

Matt Bowles: My guest today is Dani Dirks. She is a product manager, songwriter, adventure seeker and full-time digital nomad who has had no permanent base for the last five years and has lived in 35 different countries. Originally from Northern California, she spent two of the last five years as a program lead for [Hacker Paradise](#), the world's first international work travel program for remote professionals. Dani is passionate about trauma, informed design, and the intersection of social innovation, regeneration, systems change and technology. And she now works as the fully remote staff product manager at the mental health care company Cerebral. She spent the pandemic in Bali, Indonesia, where she discovered her passions for free diving, surfing and sparkly costumes. She has also been writing music since she was 4 years old. She currently has a catalog of over 100 unrecorded songs and recently started a project called [This is Everyday Love](#) with the goal of capturing real love stories from around the world and turning them into songs.

Dani, welcome to the show.

Dani Dirks: Thank you so much. That makes me sound so awesome.

Matt Bowles: You are so awesome. You and I have known each other now for over four years. Let's just set the scene here though, before we even talk about that and talk about where we are recording this from today and what we are drinking because this is such an amazing environment. You and I are in Lisbon, Portugal.

Dani Dirks: Yes.

Matt Bowles: And we have just opened an amazing bottle of red wine. This is a red blend from the Alentejo region of Portugal, which is an incredible wine region where you and I and a group, amazing nomads just spent an epic weekend for my birthday. And it was so special and wonderful.

Dani Dirks: It was so much fun. I'm so glad I flew out for that weekend.

Matt Bowles: So, let's give the backstory on this a little bit. Okay. So, it was literally like three weeks ago or so when you and I start chatting. I was in South America, you were in Bangkok, Thailand. And we're like, oh, what are you up to? What is your travel plans this year? I was like, oh, well, I'm going to go to Portugal for my birthday and going to go wine tasting with some friends in Portugal. And your birthday is of course within four days of my birthday. And we know this about each other, so. And you're like, oh, that sounds great. I'd love to go wine tasting in.

Dani Dirks: Portugal and I'll invite myself.

Matt Bowles: I was like, come through. And so, you're like, okay. And you literally just book a ticket from Bangkok to Lisbon.

Dani Dirks: Yeah, it was less than two days after I chatted with you and just booked a flight.

Matt Bowles: Your spontaneity is one of the things that I love most about you and have always appreciated over the years. But let's just talk about the weekend and who we went with and what it was like. I mean, I will just say this to you because Maverick Show listeners know some of the people that we went with. So, Sean Tierney has been on The Maverick Show multiple times. He rolled with us. [Becky Gillespie](#) has also been on the Maverick show two times and she rolled with us. And then you rolled with us and brought two of your amazing friends and we had this six-person crew and we rented a villa in the middle of the wine country and it was just completely epic.

Dani Dirks: Yeah, it was just so much fun having great people. I mean, obviously I know why you've had Sean and Becky on the show so many times. Like they are just such a wealth of knowledge, from nomading to crypto to buying homes in Lisbon. Insane amount of knowledge sharing besides wine sharing and music sharing over the weekend.

Matt Bowles: Well, the music sharing was amazing. And of course, everyone that's listened to the Sean Tierney episode and the Becky Gillespie episode knows that they are both incredibly talented musicians. And I've had them perform songs on the show. And you of course are also an amazingly talented musician. And I told them Danny is coming and she is also a talented musician. So, I was like, if we're literally renting a villa and I have three crazy talented musicians in the same villa, I was like, we got to bring the instruments. So, we had two guitars, a ukulele, a keyboard, and three incredibly talented singers and musicians. And we, when we came back from the all-day wine tasting, we started drinking wine at 10:30 in the morning. We got back to our villa at midnight, we bust out the instruments and we have a jam session in our living room until 3 o'clock in the morning.

Dani Dirks: I actually think it was like 4:30 when we went to bed. I'm pretty positive it was 4:30 in the morning.

Matt Bowles: It was so amazing. It was so special. And then this particular bottle that we are drinking, your homegirl Megan, who I had not even met before the Strip, you just brought you like I'm going to bring some of my crew. I was like, anybody that rolls with Dani is going to be amazing and super cool. Definitely bring them. And of course, we all connected and had this amazing weekend. And then Meghan, shout out to Megan bought me for my birthday this incredible bottle of wine, which is a super limited production from this premium winery in the Alentejo region. And they literally only make like 200 bottles of this per year. And she bought it for me as a really special birthday present. And I thought, what better occasion to open this bottle of wine and drink it than when I'm doing this podcast with you right now.

Dani Dirks: Thank you for sharing. It is delicious. Definitely feels like they've only made 200 bottles of this wine.

Matt Bowles: So, we are going to be drinking through that throughout the episode. But I feel like also we should talk about where you and I met. Because this is a very cool story. So, I had done Remote Year, which is a 12-month international work travel program, in 2016, 2017, and traveled the world for a year with this incredible community of people, some of whom have also been on this podcast. And then after that, I was wanting to continue to nomad and plug into different work travel communities and meet different nomads. And so, I did three months with [Hacker Paradise](#), which is another international work travel program for remote professionals. And you can do sort of one month at a time in different cities. And I was like, ooh, they're in some really cool cities. I would like to do this city and that city and this city. I'll take three months. And the very first city that I show up in for a [Hacker Paradise](#) was Da Nang, Vietnam, Central Vietnam, right on the coast, right on the beach. And you were the program lead for [Hacker Paradise](#) for that group for that month. We met on day one and we just had this amazing connection and have been incredible friends ever since.

Dani Dirks: That was such an interesting trip because it was such a small group of us. I think there was only probably like 13 people on the trip. So, everybody became so close.

Matt Bowles: It was amazing. It was such a special month. And then you and I would continue to run into each other around the world. There was this one incredible moment. I was staying in Valencia, Spain, for a month and I walk out of my building and I literally see you. I hadn't seen you in, I don't know, a year. And I walk out of my building and I literally see you walking down the sidewalk and I'm like, no way. And then you're like, no way. And then we give each other this huge hug. And then we're like, where are you staying? And we were staying in the same building in Valencia.

Dani Dirks: Yeah. So weird.

Matt Bowles: That was totally insane.

Dani Dirks: It's what I love the most about the Nomad life is like, you always are going to run into the most random people in the most random places or the most random people. Know your best friends. Like, it is always the connection and the network.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, it's totally incredible. I was just thinking at the villa this weekend when we were there in the Wine country, I was like, well, I met Sean through the Remote Year alumni network. I met you through the [Hacker Paradise](#) network. I met Becky through the Nomad Cruise and that network. And then through you, I now know Megan and Taylor that joined us for that weekend. And it's just like all of these universes just continue to coalesce and come back around and reintegrate in your life and bring new, more amazing people into your life. And it's just awesome.

Dani Dirks: Yeah, it's so amazing to see.

Matt Bowles: So, I feel like we also need to talk about what came out of this weekend. Speaking of spontaneous travel, decisions that nomads make and things that you are inspired to do when you are surrounded by other amazing people that are doing inspiring things. Because one of the things that you and I try to do is not only travel to epic places that are extraordinary and amazing to experience the physical location, but we try to surround ourselves with extraordinary human beings that are brilliant, that are interesting, that are just kind and wonderful, that are inspiring and all these different levels and just like people that are amazing, right.

Dani Dirks: That's why I hang out with you.

Matt Bowles: Well, ditto.

Dani Dirks: Always.

Matt Bowles: Exactly. And so, we're like, let's invite like six amazing people and just go have this wine tasting weekend together. And what ended up coming out of.

Dani Dirks: That weekend, I mean, a lot of things. My knowledge of NFTs and crypto from Becky was insane. Just exploding my mind about even, like, my understanding of why would you buy an NFT? I had no understanding of NFTs and utility until you told me all of your stories about be friends. And then when you started talking about the royals getting to go to a gala in Ghana and like, dress up super fancy, I was like, I got to get in on this. Like, tell me more about this NFT. And just realizing that for not a lot, I could buy a ticket to this gala, have this permanent piece of artwork, and that was amazing.

Matt Bowles: First of all, shout out to Ivy Shu, who I interviewed a few episodes back, where I learned about this particular NFT project. Because she talked about it on her Maverick show episode and she was

like, there's this amazing NFT project by this Ghanaian artist and everyone who buys this NFT and buys into this collection, you get to attend this gala in Accra in Ghana at the end of 2022 in December. And I was like, that's unbelievable. She had already bought one. You know, she's going. She's like, I'm going. I've never been to Ghana before. And Ghana, of course, is one of my favorite countries. And so, she and I were talking about Ghana. She's like, I'm this year for my first time and this is the context in which I'm going. I was like, so as soon as that episode was over, I literally go to the website and look it up and then I buy the NFT. I'm like, I'm going to. And then this weekend, I'm telling you guys about this and immediately this weekend, you, Becky and Megan all go and buy the NFT. So, we're all going together to this gala in Ghana now.

Dani Dirks: I'm so excited. I got an NFT. I learned how to set up a meta mask so that I could get an NFT. Just that out of the weekend alone was amazing.

Matt Bowles: It was super, super amazing. And then I told you what I'm doing for the final four months of the year. I was like, I told you. I was like, I registered for Remote Years four Month program, which is the first time they've ever done an all-Africa itinerary. And it's the last four months of this year. And it goes to South Africa, it goes to Kenya, it goes to Tanzania, and it goes to Senegal. And then after that, I'm going to just hop over to Ghana and go to this gala. And you were like, can I go?

Dani Dirks: I feel like this is always the theme with you. It's like, you tell me what you're doing and I'm just like, can I go? Can I invite myself on this adventure? Is it cool?

Matt Bowles: I was like, you're always welcome on any adventure that I ever go on, Danny. And so literally this weekend, before we left the wine region, you had signed up for the four-month Remote Year program with me. So, you and I are now planning to spend four months in Africa together this year and culminate that with the NFT gala in Ghana.

Dani Dirks: Yeah, I am so excited. It's going to be the most amazing, just like, cultural immersion trip. Been meaning to go back to Africa. I was thinking of going to South Africa next year. And now I get to go in September. Like I'm super, super stoked on this.

Matt Bowles: It's so amazing. And I know that Africa has a major place in not only your heart, but your travel journey and your personal development, everything else. So, I want to actually maybe now go back a little bit and talk a little bit about just your background and your backstory. Can you share a little bit about where you grew up? And as you were growing up, how did your interest in international travel start to develop when you think back?

Dani Dirks: No. I grew up in a super small town, Northern California, very traditional Catholic family, stay at home mom, dad owned a business. Like it was very like nice small-town America. And we used to go to Mexico for vacations. Every year we'd go to Mexico, we'd go to trips in the Caribbean. But a lot of those were like all inclusive, resort kind of style travel. And I remember as a kid going into the markets in Mexico, seeing the chickens hanging and going in these traditional markets and being so just in love with being in town, being in the city and realizing like that was the place I wanted to be. I didn't want to be at the city beach resort, but I would always be like, hey, can we go check out the markets? Can we be in the city? And I remember my parents realizing that like at an early age and then growing up, I just really enjoyed giving back to my community.

And when I was 16, my aunt actually invited me on a mission trip with her church to Thailand. And so, at 16 years old, I went for two weeks to the hill tribe villages of Chiang Mai and just learned about what it was like

living in these hill tribes. I learned about the clash of cultures between the hill tribe villagers and the Thai people and like the educational system. And we were working in a school for hill tribe children. And it was just such an eye-opening experience for me to be in the most rural parts of northern Thailand at 16 years old. And it was that trip that was the catalyst for I think my entire lifestyle. Because that was the moment that I originally thought, I want to go into some kind of international affairs, social justice. I want to do something that is giving back and in which I get to travel.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. And then one of your major international experiences relatively early on in your adulthood was your trip to Uganda. Can you talk about how that came about and then what the experience was like in Uganda?

Dani Dirks: Yeah. So, in college I was studying economics and I really wanted to understand more international economics. And my university offered number of scholarships to go either study abroad or do volunteer work over the summer. And so, I ended up getting a few scholarships one summer. And actually, my first trip was to Peru. And I was working with these women who are victims of rape and domestic violence in the city. And these were girls as young as 11 years old. And that experience led me actually into working for Tom's Shoes, which was like a weird. I randomly had a call with someone who worked at Tom's, was talking about my experience and she's like, hey, you should be an intern. We're looking for someone to work with us and to help us with our shoe drop planning.

And so, I started working for Toms. I would take the emails and look through them and help kind of basically reply and be like, hey, we can or we can't donate shoes at this time. And one of the emails that came through was this girl who had volunteered with this amazing program. It's still in Uganda. It's called the Real Uganda. It's run by this woman named Leslie Weighill. She is amazing. And the program was amazing. But the girl who emailed me was like, hey, we need shoes for the kids in the school I'm volunteering with. And I was like, right now I can't give you shoes, but I would love to know more about your organization. And she just sent me all of this amazing, like 3, 4-page email about how her trip and her experience. And I knew that moment, I'm like, I have to go to Uganda. I have to experience this.

And so, I immediately emailed the real Uganda and was like, hey, I want to do your trip. Put me in the most rural place possible. I want this experience. I want to do something that's giving back and I want to experience the culture here. And so that next summer I went to Uganda and ended up living on this farm. And it was 30 minutes outside of town by Matatu, which is like the local transportation bus. And like you're in this bus with like 30 chickens, three

ats, 14, 15, 16, 16 people, four babies. Literally it's an old 10-person van. And you're just all of these people and things.

Matt Bowles: The Matatu experience is amazing in Uganda. I can remember because I was in Kampala and I was also in Ginger in 2018. It was my first time. And I have a very good Ugandan friend of mine who I know through nomading and she was back in Kampala and living there. And I was in Nairobi in Kenya for a month. And she was like, dude, if you're in Nairobi, like, you better come to Uganda and you can stay with me in Kampala, like, I'll take you out, I'll show you the country. I was like 100%, of course, right. And so, she, it was amazing. I mean, so much of that trip actually really inspired me to see so much of other parts of Africa because it was just so magical. And she showed me so many amazing things. But the Matatu experience, I mean, imagine a van that you would think is like, oh, this is an 8-passenger van or something like that. And then it's like a minibus, right? Like a public bus type of service. And so, you pay to ride it. And

so, you know, we get in the van and then there's like about eight or so people eventually are in there. It's like, oh, it's time to go. Like they're going to leave now because there's eight people in the van.

Dani Dirks: No.

Matt Bowles: They're like waving people to come back over to get into the van. All of a sudden, another dude gets in and then another dude, like holding three chickens gets in the eight-person van that already has nine people. And now there's a dude with three chickens boarding the van.

Dani Dirks: And you'll wait for like 25 minutes on the side of the road for them to fill that van to the brim. You'll end up with someone's child on your lap.

Matt Bowles: Yeah.

Dani Dirks: You have like a goat licking your ankle.

Matt Bowles: Some dude's chicken is coming under your seat, like in front of you. Yeah. But it's an absolutely amazing local experience that you must simply do.

Dani Dirks: Yeah. It's the best form of transport. So entertaining.

Matt Bowles: But it was really cool too. I mean, Kampala is an unbelievable city and there's so much amazing stuff there. But going out to Jinja, I know you spent some time there and on the outskirts of Jinja and would love for you to talk about that because I went out there initially just to sort of see it because it is the source of the Nile River.

Dani Dirks: Oh, man. Yeah.

Matt Bowles: Which is amazing because I had lived previously in Egypt for about a year. And so, my association with the Nile River is very much with Egypt. But in reality, the Nile River irrigates 11 African countries and the source of it is in Uganda. And so, the fact that the source is there, it gives it so much significance globally and internationally. So, when Mahatma Gandhi, for example, passed away, he wanted some of his ashes. He left instructions for some of his ashes to be scattered in the Nile River and put in at Jinja in Uganda, which was the source. And so, when you go there, there's like all of these shrines to Mahatma G. And like, all these Indian politicians that like, make these pilgrimages, pay homage in Ginger Uganda. And it's just like this incredible place.

Dani Dirks: Yeah, it had a very large Indian influence, but I also think that was part of the political system there as well. And Uganda used to be, like, considered, I believe, the pearl of Africa. It is one of the most stunning, beautiful, green, lush places you could be. And I don't know if you did one of the whitewater rafting trips.

Matt Bowles: I did. Not in Uganda. No.

Dani Dirks: That was fun. Definitely. If you ever go back, whitewater raft, the source of the Nile, like, you got to go on it.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing.

Dani Dirks: Gotta get in. But yeah, I found the people of Uganda, Ugandan culture, the music, the food gets the potion, beans. But the people put so much love into everything. I lived in the village, middle of nowhere,

no running water, no electricity on a farm. And you just picked what you could grow on your farm. And that's what most people did. And if you went to someone's house to visit, they would kill a chicken for you. They'd have two chickens and they would kill the chicken for you to, like, feed you because you were the guest. And that was the most beautiful thing to me living there was just the giving to people who came.

The man who started this organization I was working for was just like a local guy, figured out how to farm and how to make money for himself off farming. And he wanted to teach every single villager that he could how to farm and to farm sustainably so that they could thrive on their own land. And it was amazing to go back like a few years later and just see how many people his organization had impacted. This village went from no electricity, no running water, one school, to full, all electricity. These farms that we had helped plant, these people had expanded their land five, six, seven-fold. It was insane to see what just teaching someone how to like, properly grow food, how it could change an entire village.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. Let me ask you this. What are your reflections specifically on charitable work, voluntourism, and specifically, and particularly in terms of white folks getting involved with charitable work on the continent of Africa. Some of those power dynamics that oftentimes tend to arise in sort of navigating those and things like that. I mean, I'm curious about sort of your reflections in terms of from the start until now in terms of your thinking on that, and then also any tips that you would have for folks that are interested in making a positive contribution and just sort of how to navigate some of the important complexities there.

Dani Dirks: Yeah, you know, I think it's a really complex issue of voluntourism, because for me, my first experience was a mission trip in which we were doing puppet shows about Jesus in front of villagers who didn't even speak English. And we're trying to teach. And that, to me, that proselytization, very not into that, because that village needed so much more than to learn about Jesus walking on water. There was major medical issues going on. There are major educational issues that were going on. But at 16, I got to see that, and I got to recognize that and understand that. And then when I went to college, my first trip in Peru was voluntourism. And I got to see the organization I worked with did need volunteers.

They needed people to help them fill out their Fair-Trade Agreement forms. They needed someone to help teach, design. I could do the Fair-Trade Agreement forms, but I was 19 years old. There wasn't a lot of knowledge that I could impact upon this organization or help them. I could just do whatever random thing they gave me. And the same with, like, my first Uganda trip. I was like the token white girl just going from farm to farm, helping this villager who's, like, starting this nonprofit, make his nonprofit seem more influential because he had Gamazungu with him, who was supporting him and saying, look, I have international people supporting my project. I didn't do a lot more than that because I was learning agriculture at the same time. But that experience opened my eyes to the projects that were going on. What does it really mean to give back? What does it mean to open a nonprofit organization?

And when I went back there, I tried to start one. I spent a year trying to start a nonprofit, and I worked with a lot of other nonprofit organizations and NGOs in the region. And one thing I realized is you need to do your research. If you're doing voluntourism. If you plan on going somewhere, do your research on who you're volunteering with and also understand what you are giving and why you're giving it. Because sometimes what you're giving can be something that's taking away from someone else. So, if you're painting a building, should you actually be paying someone local to paint that building? If you're building a well, should you be training the locals how to build that well, how to maintain that well? If you're volunteering, are you

someone who is in finance? And does the nonprofit need someone to train them in how to do their finances?

Do they need someone to teach their women, how to do business. Those are things you can start looking at is like, does a nonprofit need a photographer to work with them to build their portfolio and help them build a website or do the photography? So, there's like a lot of ways you can volunteer, but like, really look at it in a way of like, how can my expertise actually help these people? And also, is this nonprofit locally run? Is it at a local NGO? Because so often it is that white savior sort of complex of coming in of like, hey, I see a problem, I'm going to fix it, versus I see a problem. Let me check to see if that's actually a problem for the community or is there something bigger that they actually need help with?

Matt Bowles: Yeah, 100%. And what is the community already doing about it? Clearly, they have identified their own priorities. And so, if you are going to try to help or you want to contribute, right. The whole concept of empowering the local people to define their own problems and identify their own solutions. And then from your perspective, does that mean that they can most use you donating money and you helping to raise money to donate, just fund the local initiatives that they're already running without you actually getting involved? Or do you have some type of really specific sort of expertise where your skills can be deployed in a framework that the local people are designing and running and you can just fit in under their leadership and just deliver those skills for them to do certain things or whatever it may be. But I think that's really the important part is sort of acting in solidarity with people and allowing them to lead and design and for you to just sort of slot in under their leadership.

Dani Dirks: Exactly. Yeah. And I think there's a lot of times we go in being like, oh, we need to educate them about this thing or this other thing, or they need to do this differently. But going in and just telling someone that they're doing it wrong is never really the right way to enter into that relationship. So, like, if you see something that could be done better, go in and learn why they're doing things the way they are. Don't just go in and be like, this is wrong, but learn why they're doing it. Maybe they don't know that there is something better, but maybe they do. And maybe it just doesn't work for the environment that they're in. Or if they don't know, there is opportunity to show them, but not tell them it's to show, it's to teach, but not necessarily just be like, you need to do it this way.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, I think being really cognizant of those power dynamics in any time you're engaging with other communities is super important to be and to be culturally respectful and to be, you know, all of those other things.

Dani Dirks: Yeah, I mean, I think this goes back a lot to. I have been doing a lot of research and courses and stuff on like trauma centered design, equity centered design. And at the center of all of it is culture and context. And it's always going back to where are these people coming from? What are their experiences, even what traumas have they faced in the past that is impacting how they react now?

Matt Bowles: Yeah, a hundred percent. Well, you have done a bunch of other travel around Africa. You mentioned whitewater rafting in Uganda. I know you have also done whitewater rafting in Namibia. Can you talk a little bit about some of your whitewater rafting, whitewater kayaking experiences in Africa?

Dani Dirks: Oh my God. Yeah. So, whitewater kayaking on the border of Namibia was probably one of the best new year's I've ever had. I went with a couple people from [Hacker Paradise](#) and a friend of mine who's South African to the Orange River. And it's basically like you are kayaking down the moon. You're on this

river, you're kayaking, you're falling out of your kayak, you're losing everything. But when you look to left and right, it's just rocks, it's just desert. There might be a plant, there might be like a goat, but there's miles that you're kayaking, kilometers that you're kayaking that are literally just desert on both sides, just giant rocks. And you're like, this feels weird to be in just the middle of nowhere, just rowing down like the moon. And that was such a fun experience. I learned so much about myself. One, I'm terrible at kayaking. Awful. Don't put me in the lead. Two, go kayaking with a significant other to see if you actually work out. Because by the end of it, we couldn't even talk to each other. We'll talk in a week. Like, let's just take a break after these five days. Definitely. It's a communication-based project. When you're kayaking down a river with someone else.

Matt Bowles: Can you talk a little bit about your theory on that? Because I think it's actually a really good one.

Dani Dirks: I actually heard it after I already had this experience and felt this experience. I've been listening to this book called [How to Not Die Alone](#), which, like, as a nomad, it's sometimes really hard to meet people to date. So, I was like, oh, maybe I'll read this book. And in the book, one of the very first things it talks about is the canoe philosophy, where it's gone with your significant other in a canoe and see how you communicate. Because a relationship, especially like a nomad relationship, where you are in these very high intense situations pretty often when you're traveling or you're very long distance, as I've been in a number of my nomadic relationships, communication is key. So, if you can't canoe with the person, then you're never going to be able to actually maintain a safe and positive relationship with that person because it's like the communication is number one.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, I think that's really insightful. I want to ask you a little bit more about your thoughts and experiences and just sort of reflections, I guess, at this point of on dating and finding connection, finding love. As a nomad, you've now been in this lifestyle for five years. And one of the questions that I get asked all the time by people is, how does dating work? So, at this point, kind of thinking back over the last five years, I would love any reflections you have and maybe even tips or perspectives that people might want to consider, maybe even if they're newer, kind of getting into this nomad lifestyle. But how does dating work?

Dani Dirks: I think dating as a nomad makes you take a good hard look at yourself and recognize who you are in relationships and who you want to be in relationships. And it really forces you to look at what do you want in a relationship? Because I think everywhere you go, it's kind of different. I think for the first five years, I was really okay with just meeting people while traveling and really using it as an experience to meet new people, have fun, have a temporary relationship, build a friendship. And it can be hard, though, because once you start to have more feelings for someone and you realize that person can't move with you or can't live the same lifestyle, it causes you to put a lot of walls up.

I think for me, dating as a nomad has been great in certain ways. I've met amazing people. I've had amazing experiences that I would have never had had I not met someone who lived in the country that I was traveling. I think some of my best friends are people that I've dated while traveling. But then it's also been really difficult because I look back on relationships I've had and then like, maybe if I hadn't had that wall up, it could have been more than what it was or if I was willing to settle down. It could have been more so than you have to recognize, what do I want? Do I want a really deep relationship that is forever? Do I want a deep relationship that's for now, and am I okay with that? So that's actually been a really interesting sort of realization I've had. But I've loved dating while abroad because I have learned so many things about

different cultures, from South African to Argentinian to Italian. As my sister says, dongs all over the world. Like, we can cut that.

Matt Bowles: Well, I know that one of the ways that you process a lot of your thoughts and your emotions and your reflections and your developing perspectives is through songwriting and through music. And I was wondering if you can share a little bit about the history of the role that music has played in your life and what music and songwriting means to you.

Dani Dirks: Songwriting has been a huge part of my life, I think, ever since I can literally remember speaking. I remember sitting in the back of my mom's car just writing songs. I would sing. Three years old, four years old, I'm singing songs. I'm just making up about the random man crossing the street, the car, you know, When I was a kid, I wanted to be a neurological surgeon. So, I remember at 4 years old, playing in my grandma's garden, singing about being, like, the number one doctor in the world, Doogie Howser style. Like, I just, you know, everything I wanted in life as a kid, I would turn into song. And then I started learning how to play piano at 8. And that just spurned my love for songwriting. I used to just play. My mom could never get me to practice, but I would always play songs that I made up, and my grandma loved them, and she would always listen to me and support me.

And she bought my first guitar at 16 and was like, here's something you can take with you whenever you want to write a music and travel. And I still have that guitar, and I left it in Bali, and it's broken. It doesn't work, but I just don't want to get rid of it because she was so supportive of my music, and my parents have always been super supportive. So, I think songwriting just ended up becoming. I was never very good at expressing myself growing up. Never really good at expressing emotions. Even my friends in high school would be like, ah, you're so shallow. You could never drown in your own thoughts. I wasn't very, like, emotive person. I'm always just very happy. And songwriting is sort of that journal for me. It's sort of when something comes up in my life or something I'm struggling with, I just write it into song. Or if I'm on my motorbike and I just all of a sudden think of I have a feeling or I think of something, suddenly one sentence in my mind turns into four paragraphs of lyrics.

And that's kind of how I've always just dealt with emotions, especially, like, romantic emotions, confusing emotions. And so, traveling actually has ended up with a lot of songs, whether those are from direct relationships or, you know, emotions about. I wrote this song about how much I hated, like, spiritual culture in Bali, and I played it at a comedy show. And it was just how it was so demanding of me. Of like, oh, did you sage yet? Did you put out your crystals in the moonlight? Why aren't you happy? And I was like, just fuck off with your sage. Like, I don't need that. That's not me right now. Like, that's not the thing that's going to change my energy right now. You know, I had a friend pass away, Like, a really, really close friend in Bali passed away last summer. And the way that I was able to deal with this was I wrote a song. I played it for you the other night during wine tasting. That was how I was able to deal through those emotions. And that was what I was able to give back to him was like, at his funeral, like, I brought my keyboard and I played this song for him because it was like, how do I say these things that I want to say of what you meant to me now that I can't say them to you? And so that was the best way I could honor him.

And so, yeah, songs have just always been a way of honoring my feelings and honoring other people. And I am trying to also help other people honor their feelings and things. I, last year, for Valentine's Day, asked my friends if they wanted me to write them love songs for their loved ones. And, you know, I had five friends come to me and be like, yeah, can you write one for my husband or my wife? And so, I just spent a couple days just writing songs for people. And it was so much fun to kind of have a topic and be able to turn that

song into something that then was able to have, like, a meaningful experience for someone else. And I think that's what music is, too, is. It's not just for me, but it's like, how can my story help someone else feel like they're not alone in those feelings or help them reminisce about a good time or to grow from those emotions.

Matt Bowles: That's so awesome. As you know, I am such a big fan of your music. Would you be down to play one of your original numbers for The Maverick Show audience?

Dani Dirks: I would be happy to. I think I've had enough wine at this point that I can say yes to that. Maybe one more set before I play, but yes.

Matt Bowles: Do you want to give any preface or context to the song that you're going to play?

Dani Dirks: Yeah. So, I wrote this song. It's actually one of my older songs. I wrote it after I had been traveling after I moved back to California from Uganda and London. And I dated this guy long distance when I was living in Uganda. I had met him in London and we broke up. And then I moved back home and we started dating again. A year later, we broke up again. Then I wrote this song, realizing that that sort of relationship he wanted was like very much more of a controlling relationship, of controlling who I was. And I also felt like living in this small town was the same way of the environment. Really wanting to control who I was and realizing that I was never going to be a small-town person. I was never going to be a person who could settle down in a suburb. Traveling to me was more important.

And over time, this song has kind of changed. I've added lyrics, I've added pieces based on other relationships I've had that have been really holding me back. I'm looking for a relationship, and I think most nomads who are single are the same way. We're looking for relationships that are really supportive, that are going to help you grow and be better and want you to do the things that make you happy and excited. And I feel like I kept falling into these relationships in which the person was trying to dampen my light to bring me further down. And the same thing with settling in this small town is it was like trying to make me too much of this monochrome human rather than like the rainbow sparkle personality that I love and I want to be. And so that's really what this song's all about.

One of the lyrics is like, I need the world more than I need a man. And that was like such a defining moment for me when I realized that. And that's kind of what made me decide to travel. I'm never going to find love staying in one place because those aren't the people for me. That's. That's not the love that I'm looking for. Like, I'm looking for this extravagant travel or adventure, spontaneity kind of thing.

Matt Bowles: Amazing. All right, folks, here is Dani Dirks performing the traveling song on The Maverick Show.

Dani Dirks: I've been traveling, I am not. What's life alone without your love? And I've been searching for a reason. For a purpose and open. And I'm alone but I keep pushing on. And I'm suffocating this town is too damn small. And settling down with me, giving the rest of the world up. And I'm suffocate and your love is too. Your love is too small. And you've been keeping me down instead of keeping up. And I wanted to, I wanted to love you but I, I, I, oh, I, I just can. Cause I've always needed venture more than I'll ever need. Oh, man. Now want to, how I wanted to love you. That I just can't and I'm suffocating. This town is too small. And setting down would mean giving the rest of the world up. Not suffocating. Your love is too damn small? You've been keeping it down instead of keeping up. You've been keeping me down instead of keeping up. And I wanted to Oh, I wanted to love you. I just scared. Cause I always need adventure. Oh, I always need

adventure. Oh, I always need adventure. More than I'll ever need a man. Oh, wow. I always need adventure. Oh, wow. I always need adventure. Oh, I always need adventure. And I'll ever need, I'll ever need men.

Matt Bowles: That was so amazing.

Dani Dirks: Thank you.

Matt Bowles: That is one of my favorite songs of yours. I remember the first time I actually heard that song was when I was in the middle of pandemic quarantine. Was not traveling. Had not seen you or any of my nomad friends in such a long time. And you posted a video of you playing that song. And I just saw it. And I saw you who, of course, I missed you very much. But then I heard the song and then the lyrics and the themes in that song, and it just, like, hit me completely emotionally the first time I heard it. And so it's one of my most meaningful songs that you've done.

Dani Dirks: Thank you. And I'm really glad that it was impactful and it kept you entertained during the pandemic. I know when I started posting to Instagram, I think I posted 26 songs or maybe 30 songs. And I just had a friend who was like, why aren't you playing your music? Why aren't you posting it? He's like, I challenge you every day this month post a song. And so, I did, and it spurred my [This is Everyday Love](#) project and writing more love songs. And now, I think. But something that I really want to bring back and be focusing more on is recording more songs, recording more music on my adventures.

Matt Bowles: That's so awesome. Well, let's talk about some more of your adventures. Because of all of the travelers, I know you had some of the most epic adventures and I want to talk a little bit about some of them. The first place that I want to ask you about sticking with the continent of Africa is your experiences in South Africa. I know you've been multiple times and the country has a lot of significance for you, but can you talk about some of your most memorable experiences in South Africa?

Dani Dirks: Oh man. I mean, I'm so excited to be going back there in September with you and having some more great adventures. I think my first time in South Africa, it was sort of a country that really surprised me. I think coming from Uganda and being in East African country, it's very different. Like you go to Cape Town and you just see such the division between classes, rich, poor, race, everything there and to experience that and try and live within it with local people. And so, there was a lot of like really exciting things I got to do. Like we talked about going to errands and like being able to go to not just errands, but like, did you go to the block parties in. There's like one block party in one of the townships where it's like trucks out there and guys just serving shots of alcohol and there's DJs just like lined up in the middle of the block. Going out there with my friends from the township was just such an eye opening, fun experience because all you hear about is like the dangers of the townships and everything.

But like you go there with your friends who live there every day and such an experience to see such joy and happy like on a Sunday and everyone's just out barbecuing and dancing and having a good time. You go to Rands and order the big bowls of meat and you're just like, let's share this together. And you're just sharing meat together. And I remember one time I went and had the barbecue with some friends, went to Mzoli's. It's another one similar. It's this barbecue and I went with some of my friends and they're like, can we just tell you, like, we've never brought a Westerner here, we've never brought a white person to this barbecue. And to be here sharing this and like you're eating with your hands out of the same bowl, they're like, to share this with you is amazing. This is so great to have you here and have you so excited to be a part of our

experience. And it is really exciting to go to these townships. But then it's also really, really scary too, because a few weeks before there was a shooting at this at Mzoli's.

There's this weird dichotomy that you're in South Africa. You want to just be 100% involved and 100 taking part of everything. But then you also are always sort of on this edge of is this safe? I like, got to also go to another one of the most dangerous places with one of the ex-gang members from used to be in one of the prison gangs. And his township is one of the most dangerous in the world. And I got invited to go in and just build kites for kite day. Like, I don't know if you know about Kite Day in South Africa. It's like everyone goes to the beach, everyone builds these kites. It's a big day across the country. But a lot of the kids in these townships don't get to participate. They just see the kites on the beach and they're so close. So, I got to go with some friends who have been doing a documentary on the township and go build kites with the kids. And that was like a super impactful experience because you got to learn about what is life like for children in the townships, especially some of these most dangerous ones, and how do you support the local community that wants to build changes.

And so, they're working on building a community center, and they're building it in a way that actually is fully bulletproof. So, like, the kids have like a safe place to play throughout their childhood. So that was like an impactful experience. But then if we want to go to adventure stories, I digressed, but adventure stories would be shark cage diving with my parents. My first trip to South Africa, a big thing is to go out with the great whites and you go get in a wetsuit and you hold your breath underwater in a cage, and you wait for sharks to come to you while they throw in fish guts into the water. And you're just sitting there floating around, fish guts hitting you in the face, waiting for a shark to come. And I just remember my mom, who's like so small, so cute. She's just like, I want to try this. She just like jumped right in, getting hit in the face with fish guts, just freezing cold. Like, I see her shivering in there and she's like, I want to see the shark. I want to see the shark.

I think she and I and maybe like, one other people were the only people who saw sharks, and they weren't great whites. But the trip was very memorable in that it was just such a weird, out of the box experience to go do. But then it also was one of my first experiences with aqua tourism, like ocean tourism, which, in the same sense as we talk about with voluntourism, you have to be really aware of who you're going with, what they're doing, and whether or not it's actually good for the environment or for the fish. If I'm going out there with 30 other boats just churning the water with fish guts to get great whites to come, is that the best for that region? So that was kind of something that afterwards I thought about. And then bungee jumping was probably another one of my favorite experiences. One of the biggest bungee jumps in the world is in South Africa. It's like this massive bridge. We stayed overnight. We drove up the garden route, which was absolutely stunning. Stayed in this cute little town on this inlet.

And then, yeah, it was my first bungee jumping experience. Freaking ridiculous. But, yeah, that was super exhilarating. It's one of those things where I think that was one of the moments where I realized that I sometimes I just jump into things. Like, I literally just standing there, and he's like, do you want to push or do you want to jump? And I'm like, you know what? If it's going to hurt, I'm just going to jump in. And it wasn't bad until you're sitting there upside down for, like, five minutes longer. Will they pull you back up? Because you're just dangling upside down, and it feels like your feet are just slowly slipping out of the container that's holding you, and you're just upside down, staring at the ground. You're like, am I slipping or am I okay? You can't really tell. So, yeah, that was a really fun, exciting experience in South Africa.

I feel like there's been so many Africa Burn is another one. I highly recommend going April. It's usually when it is, and it's like mini-Burning man in the desert. But it's all, like, local South African DJs playing in the desert. All these people put, like, tons of money into building amazing artwork. And it's like four hours away from Cape Town in the Karoo. So, you're like, in the desert in this amazing part of South Africa, surrounded by amazing humans from all over the world. And it's just the burning man principles which are just be self-sustaining to give back. I was part of this this theater. It was like a cinema camp and so we just played movies like all day for anybody who wanted to come. We made cocktails and played movies and that was like our gift. So yeah, that was a really cool experience as well.

Matt Bowles: All right, we are going to pause here and call this the end of part one. Please be sure to tune in to [the next episode](#) to hear the conclusion of my interview with Dani Dirks.