

Matt Bowles: My guest today is Sally Elbassir. Born in Ireland to Arab Muslim parents of Sudanese and Egyptian heritage, she was raised primarily in Los Angeles and has now traveled to over 40 countries. In 2015, she left her advertising job to chase her dream of eating the best street food, learning about different cultures and challenging misconceptions about Islamophobia. She's a firm believer that local food and travel experiences are the best form of education and she shares her adventures, reflections and tips on her blog at passportandplates.com.

Sally, welcome to the show.

Sally Elbassir: Thank you for having me.

Matt Bowles: I am so excited to have you here. Let's just start off by talking about where we are recording this from today. We're not in person, unfortunately. We're not even on the same continent. I am actually in Alba, Italy. And where are you today?

Sally Elbassir: I am in Los Angeles, California. So, I think we have an eight- or nine-hour time difference now.

Matt Bowles: I think we do. I love Los Angeles. I lived in LA for the seven years before I started Nomad. It was the last permanent base that I had and I have so much love for the city of LA. But I want to start with your story way back before you got to LA. Can you take us back and talk about where you were born and then what your journey was like from there getting to Los Angeles?

Sally Elbassir: So, my dad is Sudanese and he spent some of his life living in Sudan and then he went to college in Egypt before going to Ireland for med school. And then my mom is Egyptian and Sudanese and she spent her childhood in Sudan and then moved I think when she was about 12 to Egypt. So interestingly, they both spent time in Egypt and Sudan. And then when she married my dad, she moved to Ireland to be with him. And yeah, since then, they also moved around a lot. I was born in Ireland. They lived there for a couple of years. They moved to the UK after. They lived in Bahrain for a while, and then Egypt, and then they finally made it to the United States. So, I was three and a half when they moved to Northern California, and we lived there up until I was 8, and that's when we moved to Los Angeles. So, yeah, everyone's born. Everyone's born in a different country, including my siblings and I. And yeah, it always makes for a fun story when someone asks where I'm from.

Matt Bowles: Can you talk a little bit about then how your experience was growing up in Los Angeles and maybe share a little bit about the term if people haven't heard it, Third Culture Kids, what that means. I know you've written a lot about that, but just also share a little bit about your experience as an immigrant family in Los Angeles, as a Muslim family who was living in Los Angeles during 9/11 and in the aftermath of that and maybe just how that experience was for you.

Sally Elbassir: Yeah, sure. Well, I guess, like, moving around a lot as a kid definitely had its challenges. I am and always was, like, introverted. And so, I think for me, I definitely had to learn to adjust to new situations pretty quickly. So, when we moved to Los Angeles, like I said, I was 8 years old, and it was a change from where we lived before. We lived in Sacramento when I was in elementary school and I had family that lived in San Francisco at the time. So, it was nice because we were always able to see them on the weekends and things like that. So, when we moved to Los Angeles, that was also an adjustment because it was just my immediate family and I that lived there. But, you know, you're a kid and you adjust quickly. And so, I made friends and everything was good and dandy in terms of 9/11.

So, I was 11 years old and I was in middle school when 9/11 hit. And, you know, it happened in September, so it was still very early in the school year. And I was at a new school. And I think that was really the first time I became aware that my family was different. I mean, I always knew, you know, my parents were really good about keeping us in touch with our culture and our religion and so that we spoke Arabic at home. We eat Egyptian food at home. I used to go to, like, Saturday school at the mosque to practice Arabic and learn religion. But I think that was the first time I kind of became really aware of what that means and how that's different than maybe the rest of my classmates. And that was really challenging. You know, I think especially during that period of time when you're kind of an awkward teenager and you're already self-conscious as it is about just existing. So that was definitely an added layer.

And I think it really made me struggle to kind of find this constellation between what does it mean to be Arab and Muslim and also American? Because I always felt like, especially at that time, they were inherently opposed. That was definitely something that, you know, overshadowed me through my teen years and into being a young adult. So, I think that's definitely something that I have spent a lot of time sort of working on myself. And I think the more that I've traveled, I've also began to understand that there's really no one definition of not just being American, but just in general. I now consider myself lucky that I get to take all these different parts of different cultures and parts of who I am and these experiences, and I get to take the good and leave behind the things that are maybe not so great. So, it's actually a benefit.

And then you asked about being a third culture kid. So, the concept of being a third culture kid is essentially that you have parents that are from two different cultures, and then you're also living in a third culture. So, for me, my parents are Egyptian and Sudanese, and then I grew up in the United States. And I think growing up, it does have its challenges because you don't really feel there's a single place that you belong. It's interesting because I have traditions from all three cultures that I take. It's different foods, different languages, different cultural norms. Even just on a broader perspective, the idea of collectivism versus individualism. So, all of these different ideas that I think growing up I felt like didn't necessarily mesh together really helped shape who I am now. I think I've learned how to kind of take little aspects of all these different cultures and bridge them into who I am.

Matt Bowles: Can you talk about your first experiences going back to Egypt and going back to Sudan and connecting with those two cultures in those countries?

Sally Elbassir: Yeah, absolutely. So I went back to both countries, actually, when I was 14, I went to Egypt first. So, my parents and I didn't become citizens until 2004. And honestly, as soon as we got our passports, we went to Egypt directly. Going to Egypt was such a culture shock for me, but it surprised me how much. So, I think my family had always been really big about speaking Arabic at home, you know, eating Arabic food. We watched, like, Arabic TV shows, and my mom and dad have a network. You know, a lot of their friends are also Egyptian and Sudanese. And so, I didn't really expect that there was going to be much culture shock beyond, oh, it's maybe it's a new country. Maybe they operate a little bit differently. And I know, Matt, you've been to Egypt, so you know just how different it is than the United States, to put it lightly.

I mean, Cairo is great but it is very chaotic, and coming from, really, the suburbs of Los Angeles, and even Los Angeles as a city, I was surprised to be in a car and just see someone with a donkey and a fruit cart, like, just on the road with me, I think the driving was really, like, the first introduction to the culture shock for me, where. Because in Egypt, they don't really follow a lot of typical driving rules that they follow in the United States. But, yeah, I think it's also just people knew right away that I was a foreigner. They were like,

you're not from here. Sometimes I didn't even need to open my mouth that they could spot it right away. And even my mom, I think people realized that my mom hadn't been in Egypt in a really long time.

And so, I remember that being really surprising to me because I was like, how do they know my mom? Especially because to me, she doesn't have any kind of detectable accent. She spent almost her entire life in Egypt, with the exception of maybe the previous 15 years. And so, yeah, that was really surprising to me, But I think it was great in the sense of, like, I really just got to get a glimpse of where my families from. My grandma still lives there, and I have some cousins that live there. And I got to stay with my grandma in the house that my mom grew up in and go to the pyramids and go to some of the mosques. And it was just so cool to be able to experience just that history and really connect yourself with a culture that you'd always heard about, but I had never gotten to experience up until that point.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, Egypt is an extraordinary place. I've spent about a year in Cairo. I've been there three times, and I have a lot of love and appreciation for the city. But, yeah, if it's the first time that you've ever been there, especially if you haven't traveled much, like outside the United States or outside of Western Europe or something like that, it is.

Sally Elbassir: Overwhelming.

Matt Bowles: Really quite a different experience. As you said, the traffic lights are more decorative than functional, shall we say. Which basically means that if you want to cross the street as a pedestrian there's no stoplight that people are going to stop for. And there's really oftentimes on some of the roads, no stop in traffic at all. So, you just have to simply walk out in front of four lanes of traffic and trust that those cars are not going to hit you and that they are going to stop for you. And you just have to start doing things like that. And then eventually you get used to it. And what initially appears to be extremely chaotic, ultimately, when you immerse in it for long enough, you start to see that there's a high level of organization to the chaos, and you start to understand how it all works and how it functions and how you can sort of fit into that ecosystem and function within it. But it takes a little bit of time to adjust.

Sally Elbassir: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think every time I go back, I get a little bit culture shocked, because I've forgotten, but like you said, it is very much organized chaos and even systems like the bus and things like that. That maybe just because I don't necessarily understand how the microbus system works or someone who's visiting doesn't, doesn't mean that it doesn't have a system. Everyone that lives there understands the system.

Matt Bowles: Right. It's like you might see the microbus stopping in the Middle Lane of 4 lanes of traffic and someone running out in front of the cars and jumping on it. And you might think that's different from how it works where you live, because it is, but that's how it works there. And so, then you learn that, and then you figure out how to work with it.

Sally Elbassir: Yeah, exactly. I mean, I'm kind of grateful that that was my first experience abroad besides being a baby, because it was so, so different that it almost felt like everywhere else that I went to after was kind of more relaxing, I guess, by comparison. Like, it didn't feel just so out there. So, I think even when I went to Sudan after, because I ended up going. So that was my summer break after my first year of high school, and then winter break, we went to Sudan and spent two weeks there. And Sudan was also very different than Egypt. And also, just for me in general, because Sudan is quite calm comparatively. The

country is very large, but they don't have the population density. The capital of Sudan, Khartoum, does not have the population density that Cairo does. So that was really different.

But I also felt like it was harder to be independent there. And that was something that I kind of struggled a little bit with. I mean, I was a teenager at the time, I wasn't an adult by any means, so it's not like I got to wander around the streets of Cairo by myself or anything, but I did feel like in Sudan it was a little bit more challenging to get around and be able to explore. And I think with Sudan too, a lot of the cool things to do from like a historical perspective, like the pyramids in Sudan and things like that are not located in the city. And so, it did make sightseeing a little bit more challenging. And my dad hadn't been back in a really long time either. And so, we ended up spending a lot of time with family rather than doing like the quote unquote touristy things.

So, I think for Sudan, I was a little bit underwhelmed as a teenager being like, I mean, it was fine to hang out with my family, but I would have loved to see the country. So, when I did go back again, I went in 2011, and then I went again in 2017 with a very dead set mission of leaving the capital and seeing other parts of the country. And my family was with me. My brother, my sister, my mom and my dad all came along and we got to explore other parts of Sudan. And that was really great because I realized there are so many amazing things to do in Sudan and it's so empty compared to Egypt. And I think people don't know that. I didn't know that.

Matt Bowles: Can you share a little bit about some of those things? I mean, maybe starting with the pyramids in Sudan and then anything else that you want to share?

Sally Elbassir: Yeah, absolutely. So, in Sudan, I mean, at least I didn't know this, so maybe this isn't very common information, but there are more pyramids in Sudan than there are in Egypt. And they are not bigger. The Great Pyramid is, you know, the largest. But yeah, in Sudan they actually have a higher number. And so, I remember finding that out and being really surprised. But it was cool to be able to go. And actually, we did a road trip and we got to see these pyramids and they were empty and they were in pristine condition, I mean, considering their age. But really, really well taken care of. You can actually go camping just really close by. And it was an amazing experience to be able to go there. There are no tourists, there's nobody. You just get to go explore at your leisure and see these really beautiful and just well preserved, you know, pieces of history. So, to me, that was amazing.

And then another part that we went to, we went to Port Sudan, which is on the east coast. Of the country. So, we actually flew there. And Port Sudan also is bordered by the Red Sea. And I've been to the Red Sea in Egypt, and I remember still thinking that that was some of the most beautiful water that I'd ever been to. But in Sudan, because they don't have as much tourism and they just don't have that volume of people that are there. The coral was in absolute pristine, colored condition. Everything was so well preserved and taken care of. And again, we were the only ones that were swimming there. I think one boat of tourists came at one point, but it was just spectacular. And I think when Sudan really politically stabilizes and is open and accessible to tourists, it's going to be such a popular destination.

Matt Bowles: Can you talk a little bit about what's going on in Sudan right now? I know your parents are actually in Sudan right now when we're recording this. And there's not been a lot of coverage in the United States media anyways about what's going on in Sudan right now. So, can you just share a little bit with folks?

Sally Elbassir: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. So, you're right. My parents are there. They're supposed to be flying back to the United States this weekend. Hopefully they've already had a flight cancellation, so I'm hopeful that they'll come back on Sunday. So back in 2019, there was an ousting of the president at the time, President al-Bashir, and people were not happy with his rule. I think it was almost a belated Arab Spring in Sudan. So, a lot of civilians were not happy with his rule. And there were weeks of protests, and they ousted the president. And there was this agreement that happened between the military and the civilians to have this transitional government where the military rules for a certain agreed amount of time and civilians would take over after that, a civilian government. And now that it's come time for the civilian government to take over, the military no longer wants to give up the power. And so now there are protests that have been going on since October. And the civilians really want a democratic government.

And I think they have been ruled by the military for so long because even the president al-Bashir was also a military officer. And I think one thing that I love to see about the Sudanese people is that they are stubborn and resilient in the best way. There's no backing down when it comes to what they want, especially related to the government. And even though at this point the government has shut down the Internet in Sudan and the military is attacking these protesters. But the protesters are still going into the streets and they're disobeying these curfews because they feel so strongly that it's time for Sudan to have a democratic government. And as much as it's painful to see one of my homelands in strife, I'm hopeful that this fight is going to bring about democracy and peace that the people have been looking for so long.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, hopefully, and hopefully your parents will return safely this weekend. Let me also ask you just kind of going back, you mentioned that you went to Egypt and you went to Sudan as a teenager. Can you talk a little bit from there about your travel journey and how your world travel experiences evolved from there? I mean, one of the things that you mentioned to me actually that I'm kind of curious about is that you did that trip with your family and you did a bunch of this travel with your family. And of course, your family has tons of world travel experiences, as you mentioned, from when you were a kid and all that kind of stuff. And they've lived and they've traveled around. But I am curious how you navigated the parental situation, shall we say, when you were interested in pursuing your dreams of work world of travel.

You actually wrote a really cool blog post. I just want to read an excerpt from it. It's called [A Thank You Letter to \(My\) Supportive Parents](#). And in that blog post you wrote, *"my parents may not have always been supportive of my crazy adventures, although they pretend otherwise. I'm sure they still get anxiety every time I dig out my passport. And I'm pretty sure the day I settle down will be the happiest day of my mom's life. But despite all of, they're supportive of my decisions because they understand what's best for me, even if they don't like it"*.

Can you talk a little bit about that dynamic with your parents and sort of navigating some of those maybe traditional cultural expectations growing up and how you ultimately work through that with your parents to pursue your dreams of world travel?

Sally Elbassir: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think this is a topic of conversation that comes up a lot between just in our community, I think especially amongst some of my parents' friends that have younger children that are maybe teenagers or young adults. It was not always this way. I just need to be clear. It started actually off when I was trying to dorm in college. I went to the University of Southern California, which is probably 20-ish miles from where my parents live. And I had to fight for almost a year for them to allow me to dorm. And I'm really grateful that my dad has always been really big on world travel and having these experiences and kind of, you know, not necessarily being under the wing of him and my mom the whole

time, even as young adults. And so, I think I was really grateful that he helped me kind of navigate that fight. And I think the other thing was also compromising, right? It meant that I had to go home every weekend, which I was not necessarily happy about, but I understood that that was the compromise that I would have to have in order to be able to have this dorming experience.

And then the first year in college, this opportunity to go to Shanghai came up through the business school. And that was also another bit of a fight. And again, I think it took some compromising on my parents, and especially my mom's, who is very much traditional. And I think there's really this sort of cultural stigma around women doing things like traveling on their own, right? And so, you know, I think it kind of kept her reassured knowing that it was a school trip, it was pseudo supervised in the sense that we had chaperones, we were there staying in the same hotel, etc. And it was just one week, and that I promised I would call every day. And then when study abroad rolled around, I chose Ireland. And I chose it because I wanted to purposefully, to be honest, I hadn't been back since I was born, and I was really curious to see this country that my parents both love, by the way.

They had an amazing time when they lived in Ireland, and they always spoke really fondly of it. So, I was really eager to go there. And I think it helped that they know that it's pretty. Like it's a pretty safe country, especially compared to maybe some other countries in Europe or just generally around the world. And they somehow managed to find a Sudanese family that lived in the neighborhood right next to mine in Galway, where I studied abroad. And I would go to the Sudanese family's house, like, once a week and have dinner with them, and they would make sure that I somehow hadn't died. So, you know, it was things like that. I think it was like a very kind of slow push of the envelope with my parents. And then I think when I was studying abroad, I traveled a little bit in Europe, as one does. And I think it's fairly easy to travel in between countries in Europe.

And so, after that, I think they got a little bit more relaxed about it. I think they realized that I was responsible and that I would be able to navigate traveling not necessarily on my own. I didn't go on my first completely solo trip until 2015. But I definitely built up to it in that way. So, after study abroad, I went to Indonesia and I did a summer internship through my university. I went to Argentina and Chile and I did a Spanish program with a family friend. So, it was all those little things that led up to. By the time it was time for me to do this solo trip, the hesitation was there, but it wasn't the same as if I had just gone from always traveling with them to suddenly wanting to do a solo trip.

Matt Bowles: Well, I chose Ireland for my study abroad as well. And it was a completely life changing experience for me and really significant as well, because I'm Irish American. That was really my first time going to Ireland and then it was my first time living in another country. And then you're in college at that age and stuff like that. And so, it was completely transformative for me. And I would kind of do, you know, similar thing with my parents. They were supportive of me going to Ireland, but I was actually there during 97, 98 was the year that I was there. That was my junior year in college. And that was the year that they negotiated and signed the Good Friday peace accords and in the north of Ireland. And I was actually in Belfast on the day that they signed that and stuff like that.

So, it was interesting because I would be going up to the north and I would be going up to the west Belfast, these things. And I would always tell my parents, like after I got back, I wouldn't tell them in advance that I was going to the north and things like that, because you kind of like do these things that, you know your parents will be nervous about. And then like, you tell them after you're back and everything is fine and all of that, they have nothing to worry about. So that was amazing though. I mean, that was completely

transformative. And then the same thing for me, right? Like, I traveled to rent, backpacked around Europe and got to see other European countries. And that opened the floodgates, I think, to my desire to travel. And your independence and your just passion and your confidence and your ability to navigate other cultures and countries where they speak other languages. And I mean, I think it was such an important, you know, just personal growth experience for me.

Sally Elbassir: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think travel is really just the best way to learn about the world and also yourself and your ability to kind of navigate situations that are unknown and cultures that are unknown. And when I went to Indonesia, I know, kind of under false pretenses, that everyone spoke English, as was told to me by someone who had previously done an internship there. Although that might have been the case in certain parts of Indonesia. That was not the case where I was in Jakarta, especially because I actually lived a little bit outside of the city center, closer to where my internship was located. And I cried like the second day I got there, not just because of the language barrier, but I was in an apartment that there was a roach infestation. And I couldn't figure out what to do about it. I didn't know anybody there. I couldn't speak the language. I couldn't figure out how to do basic things like buy groceries. And I remember thinking at that time, like, if I make it through this summer, I know that I'm going to come out of the other end stronger because of it. And I ended up loving it. But those first two weeks, I remember just sitting in that apartment thinking, what am I doing here?

Matt Bowles: And you told me that you had your birthday in Indonesia.

Sally Elbassir: Yeah.

Matt Bowles: And how was that experience?

Sally Elbassir: Yeah, so I had my 20th. Yeah, my 22nd birthday in Indonesia. And so I was there, as I said, part of an internship program. So, my university placed about 10 of us in 10 different companies throughout Jakarta. And one of my friends, his coworker, said, oh, yes, like, let me help you set up this weekend trip because we really wanted to go to one of the thousand islands off of the coast of Java. And we were like, yeah, sure. I mean, she's a local, she probably knows better than we do. And she managed to get us this incredible deal where the entire weekend was like \$50 or something. And since all of us had just finished college, no one had money. And we were like, yeah, that's great. So, I showed up to our port spot, was in a cute summer dress, like all ready for this weekend swimming trip. And it turned out that this boat was taking off from the fishing port. Port. So, I was wearing sandals and stepping on dead fish. And it turned out our boat was actually like a shipping boat. So, we were sitting at that, like, floor of, like the shipping hole in this maybe three- or four-foot space.

It was a little bit terrifying, but also really comical. I'm grateful that I was there with other people. I think I would have been really terrified if I was by myself and probably had some thoughts of child traffic or adult trafficking at this time. But yeah, I think we just made the most of it. And we got to the island and there were like two beds for 10 of us and no running water. And it's funny because I can look at it now and just laugh about what a crazy experience that was. And I think that's the beauty of travel. Right? Sometimes you just get into these bizarre situations, and all you can really do is just. All right, I guess we're going to just figure out how to navigate this, and then you come back and it's a great memory and a great story.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, absolutely. That's amazing. All right, so by 2015, you had spent time in Africa, in Asia, in Europe, in South America, obviously North America, and la, of course, where you grew up. So, can you

then talk a little bit about what 2015 was like for you in terms of your career life transition that happened there, the founding of [Passport & Plates](#) and how that all came about?

Sally Elbassir: Yeah. So, 2012 is when I graduated university. And like you said, I had spent that following summer in Asia, and then I went to Argentina and Chile after that. And so, I knew at that point the fun was over and I had to get a job. And I remember reading about Digital Nomads at the time and thinking that that was something that I really wanted, but I honestly had no idea how to even go about it. Blogging was not really on my radar at the time because I didn't know how people made money from blogging or that it was even possible. And I didn't really have any, I guess, work experiences that I felt like could be done remotely.

And so, I got a job at an advertising agency, and I stayed hopeful that I would be able to travel in the two weeks that you get off every year when you work in the United States. And I did. I traveled during that time, too. But I think I became increasingly dissatisfied with that job. And it wasn't just, like, the lack of travel and the lack of flexibility for me, but I also just. I didn't feel like I was doing any kind of meaningful work. I didn't enjoy the company culture. And so, by the time 2015 rolled around, I was done. So, I decided to leave that job. I had been applying to other jobs at the time, and things just weren't really panning out. And I decided, you know what? Let me take a bit of a career break and try to figure out my next steps. And so, I planned my first solo trip. I'd always wanted to do it. I'd always been a little bit afraid to, but no one else was going to take six weeks off with me. And so, I was like, okay, I'm going to do it.

So, I chose Europe because I had traveled a little bit in Europe before, when I had studied abroad and I felt like it would be an easier place to start the solo travel experience. And yeah, I started my blog because I wanted just to be able to have my family and friends' kind of keep in touch and see what I was getting up to with no real intention of ever turning it into a business. And even when I got back from that trip, I kept writing because I knew at that point that I really did want to be able to work remotely. So, my goal was to use my blog as a portfolio so that I can maybe get a job in content writing or in social media marketing. So that's kind of like how it all started. I never really started with the intention of turning [Passport & Plates](#) into any kind of business or even anything that would generate money. It was just there for a portfolio.

Matt Bowles: And then how did that evolve? How was that first solo trip for you? First of all, because you mentioned that was your first one. You had some trepidation about it. You did it anyways. First of all, how did that go? And then how did your, how did [Passport & Plates](#) evolve from there?

Sally Elbassir: Yeah, so the solo trip was amazing. I'm an introvert, and I don't think I realized how great, great it would be to just be able to travel at my pace. And some days that meant I did, like, 10 things, and some days it meant I did half a day's worth of activities. And then I went and just took a nap or something and I speak Spanish. And I got to travel all over Spain and see places that I had always wanted to, especially the south of Spain, because there's so much of that Moorish architecture and influence. And I was really able to see a lot of this kind of like Arab and Moroccan style, because I had been to Morocco a few years before to see that style and how it influenced just the design of these southern Spanish cities and architecture and food. And it was so amazing. So, it was really great. And I also was smart enough to take some periods where I was either traveling with friends or visiting friends that lived in Europe or meeting up with people. So that was also good in the sense of, like, I think six weeks completely on my own would have been a little bit lonely, but I did have, like, a couple weeks on, a couple weeks off, that kind of thing, so it was the perfect balance.

And then for [Passport & Plates](#), evolving. Yeah. So, I started the blog in the summer, like around August or so when I went on that trip. And then I actually got my first paid sponsored post February 2016. So, it was about six months later. And I also got my first freelance project doing social media marketing around that time as well. And I realized, oh, people can actually make money blogging. And then it just took off from there. You know, I think I was doing a lot of, like, freelance work. I was doing some sponsored content and learning how to navigate brand partnerships and how to grow website traffic and all of that stuff. So, I was doing both side by side, and it was great. Like, I definitely took the opportunity to work remotely, and I traveled as much as I possibly could. I hardly spent time in LA. I was always in and out of the country.

Matt Bowles: Well, one of the central themes of [Passport & Plates](#) is experiencing the world through food. Can you talk a little bit about that and why that's so important to you and why you chose to make that such a central part of your travel experiences?

Sally Elbassir: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, first of all, like, who doesn't love good food, right? So, I just don't trust people who don't really like good food. I'm not going to lie. But, yeah. So, I think, to me, the other thing is really that food is the great unifier. I think it's one of those things where even if you don't understand the culture or the language or really anything about this place, a good meal or just good food, I think really just bridges a lot of misunderstandings and misconceptions. And I think just sharing a meal with someone, even if you don't really know them or you don't. You can't speak their language or anything, there's just this kind of inherent warmth that comes from sharing nourishment. And I think there's also so much that you could learn about culture through food that maybe people don't necessarily think about.

In Indonesia, when I was there, I was actually interning for a company that owned a McDonald's. So, it's a tea company, but they actually own McDonald's Indonesia. And the most popular meal at McDonald's in Indonesia is actually fried chicken and rice. Not burgers, no sandwiches, nothing. Right? And so, I think for me, that was so fascinating when you just go back and you think about the grains that are grown in Indonesia right there, it's rice that's the primary dish. And so, at the end of the day, that's like kind of what nourishes people, and that becomes their norm. And that's how they. Rice can even be part of a breakfast meal there. And so, you just think about how there's just this, like, huge interconnectivity between culture and food and environment and weather and all these different things that I guess if you just, if you don't think that hard about it, you're like, oh, it's, it's just some rice. But when you think about all the stuff that goes behind, like making rice part of this staple item of their food, it becomes really fascinating and a great way to learn about culture. And that was really nerdy, I know.

Matt Bowles: One of the other themes of your blog is challenging misconceptions about Islamophobia. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Sally Elbassir: Yeah, sure. So, I think one thing that I've really evolved to be passionate about in general is challenging misconceptions, period. I mean, I think there's so many countries around the world that have these misconceptions about them thanks to the media or certain entire regions of the world. Like people look at the Middle east and they think, oh, it must be so terrifying to be there. Oh, there's no women's rights there, oh, terrorism, etc. And so, I think for me, the more I traveled, the more I realized there are so many misconceptions about all these different countries. And I would love to show that maybe these countries that they definitely do, they have a lot more to them than the misconceptions that the media show.

And so, I mean, I think Islam as a religion is another one of those things that has gotten since 9 11, especially the Islamophobia globally has gotten worse and worse. And I think it's a shame. I think a lot of

times it comes from a place of not understanding, of non-education that people just kind of take whatever they see in the media as face value. And I'm just one person. So, I'm not going to single handedly change the entire world's view of Islam. But I think for me, every time I travel, I encounter people, it's not even necessarily locals, it could be people that are other travelers and things like that who don't really know anything about Muslims or about the religion in general or I'll be the first Muslim that they've ever really had a conversation with. And I would love to live in a world where it's like I don't need to be the only Muslim person you've ever met, even though you grew up in Australia or something.

But if that means that I can maybe change one person or not even change their mind, but necessarily, but like help educate them a little bit more about this religion of peace, right? Like not in a try to convert you type way, but just like, so you can understand that Islam is not just terrorists. And it's not that at all. Right. There's extremism in every single religion and every single racial group in and just all over the world that nobody wants to associate their group with these extreme ideas. So, yeah, I think to me, that's something that's really important to me. And so, I don't hide that I'm Muslim. And I think for me it's really important that it's something that to use my platform to talk about that Islamophobia is real, but it's up to us to kind of educate ourselves and realize that, hey, like, question the media. It's not always going to show any group in the best light.

Matt Bowles: Can you talk about some of your travel experiences in the Middle East? You have been to some countries that I also love, such as Lebanon, have a lot of friends in Beirut. What an amazing and spectacular city. I know you've been there. You've also been to Oman. You've actually spent more time. I was only in Oman, Virginia, very briefly, but I had heard incredible things about it. And what a special place. But I would love to hear some of your travel experiences and how those places were for you.

Sally Elbassir: Yeah. So, I think the first couple years that I was traveling sort of on my own or like, pretty frequently, I really kind of focused on Europe because it was just really accessible, and Asia as well. It was accessible and inexpensive and just easy to get around. And then I think probably around 2017, I was like, you know what? I think I want to reconnect with my culture again. I went back to Egypt for the first time in like nine years. And I went to certain parts of Egypt, Luxor, and Aswan that I hadn't been to before. And I went to Jordan for the first time and I realized, oh, you know what? The Middle east actually has a bunch of really, really amazing places. And. And so many people are afraid to travel here because it's the Middle east. And that's just. They've associated it with this, like, negative stereotype.

And so, at that point I was like, no, I'm going to show whoever's following me or whoever's reading my blog that the Middle east is actually really amazing. It's totally worth going. And you are doing yourself a disservice by ignoring it as a region. Yeah. So, over the course of, like, a few years, I was really fortunate. Like, I got to go to Lebanon, I went to Oman, like you said. I went to Jordan. I went to Qatar. I mean, I didn't go everywhere, but I went to, like, quite a few places in North Africa and the Middle east, and every single one of them, like, amazed me. And almost all of them that I went to, I either went solo or, like, I went. For example, I went to Lebanon with just my sister, and it was great. And I never felt unsafe. I was not concerned about traveling there as a female. And I think that the hospitality in the Middle east is just unparalleled.

Everyone is so excited that there are visitors there, and they really want to feed you good food. And there's so much history. I mean, Oman, the nature, the natural beauty there, that's what people go to see in Oman. There's not a ton of these kind of old historic artifacts or villages. Like, they do have that, but that's not really the primary focus. Oman has just beautiful mountains and these pristine desert sands. And if you like

camping and if you like nature and that kind of thing, Oman is the place to be. And I went there because a friend of mine said it was her favorite place in the Middle East that she'd gone to, and I was like, cool, I'm going to add that to my list, and I'm going to go. And it's great. I think that people need to be a little bit more open about there's misconceptions. But, like, do your own research and see, and you'll find that a lot of these countries are amazing in their own right and are almost nothing like the media portrays them to be.

Matt Bowles: Yeah. And if anyone is a foodie, I just tell them, go to Beirut. You must go to Beirut. Just go to Beirut.

Sally Elbassir: I mean, Lebanon and Jordan by far. And I know I'm Egyptian, so I really should not even say that. I shouldn't even say this, but Lebanon and Jordan's food is arguably the best in the Middle East. It has blown me away. I mean, I've had Palestinian food here, but I've never been to Palestine myself, so I don't know how the food compares. But Levantine food in general is spectacular.

Matt Bowles: Agreed, 100%. Can you expand a little bit on what you were saying about travel safety and sort of unpack that concept a little bit and some of the common misconceptions around that and then how people should maybe rethink or actually navigate safety, like, what considerations do you have when you travel and so forth?

Sally Elbassir: Yeah, I mean, it's so interesting to me because I think that we are all under this impression that we're safe because we're in our home city or our home country or whatever. But the reality is the United States, especially if you live in a big city, the United States is arguably less safe, just if you look at statistics than a lot of other countries that you travel to throughout the world. I think Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, violent crime is a huge issue in a lot of these big cities. And we also have gun violence is also another big issue here in the United States that they don't necessarily have in a lot of these countries abroad. And so, I think the idea of safety is familiarity for a lot of people. But the reality is you are just as safe or unsafe at home as you are abroad. And so, I think when you're abroad, you should just be aware of your surroundings in the same way that you're aware of your surroundings at home.

And there's really no place that I have been to that I've felt inherently unsafe, whereas in the United States, there have been times where I have, as a female, have felt way more unsafe in certain cities that I visited here compared to other cities or countries abroad. So, I think the idea of travel safety in terms of tips, like as a female, the world is not necessarily that safe for us to begin with. And so, I think it's just taking those normal precautions. It's not wandering down the street when it's dark by yourself. If you drink, for example, keeping an eye out on your drink, or maybe not going out to bars by yourself or telling people where you're going, whether that be a friend at home, a friend that you're traveling with, the hotel reception, whatever that case may be. On a personal level, I always send my itinerary or like at least the accommodation that I'm staying at to my family, and I send them my flight information. It's things like that. I think it's just a normal level of awareness. But the reality is abroad is just as safe, if not safer than the United States.

Matt Bowles: I also want to ask you for our Muslim listeners, for tips that you have specifically for Muslim travelers. And I'd actually also love for you to talk a little bit about your blog again and some of the really incredible content that you have there in terms of Muslim friendly travel information and things of that nature.

Sally Elbassir: Yeah, absolutely. You know, and I think I have a different experience as a Muslim traveler than maybe like a hijab, a woman who wears a veil traveler, because at the end of the day, like, I'm not

visibly Muslim in the same way that somebody, somebody who wears a headscarf is. And I'm totally aware of that. Yeah. I guess in terms of safety tips for us, I think in general you don't have as much, and I'm speaking from a female Muslim perspective also, that you don't have as much luxury of maybe like just figuring out where you're going to stay just randomly upon arrival. Right. I personally and I think a lot of other Muslims and Muslim women, if we're going to stay in a hostel, we'll feel more comfortable for staying in a female dorm. And so, I think it's. Oh, okay, so you plan your accommodation ahead of time and you book it ahead of time. So, there's certain things like that where you just, you do have to do a little bit more planning ahead of time.

I do think it's also important to kind of do a little bit of research on safety, specifically from like a racism perspective if you are a Muslim woman who wears a headscarf. I think you do have to have that like extra precaution of thinking, thinking about is this a country where Islamophobia might be an issue and if so, can I travel solo there or do I need to make sure that I'm traveling with a partner or with a friend or something like that? So, there's certain things like that that I think you have to take those precautions for. But in general, I think as somebody who's not necessarily visibly Muslim in the sense of not wearing a headscarf, the precautions that I take as a female are sufficient.

Matt Bowles: Well, you've created some amazing resources. Can you talk a little bit about your [Muslimas Who Travel Facebook](#) group? And also, just some of the types of content you have on your blog, just in terms of, I mean, you're talking about halal food and like how to find a lot of different things, especially when you're in very non-Muslim parts of the world and things of that nature. So anyway, resources like that would love for you to talk about a little bit as well.

Sally Elbassir: Yeah, absolutely. So actually, I co-founded a Facebook group with a friend of mine, Karima from Hijabi Globetrotter. We co-founded a Facebook group called Muslimas who Travel because we both were kind of traveling solo and I think I saw an article she had written or something and I sent her a tweet and I said, hey, I'm going to be in Spain. And this was like 2017 and I saw that you're there. Do you want to meet up? And so that's how we became friends and we talked about how we're sure that there are other Muslim women that are out traveling like us, but we just don't know where to find them. And so, we created this Facebook group as a resource for other Muslim women to connect with each other when they're traveling. And it's been really, really great because there's representation from all over the world. So, we have people that live in North America, South America, Europe, Asia, everywhere.

And a lot of times that's a great resource, not just for potentially meeting up with someone. Yes. But also, if you want tips on where to eat halal food, for example, like, where can I eat halal food in Vienna. Right. And there's usually someone in there that's either been to Vienna or lives in Vienna and can give you those tips. So, I think definitely from like a food perspective, it's really great to have access not just to a Facebook group, but also there are a few different websites online that do really kind of focus on that. And then I think in terms of finding also, like, sometimes it's just really challenging to find halal food. But thankfully, I think the world has become a lot more conscious of the food that we eat in a lot of countries. And so, you can at the very least find vegetarian, vegan, or like pescatarian options.

So those are also like a great way to find food that's great and edible. And then I think it's also mosques. There are mosques in so many countries now. It's really great. Like, so even countries that are not necessarily predominantly Muslim, a lot of the big cities will have mosques. And I think those are also like a great resource to kind of help people. It's interesting because it's like being Muslim isn't a culture, but it is. It's almost like there is this kind of idea of an ummah, which is kind of like we're all one, like, one people, no

matter what your race is, no matter where you're from or what language you speak. And I always find that sometimes, like being able to visit mosques when you're in other countries, especially in these non-predominantly Muslim countries, it does kind of help find that, like, sense of connection as well. And they're great resources too, for like, food and Muslim friendly things in general.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, that's a really good tip. And shout out to Karima, your co-founder of Muslimas, who travel, who has also been on The Maverick Show. So Maverick Show listeners know [Kareemah](#). If you haven't listened to that episode yet, we'll link it up in [the show notes](#) you can go and check that one out as well. Sally, I want to ask you now just if you were to reflect back on all of the travel that you've done, the 40 plus countries that you've now been to, and all these experiences, how would you say that that has impacted you as a person?

Sally Elbassir: I think when you grow up, right, no matter where you grow up, ultimately you grow up in a bubble. Even if you grew up in maybe a city that's like, large and diverse, you still grew up in this kind of bubble of your own community. And I think that travel really, really forces you outside of that bubble and in the best ways possible. I think on a personal level, I've learned so much about the world, about how people live their lives, about different belief systems and different cultures, and I think it's really made me look at maybe like some of the things that I thought were important, right? I think in the United States, for example, growing up, I was always kind of under the impression that, you know, your career and the job that you do is ultimately like, it's your life, it defines who you are. And I realized when I traveled that not every country really believes that. A lot of people believe your job is your way to make money so that you can live the life that you want.

And I think traveling really helped shift that perspective for me. You know, I was always, like, I was a straight A student, I worked really hard. I was always very driven. And I'm not saying that I'm not anymore, but I'm saying that it's like your career is not the only thing that defines who you are. And so, I think for me, that was like one really impactful way where I kind of took a look at my life and I realized I want this flexibility. I want to be able to work and make money so that I can enjoy traveling, so that I could eat food, so that I could try new activities and new things and have these new experiences. So, I think for me, the more you travel, the more you learn about the different ways that people live, and you realize that there is no right way to live. There are just different ways. And that you have the luxury of being able to pick and choose what works for you to build the life that you want, even if it's not maybe a traditional pathway that the rest of society lives in.

Matt Bowles: That's awesome. I also want to ask you about your concept of home, and I want to read an excerpt from one of the blog posts that you wrote where you were reflecting on that concept. Your post was called *What is Home? Thoughts on Being a Third Culture Kid*. And this is an excerpt from that quote you said. *"Whether I like it or not, the more I learn and absorb from other cultures, the more diluted I become from my own. The more I see, the more I experience, the more I travel means, the more I drift away from the many small nuances that make my identity wholly Arab or even wholly Arab American. I can choose to reject the bits of the culture that I don't like and instead replace them with ideologies I do like. Which begs the question, where in the world is home? Where do I fit in, if anywhere?"* You wrote that a few years ago, and I loved that piece, by the way. It was fantastic. And I think a lot of people think about those types of questions, and it was almost as if you were just openly sort of asking the questions which without a definitive answer, per se. But I want to ask if you've continued to reflect on that concept and those

questions for you, and if you can share a little bit about, you know, where you are in terms of thinking about that concept now.

Sally Elbassir: Yeah, I mean, I don't think I've found an answer to it in the last few years, and I don't know that I ever really will. I guess I've kind of come to this ideology that home is just where I am. Right? Like, I don't think that home is necessarily a place. I think home for me can be physically in. In so many places, because there's so many places to me that have helped shape who I am. It's like the United States where I've spent most of my life, but also Egypt and Sudan, where my family's from, and also where I studied abroad or Spain, for example, where I spent so much time living in the last few years. So, I think the idea of home doesn't necessarily have to be a place.

And I think it's interesting because sometimes it does feel a little bit lonely in the sense of you really want to find this one place where it's like every single aspect of who I am is in just the singular place. All my friends and all my family and all of these cultural ideas, right? But I think that the beauty. And I guess also on the flip side is the challenge of when you travel so much is that because you're always exposed to these new ideas and concepts and foods and cultures, that you come back a little bit different from every trip that you take, you come back having learned something new and maybe the rest of the world that you go back to has not necessarily learned or changed in the same ways, right?

So, I think I've actually really come to comfortable terms with that. And I think even though right now, you know, Los Angeles has been my home base for a while, especially with COVID I'm happy that at least I can have a home base in a place that is very, very diverse. And so that here I can still continue to have new travel experiences, even if it doesn't mean that I have to jump on a plane to have them, right. Yeah. So that's kind of where I'm at. And I think I've just accepted, okay, maybe I'm never going to feel 100% at home anywhere, but that's okay. Kind of what makes you unique, I guess.

Matt Bowles: That's awesome. I love that. Let me ask you one more question and then we'll wrap this up and move into *The Lightning Round*. What tips do you have for how non-Muslims can be better allies to our Muslim brothers and sisters? As Islamophobia continues to grow, rise all over the world, what can we do to better support the Muslim community?

Sally Elbassir: Yeah, I mean, I think education is really the most important thing. I think it's really easy to see the mainstream media and what they say about our religion, about Arabs or all these other different cultures that represent Islam. Although I do think, you know, Arab culture is very tied with Islam. And so, a lot of people don't realize that they're different. Like that there's Christian and Jewish and every other religion of Arabs and there are Muslims from every country in the world. So, I think it's just really important to, when you see these misconceptions or these ideologies, stop and think that there is no single ideology that really identifies an entire group of people. And so, if it means just like read books or follow bloggers or follow, just figure out different ways to learn about Islam.

And it doesn't have to be like, I'm going to pick up and read a book that's literally the history of Islam. But it's like, okay, on Netflix, for example, there's tons and tons of movies and documentaries and TV shows that are Arabic language or that take place in the Middle East. You can educate yourself by watching those. You can follow people on Instagram or on TikTok or any of these social media platforms, platforms that don't look like you and they're Muslim and they'll probably talk about religion in various ways or their own culture in different ways. So, I think for me, it's coming from a place of curiosity and then going out of your way to just learn a little bit more and ask questions. And honestly, most Muslims, a lot of us, we like when

people ask us questions. Like, I think it's, I would rather have someone ask me a question rather than make an assumption.

And I think that's the case for so many groups, not just Muslims. I think most minority groups, you'd rather have somebody ask you a question than make an assumption about your beliefs. And everyone's different. And it's so nuanced too, even. Like, for example, for me, yes, I'm Muslim, but I don't strictly eat halal meat. I don't eat pork, for example. I don't drink alcohol, but I have, for example, other friends who will only eat halal meat. So, I think it's just like there's so many different nuances even within us, but I think it's really just trying to generally educate yourself so that when you do ask questions, you come from a place of curiosity.

Matt Bowles: Good advice. I appreciate you sharing that. All right, Sally, at this point, are you ready to move in to *The Lightning Round*?

Sally Elbassir: Yes. Let's do it.

Matt Bowles: Let's do it. All right. What is one book that has significantly impacted you over the years you'd most recommend people check out?

Sally Elbassir: It's called [Man's Search For Meaning by Viktor Frankl](#). Yeah, so it's about this Jewish man who is in the concentration camps and how he used his willpower and kind of like his mindset on how to survive.

Matt Bowles: All right, who is one person that is currently alive today that you've never met, you'd most love to have dinner with?

Sally Elbassir: So that would definitely be Mindy Kaling. I love her. I think she's a great writer. She is a very powerful woman of color and you could tell that she's like kind of a quirky, nerdy introvert. And I very much relate to that.

Matt Bowles: And it would be an absolutely hilarious and amazing dinner. That is an awesome pick. All right, if you could go back in time, knowing everything that you know now and give one piece of advice to your 18-year-old self, what would you say to 18-year-old Sally?

Sally Elbassir: Yeah, 18-year-old Sally really thought she knew a lot, but I think I would say that there's no right roadmap on how to live your life and so that you don't need to follow a traditional path if that's not what's speaking to you. So, it's okay to live your life and follow your dreams. Even if that's a non-traditional dream.

Matt Bowles: Awesome advice. All right, of all the places that you have now been in the world, what are your top three favorite travel destinations you'd most recommend people check out?

Sally Elbassir: Yeah, I have a really hard time answering this question always, but I would have to say Jordan because I think it surprised me. And even though I knew a lot about it going in, it still went above and beyond and delighted me in every way. Egypt, of course, because there's so much to see and do in Egypt. The pyramids are amazing. Yes. And all the ancient Egyptian artifacts are also amazing. But you can really do and see anything there. There are beaches, there's snorkeling, there's just everything. And then Peru, I went in 2019 and I hiked the Inca trail and I traveled around the country. I spent three weeks there. And it is spectacular and so diverse in every way and it's just, it's amazing. And the food's amazing too.

Matt Bowles: The food is insane.

Sally Elbassir: Yeah.

Matt Bowles: I mean, Lima, Peru probably has the best food in all of South America. I dare say.

Sally Elbassir: I think the Peru actually won best food in the world as a country for like 14 years in a row. I can't remember who awarded them that, but I have to agree.

Matt Bowles: It is completely insane. Yes. So, I highly endorse that recommendation. All right, Sally, what are your top three bucket list destinations? Places you've never been highest on your list you'd most love to, see?

Sally Elbassir: Yeah, so I obviously have so many more than three, but I would have to say that my top three are South Africa, because I actually read an autobiography about this young guy who grew up in South Africa, like when I was a teenager. And I've always wanted to go Patagonia because it looks amazing, and also penguins and then Uzbekistan, just because honestly, like, I feel like it would be such a fascinating place to go. It just its location alone with all the influences that it gets from the east, the west, and also the architecture looks spectacular. So, I would be really curious if it is Uzbekistan.

Matt Bowles: Amazing. Those are really good picks. Yeah. Hit me up when you're planning your South Africa trip. I've spent probably about three months in Cape Town, which also has penguins, by the way. So, you get penguins in both?

Sally Elbassir: Yes.

Matt Bowles: South Africa and Patagonia. Yeah, you can just do like a multi continental penguin. Penguin tour. Yeah, exactly. That's amazing. All right, Sally, I want you to let folks know how they can find you, follow you on social media. Learn more about the Muslimas who travel group. If they're interested in that? Definitely check out your blog [Passport & Plates](#). How do you want people to come into your universe?

Sally Elbassir: Yeah, so I think if you're a Muslim woman and you're interested in connecting with other amazing Muslim women around the world that you should definitely join the Facebook group. So, it's Muslimas who travel. And then if you are just interested in, I guess like following me and following my blog, you can follow me on [Instagram](#). My blog handle is *passportandplates*. And then my website is also chock full of a lot of great travel information from travel guides to amazing restaurants to foods that you have to eat when you're traveling to a certain destination. So that's on [passportandplates.com](#). And also yeah, just if you're on [Instagram](#) or anywhere, just DM me or send me an email and say hi and I always love to hear from people.

Matt Bowles: That is awesome. We are going to link all of that up in [the show notes](#) so folks can just go to one place at [themaverickshow.com](#) go to [the show notes](#) for this episode and there you will find all of Sally's contact information, her blog, website and everything we have talked about in this episode will be there.

Sally, this was amazing. Thank you so much for coming on the show.

Sally Elbassir: Thank you so much for having me. I had a great time.

Matt Bowles: All right, good night, everybody.