that I'd pass on. One would be drinking a ton of water. Just bear that in mind that you're going to be drinking a lot of water. Bring 3 to 4 liters, minimum capacity. Two, get the important stuff before you get to Arusha. You can't hike without boots. So ideally get boots before. Right. Things like that, things that you know you need, medications, that kind of stuff. Don't rely on getting that at the last minute because you never know what the rental places are going to have. That's the other thing. And then I would say it was extremely rewarding, and I would urge people to do it if they have the chance. Especially if you've never done something like this before, a multi-day hike, there are points in that hike that you might think like, oh, have I made a, like a mistake? Or whatever. You didn't. You made a good choice. Even if you don't make it to the summit, just

pushing your limits like that, doing something that is that far out of your comfort zone is a rewarding experience in and in itself. I think everyone that has the ability to try that should try it.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, I think those are really good tips. The other thing that I would say that I did and had heard to do beforehand that was really helpful was to bring electrolytes to put into the water.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yep.

**Matt Bowles:** Which really helps because you need to be very intentional and just sort of be mentally aware the whole time, you're going up there about how much you're drinking and how much you're eating and how important it is to eat a lot of food and drink a lot of water. And putting electrolytes in your water helps you to rehydrate much better. And so that's what I would do, is bring a 3-liter CamelBak full of water and then bring a 1-liter Nalgene. And in that water, I would dump the electrolytes. And so, I'd have a liter of electrolytes and then three liters of regular water. And try to be intentional about drinking all of that every single day each day and then eating all of the food that they supply to you because your body, your body need that.

And then try to make sure that you get as much sleep as possible. I mean, there were some nights where we would just try to be like, all right, we're going to bed. It's like 6, 45 or 7. We're like exhausted. People are just like falling into bed and stuff. But as you get to higher altitudes, there is an effect on the body where oftentimes it will cause you to lose your appetite or to make it harder to sleep. And so, you need to try to be as attentive to those things as you can and to try to make sure you're eating and drinking and sleeping. And then the other thing I would just say is just prepare mentally for it. Just understand that on that summit night push and that 24 out of 34 hours or so of hiking, that it's just going to be a mental game. And if you keep putting one foot in front of the other, you'll eventually get to the summit

**Tammer Abiyu:** Polly-polly.

**Matt Bowles:** Polly-polly is the theme of the mountain, which means slowly, slowly. So go slowly but keep putting one foot in front of the other and eventually you will reach the summit.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Oh, one more thing, bring candy for summit night. Some easy sugar. That could be a lifesaver, especially if you have mild altitude sickness. So, bring candy, Bring extra snacks just for the entire summit day experience.

**Matt Bowles:** Absolutely, yes. Salty stuff, sweet stuff, nuts, candy, that kind of stuff. And just keep feeding your body and getting yourself to the top and then whatever you can do to motivate yourself. Understand that that summit hike is going to be very internal. It's going to be very a lot of solitude and a lot of you, just you versus you to get to the summit. And so, music, playlists, things like that. It's just you versus the mountain and you have got to do everything you can to prep yourself to get up there. But it's an extraordinary accomplishment and feels amazing to have done it and I think it feels amazing to have done it with the people that we did and to have accomplished it as a group. I thought it was an amazing bonding experience that really brought us together.

**Tammer Abiyu:** Yep. I mean, we were a crew man. No one was left behind.

**Matt Bowles:** No doubt. All right, we're going to pause here and call that the end of part one. And by the way folks, if you are interested in learning more about Remote Year and potentially doing a Remote Year program like the four month program in Africa that Tammer and I are on right now, or like the 12 month

program that Tammer and I each did a couple years ago, or even just a one month program, Remote Year offers all of those different program lengths and they go to all different places around the world, different time zones and all of that stuff. So, if you'd like to check out their offerings and consider doing a program, I'm going to put a link in [the show notes](#) that will get you a discount on your first Remote Year program. If you use that link so you can find that, just go to [themaverickshow.com](http://themaverickshow.com), go to the show notes for this episode. There you will find the link to get your discount on a Remote year program. You will also find links to everything else that we have discussed in this episode. It's all in one place. Go to [themaverickshow.com](http://themaverickshow.com) and go to [the show notes](#) for this episode. And please remember to tune in for [the next episode](#) to hear the conclusion of my interview with Tammer Abiyu. Good night, everybody.