

INTRO: This is part two of my interview with Marissa Strang. If you have not yet listened to [part one](#), I highly recommend you go back and do that first because it provides some really important context for this episode. If you have already heard [part one](#), you know we're about halfway through our bottle of wine, so please enjoy the conclusion of my interview with Marissa Strang.

Matt Bowles: I now want to ask you about a super different cultural experience. I love that you and I both have deep love for the Middle east and North Africa and the Indian subcontinent. I also want to ask you about the time that you spent in Japan because it's so culturally different from these other places. But I also have such a deep love for Japan. I have been back three times for a month each. I was based in Tokyo for a month. I was based in Osaka for a month. I was based in Kyoto for a month. And I've been able to travel around the country a bit. Can't wait to go back yet again. Everytime I leave Japan, I just want to come back again. And there's so many things that are special about it, but it's also such a completely culturally unique place. So where in Japan did you go and what for you were some of your very first impressions and some of your highlights of the trip?

Marissa Strang: Oh, my gosh. Japan is so insane. I think it's one of those places, like you said, when you leave, you're just sad. I just want to get right back on the plane and go right back. It is not a place you want to come home from. And I've been saying to my husband for the past probably a couple months, Japan's really calling me back. We really need to get there asap. So, I love that you brought it up, but we did, of course, Tokyo, Hakone, Kyoto, Osaka, and then went back to Tokyo. And that was for, I think, 10 or 11 days and first impression that surprised me, everyone says it, but you're not prepared. It is so clean. And when they say there's no trash cans, they really mean there are no trash cans. You just have to carry your trash with you and hope you find one later. That really surprised me. But it's so cool because obviously most of us, I think a lot of American travelers, we have this idea in our heads that we want to go to Japan. It's like the hot spot.

And so, when you go there and you're like in the streets. I think we started in the business district. Shinjuku is where we were staying. But we went over and we were walking through the streets and you see these big neon signs written in Japanese and you're like, oh my God, I'm finally here. And then getting on the trains and it's so quiet, nobody talks. You don't tuck on your phone. It's very quiet. So, it really is this idealized version of politeness and respect that we don't necessarily have here in the U.S. So, it definitely takes getting used to. You have to understand it when you go there.

Matt Bowles: So, I'm curious for you as well, because you've been to Tokyo, you've also been to Kyoto, which could not be more different. What for you were some of the moments or some of the experiences that just completely struck you and that you still think about.

Marissa Strang: So, we did the Mario Karts in the street. We went over the Rainbow Bridge and we did these Mario Karts. We did not do Shibuya because we decided to book last minute, but we did the Rainbow Bridge and did these Mario Karts. And that was insane. I don't think I will ever do it again. That is actually really rare for me to say that I won't do something again because I remember just being like, is this safe? We are on these like tiny little carts and there are cars rushing by us all around. Drive up to Tokyo Tower, sitting at the red light and your guide does all these hand signals, throwing up gang signs, trying to tell you like, go left, go right, stay close, go in one line, go in two lines. Now we're going to make a right. And then if you get stuck behind the light, you're just stuck there without the person leading the tour. So, you're trying to make sure you get through the red light. It was just a lot.

And then because we booked last minute, we could only do the three-hour tour. So, we were driving these things for three hours. I just remember by the end being like, all right, I'm ready to be on my two legs again. But there was one of those amazing things that I was like, wow, we are driving Mario Karts through Tokyo. How is that even real? So, another second moment that I think a lot of people don't really realize, but there is this gorgeous temple in Japan in Tokyo called Sensō-ji. And it might be one of the first places that you decide to visit because it's in the Nakamise Shopping Street area. So, it's a really popular tourist area. But going into the temple and seeing people there practice their spirituality was also something that really struck me.

First of all, the temple is gorgeous. It's got these huge pagodas and it's red and black and there's this central offering area and there's smoke in the air and people are there saying prayers and practicing their spirituality. But that was also a moment in Tokyo that I thought was really beautiful was seeing people practice at the Buddhist temples and getting to watch elders and little kids. I feel like spirituality is such a deep part of culture, of people's cultures and getting to see these moments where they're practicing. Sing it. It's something that's really unique and can be really intimate and it's important to show respect. But it's something that I feel like we shouldn't take for granted that we're really lucky to get to watch people practice these intimate moments. And so, I remember feeling so in awe of that going to Sensō-ji. It was also the first day, so I was just bright eyed and bushy tailed, excited to explore. But I remember feeling really struck by that of like, okay, they're practicing their spirituality and I'm lucky enough to be let in on this experience.

Matt Bowles: Did I see an Instagram story of your husband participating in a sumo wrestling experience with a Japanese sumo wrestler?

Marissa Strang: I planned the trip. I was like, okay, I'm going to like write our itinerary and everything. And he's like, okay, but I have one thing that I want to do and it's at this time and it's on this day. And I was able to get us tickets and it was really hard to get us tickets. So, the night of, he tells me we're going to go watch sumo wrestling. I'm like, okay, let's go watch it. It was so insane. These guys are so strong. They're powerhouses. They're pushing each. They're out of this circle and it's just really intense. And I feel like for the purposes of the ones that you can access to go see in Tokyo, they're kind of played up right. They're a little bit more comical than what a usual one would be. But the guys were so into it. And at the end they're like, does anyone want to challenge a sumo wrestler?

And of course, I look in my peripheral and I see my husband's hand flew up with no hesitation. And they put them in this ridiculous inflatable suit, and they put on the intense music, and they have him behind this curtain and they put smoke out, and he literally walks out in this giant inflatable suit. And would you believe that he almost, did it? He actually did such a good job. He used to play football, so he's using these different techniques of how to push the guy or whatever. But he did so good. You could see in the video, the guy in the back, the other challenger who he wasn't fighting was like, okay, like, respect. A little head nods. He dapped him up afterwards. I was like, wow, you did such a good job. But while everybody else is having kids and buying houses, my husband is fighting sumo wrestlers in Tokyo. It was the most insane thing, but we could add it to the lifelore.

Matt Bowles: I loved it. I watched the video and it was so amazing and so great to see, but I love the way that your husband does that. He's obviously a super athletic guy. And I saw the video in Egypt of when he went to play soccer with the Egyptian kids. Can you tell that story?

Marissa Strang: So, we were on a cruise on the Nile River, and we were going through these locks. It's very similar to the Panama Canal, but your boat has to be in the line to go through these locks that bring you to the other side. And so, while we were waiting for our turn, we stopped by a soccer field on the side of the Nile River, and he's watching the kids play, and he's like, man, I really wish I could be out there with them. And he's concocting all these random plans in his head. What if I just get off the boat and then just jump in the canoe with the guy who's selling the towels, and then he paddles me over, play with the kids. And I'm like, no, you're not doing that. Because if you get left in here, I don't know what I'm going to do. So, fast forward. After he's longingly looking at these kids playing soccer and he wants to be with them, he comes up with this idea, hatches a plan that we're going to go buy 20 soccer balls, we're going to go to the pitch. And we're going to give away these soccer balls to these kids. And we're going to do it when we get back to Cairo.

On our last day in Egypt, my husband and the guy made it happen. We went to a store; we bought 20 soccer balls. They sold them to us flat. So, then we had to go to a tire place and get the balls filled up. So, we're with these car repair guys. They're inflating the balls for us. And then we go to this pitch and he just naturally jumps in and the kids are so excited. And we devised this competition where the kids that can score a goal get a ball. And it was so exciting. The first one to score was a little kid. He was probably no more than five years old, but he's on the field with 12-year-old. And I just remember the moment of him so sprinting across the field, so excited that he made it. His boys are all hyping him up, running with him. And he walks up to my husband, my husband presents in the soccer ball and they give each other a hug. And it was just the sweetest moment. Only my husband, on our honeymoon would be creating a plan to gift soccer balls to kids. It was just the cutest thing ever.

Matt Bowles: That was super special. And you documented it really beautifully on your Instagram stories and captured the whole thing on video and it completely came through with all the emotion that, that you just described it. So, we'll definitely link up some of these stories and some of these videos in [the show notes](#) because I want people to go through and watch them, just see some of your perspective in the way that you document some of these amazing moments and experiences in your travels. I have to ask you about at least one experience in Europe because you've traveled very extensively in Europe as well. And as I was looking through your content, I saw that you rode the Bernina Express, which I have also ridden, and that you were able to get the Swiss rail pass and go on the train around Switzerland. And this is one of the things that I have been telling people is one of the most beautiful and extraordinary experiences.

If you can get the three-day Swiss rail pass, which is what I got, and this was almost a decade ago that I did it, but I can remember distinctly I got the three day Swiss rail pass and you could just take all of these epic train rides. And so, I'm looking up, what are the most beautiful train rides in the world? I have done that search before. What are the most beautiful train rides in the World. And multiple of them are right there in Switzerland. Going through the Swiss Alps and going around that area, the Bernina Express being one of them. Going from Italy into Switzerland or vice versa, and you go right through the Alps. And I saw that you did that train ride. And I remember our Swiss Rail pass also included as part of the train rides, the boat through Lake Lucerne and then you get onto another train and you're just going around this country. And I can just remember being just completely in awe of the natural beauty that you're seeing through this mode of transportation. So, I have to ask you about it. What was your experience? And for people that have never heard of the Bernina Express, I definitely want you also to describe what it was like to ride on that train.

Marissa Strang: It is just insane. The scenery that you see when you're riding through Switzerland on the train, it's one of the most beautiful ways you can see the country. And so, when we did Switzerland for about a week, so we did a six-day Swiss rail pass, which as you mentioned, includes the ferries and includes the trains. It also includes cable cars. So, there are many different methods of transportation that you can take while you're there. We went from Zurich to Lucerne and we also did a day trip up to Mount Rigi and we did Lauterbrunnen and then St. Moritz and we rode from St. Moritz into Italy. So, it was just an insane amount of these beautiful train rides.

At first, I thought I had made a mistake because it was about mid to late April and so it's kind of the shoulder season, right? Winter's over, but summer hasn't quite started and I was like, dang. I really wanted to see the snow in the Alps, but I didn't think I was going to see much because it was mostly dried up. So, we were still seeing these beautiful Alpine lakes and this beautiful green grass and these huge hills and mountains and it was just stunning. And then you come up on a little village and it's just tucked in there and you're riding past cows. I think cows are so cute. So, you see the cows and you see all these different sceneries. And then the last trip we took, the last train ride we took in Switzerland was from St. Moritz into Toronto to Italy. We took that on the Bernina Express and that was the train ride where we were going. And then all of a sudden, it's just mountains covered in snow. I just remember getting so excited. And the lake, I don't know what lake it was, we're riding past a lake it is covered in ice and it is frozen. And the picture-perfect snow globe looking place where it's just these huge mountains covered in snow and icy lakes.

The thing about the Bernina Express is they have panoramic windows. So, it's this gorgeous train with 360-degree views because they have large curved panoramic windows so you can see everything. But the only issue with those panoramic windows is that they don't open. So, I had started to do a little stroll through the carriage and I found this little section in between two cars that the window opened. So, I decided to be a little crazy and I went into that little section, I down the window and I stuck my head out of the window and I just was a dog with my head out of the window. The wind is blowing in my hair and I'm looking out the window when there's icy lakes and there's snow and it was just insane. So, it's that little stint between St. Moritz and Toronto was when I got to see these snowy lakes and ice and then keep going and then you start to see this green countryside and it looks like you've changed seasons in the middle of your train ride. Now it's sunny, it's green, there's these gorgeous alpine lakes that have this beautiful jade color and the sky is blue and it's just shining. It just looks so, so beautiful. And you experience these different seasons.

I initially thought, oh, we made a huge mistake. I wish we came during winter. But going on shoulder season and getting to get winter but also get what looked like a summer scene, but technically a spring was the coolest contrast all throughout a ride that was only two and a half hours from St. Moritz. You can also start from Kerr, another city in Switzerland, and you can ride for four and a half hours into Toronto. But we decided to take the regional train to St. Moritz, which was a couple hours, and then we broke up the trip a little bit and took the other two hours to into Italy directly. But I can't even express enough. You just really have to see it for yourself.

Matt Bowles: You really do. It's completely incredible. And I can remember the way that I did it was the opposite direction. So, I started in Milan and then went from Milan over the Swiss Alps to St. Moritz and then transferred and went on the Glacier Express from St. Moritz to Zermatt and then skied the Matterhorn, Glacier paradise in survival, which was completely insane. It was unbelievable because the Glacier Express is also absolutely preposterously gorgeous train ride. And then if you ski, I grew up skiing in Buffalo, New York, which is basically like skiing on icebergs. It was years later until I ever went out even to the

western United States to ski in a place like Colorado, which is a whole, whole different world. But then when you ski the Swiss Alps. I'm sorry, but your perspective on all skiing just completely changes. It's just a whole different world. Just going all the way up to the top in these glass gondolas. And it might take you an incredible amount of time to get all the way up there, but once you're up there, if you ski from the top all the way down to the bottom, because you can ski like intermittently and then take another chairlift up to some other place, if you ski all the way to the bottom, there are literally ski runs that are 11 miles long.

Marissa Strang: Wow.

Matt Bowles: You can just ski all the way down. And the scenery that you get, every second of that ski run is just preposterously gorgeous. And the crazy thing about the Matterhorn Glacier paradise when you ski that it's literally on the border of Italy and Switzerland. So, when you go all the way up to the top and you're deciding which run to go down, the name of the run will have a flag on it. Either the flag of Switzerland or the flag of Italy to tell you what country you'll end up in if you take that ski run. So, we were staying on the Swiss side, but we would go up and then ski down into Italy and get down to the bottom of the run and everyone's speaking Italian and you go into an Italian place and have Italian food for lunch, and then you take the chairlift right back up and then you ski back down to Switzerland and then you're spending the night back in your place in Switzerland. And it was one of the most magical and insane ski experiences I've ever had. And it's totally tainted my entire perspective on skiing because now it's like, oh, want to go skiing at this place in the U.S. I'm like, eh, it ain't the Swiss Alps.

Marissa Strang: That is so dope. I think very few people can say that they skied across a border.

Matt Bowles: It is pretty special and amazing. But those train rides are absolutely magical. So, anybody that has any interest in train travel, Switzerland is a really uniquely spectacular place to do it. And it's a really amazing way to see the country.

Marissa, you are now a professional full time travel content creator and you are able to make a living going and having these epic travel experiences that we are talking about. And I would love, this is the dream for a lot of people, I would love to rewind the tape and just talk a little bit about your professional journey and your transition and maybe going all the way back to the moment that you talked about when you were leaving your full time 9 to 5 corporate job and you were transitioning into the travel creator space. Can you talk about that moment, that decision? What were the emotions like? What were you thinking? What was that transition actually like for you to make that leap and then how you built your career as a travel content creator?

Marissa Strang: So, it all really began, I would say in 2018. I was in grad school, I was finishing up my master's and I started a blog, but it was just for fun. I would talk about everything, lifestyle, what I wore, how I'm feeling, self-love, self-care. I really wasn't a travel page, but I would start talking about it. And I noticed that when I would talk about everything in terms of life, when I would talk about travel, that people, it really resonated with people. They really wanted to know more about it and really wanted to tap into my expertise on weekend trips or just places to get away or things like that. That was when I maybe started to realize, okay, there's a little something more here. At the end of 2019, I had gone full blown into travel. But it started with local travel. New York City or Massanutten, which is a little ski resort near the D.C. area for those of you who are not familiar. Day trips from D.C. things to do. And so, it really started off as that.

And then Covid hit in 2020 and we are all just itching to get out of our houses and out of our bubbles. And so that's when I really started talking about, okay, well, maybe you can take a short hiking trip three hours away. This is when I really started to dive in. It's funny because I don't know if a lot of people can say the same, but I became a travel blogger during COVID when I wasn't even trav. This is when I started to dig up these different local trips and places and just ways to get out of your bubble where you could still feel safe and comfortable. And it grew and people started paying attention and I noticed that I really have a platform here. In 2021, I went on a trip to Puerto Rico and I'm a daredevil. I love jumping off cliffs, I love riding jet skis, I love whatever I can get my hands on. In 2021, I'd gone on a trip to Puerto Rico and I was also creating a guide, but I had created this video about jumping off a cliff in Puerto Rico. And I went from 4,000 followers to like 10,000 followers within a month. And it really had jumped up.

And it's funny because during that time before I had even reached the 10k mark, Memphis Tourism had reached out for a press trip. And that was the first time I realized, like, wow, people want to bring me to their city to talk about travel. That's insane. And I think that's when it really started to click for me that this could mean something more. Once I started to realize that, that's when I started to plan my exit from corporate America. I need to save this amount of money. I need to make this amount of brand deals. I need to pitch myself this much. This is when I really started to lock in and realize that it could be a business, it could also be my passion, but it could be something that I do for work. And so that's when I really started to like, dive all the way into travel content creation and learn everything I could about it. I would spend five or six hours a night on Clubhouse and I would just listen to people talk about brand deals and working with brands and being a content creator and all the methodology to try to grow your page.

And that's where I really learned the business side of things and where I started to like, embark on this journey of being able to leave my job. So, my corporate job for two years, I was a marketing strategist for a tourism board called Visit Fairfax in Northern Virginia. And all the things I'm doing now, I was doing for them. I was writing blogs about how to have fun, where to go drink beer, where to take your dog on a patio to have dinner, where you could experience history. In Fairfax County. I was writing all these blogs and managing social, but slowly building my business in the background. And then it just got to this point where it didn't make sense anymore to stay in corporate. And I knew if I got my time back that I could make this transition into being a creator. Two years later, in 2022, I decided to leave my job. And I have not looked back since. I'm coming up on my four-year anniversary of quitting. It's been the most amazing journey and I feel so blessed every day that it's my reality.

Matt Bowles: So, the first question I want to ask you as someone who's been doing this now for years, how do you balance documenting the moment versus experiencing the moment and being in the moment? Do you ever find a conflict between those two things. And how do you reconcile that?

Marissa Strang: I would say constantly. I'd also just be willing to admit it's something that I'm still learning to do as a grader. It's so hard to turn it off. I think my honeymoon trip is a wonderful example of that, because my husband and I had that conversation before we went off like, okay, I do want to create. I do want to have content that I can post because Egypt is such a wonderful place. But also, we're here to celebrate us, and we're here to just be you and I. I still experience that to this day. This conflict of how do I turn off my camera and make sure that I'm looking through it with my eyes instead of just looking at it on my phone screen?

And so that's something that I say to myself constantly. If I'm looking at a beautiful view, I'll literally say to myself, okay, Marissa, remember to look at it with your eyes and not just only remember that you saw it

through your screen. These moments of intentionality, of making sure that I'm balancing. It's something you have to be really aware of and remembering. Also, I consider myself a perfectionist, probably taking certain shots up to like 12 to 20 times, just trying to make sure I got it exactly framed the way I wanted to. Remembering to let some of that go can be really difficult, but it's something that I'm practicing and constantly trying to improve on every day. So, I don't know if I have the key or the answer, but I do think intentionality is so important. And remembering, okay, you're here. Remember to experience and not just document it.

Matt Bowles: I think it's a really interesting point that you mentioned, particularly when you're traveling with a spouse or a relationship partner, even more so than when you're solo traveling, because now there's yet another variable there, which is not just, I want to be present and experience this in addition to documenting it, but I want my experience with my relationship partner also to be special and for us to be able to have special moments that are not being filmed on video and so forth. So do you have any tips for or maybe how you personally reconcile that on your honeymoon or just in general for people that are trying to strike this balance? Any guidelines or techniques that you and your husband have come up with that have worked to make sure that you get some content, but you two are also able to have a really special experience together?

Marissa Strang: Sometimes when we have certain experiences or just meals or whatever it maybe we set a time limit. I remember we had done this really amazing spa experience, actually, in Asheville, North Carolina. There's a Japanese spa called Shoji. And we were like, okay, let's use the first 20 minutes to take content. And then after that, no cameras. I think time limits have helped a lot. I think it's something that is a little more efficient than saying, okay, I'm just not going to take as many shots. If you actually give yourself a stopping point, let's go to this experience. Okay, I'm going to take. Maybe it doesn't even have to be a time limit. Maybe it just has to be. I know I need five shots. So let me write a shot list of the five shots I need, and then once I get them, I don't need anything else. And just holding yourself to that, I think that could be a really good strategy to make sure you're not overdoing it.

Matt Bowles: So, real talk, four years into this, what parts of becoming a full-time travel creator turned out to be different from the fantasy? And now that you've been doing this for so long, do you feel more free overall or do you just feel stressed in different ways now that this is your new job?

Marissa Strang: When I first quit, I would say the first year or two, I always told everyone, yeah, I quit my nine to five so that I could just work 24 hours a day now. Because that's genuinely how I felt. If email comes in, you answer it. A brand wants to hop on a call, you get on that call as soon as possible, because if you don't get the campaign, someone else is going to get it. So, I was kind of living in this scarcity mindset of, okay, if a brand comes to you with a certain number, maybe you're not feeling it. Maybe I should just make it work, because I don't know where my next job is going to come from. So, I will say there was a level of stress, there was a level of scarcity mindset, and maybe a level of feeling like I had to say yes to every single opportunity that came my way, especially the first couple years. And that was something that was really hard to reconcile with. Now I work even more.

And when it came to friendships and relationships and just trying to maintain that, when you become an entrepreneur, a lot of people don't see the ugly side of things. When you come back from a trip, you've been on the trip for a week, you recorded, let's say, 2,000 video clips and pictures, and now you have to edit through all of it. So, you're just at your computer maybe 12 hours a day. Honestly, at times when I got back just on the computer just trying to edit, trying to now support next trips and next deals and X, Y and Z. So, it

really did take a toll on me. And there were times actually that I would say my mental health even suffered because I remember maybe like August of 2022, I had so many deals back-to-back and I was barely churning them out between the time I needed to get back on a plane and dump my suitcase and repack and go on another one.

I will say now that I have gotten into my career and it's four years in and I've started to set boundaries. I don't say yes to every single thing. There are quite a few, quite a bit of opportunities, in fact, that I've had to say no to that I think people would be surprised about. But now I've set that boundary for myself. Now I try to be a little more mindful and I'm still working on it. I'm still a work in progress. I'm not done with myself yet. I'm still a work in progress of trying to remember, okay, get off the computer, it's the weekend, let's set some boundaries. Maybe I can't set a 9 to 5 boundary. Maybe it's 9 to 6:30 or whatever. You have to do that or you're going to burn yourself out. I've learned that the hard way more than once.

Matt Bowles: What kinds of travel stories do you wish got more attention online that currently don't?

Marissa Strang: I think that there's starting to be more of a trend towards people caring about stories that are historic or local. And now I'm starting to see an uptick in that. But I think people have had to push for that the past couple years. The social media atmosphere is. The attention span is so low and it's something we're constantly fighting. So, stories get watered down so much. I love to create culture guides about black travel, about black history, but not just honestly any cultural history. A place that's now a tourist place but now doesn't have the infrastructure for it. And now we're talking about who's there, who's suffering, who's living there, stories of what places used to be. So, I wish maybe that there would be a little bit less of an emphasis on these huge bucket list places that everyone knows and maybe more of an emphasis on the stories of the people who actually live there.

As a travel creator, I feel like I'm trying to strike this balance between not watering down a story but making sure I still create it for the short attention span economy. The social media platforms have trained people into the way that they consume now. Having this low attention span and not being able to sit through a three-minute story anymore. But I wish that people would take more time to understand the history of places and to actually value it and want to listen to it. As creators, we kind of have to sensationalize things at times because when we're trying to tell a greater story, that's the only way to get people to listen. So, I would say like history and local stories. I wish more of those got told. But it can be hard when consumers have been trained to just listen to a 30 second video instead of a 3 minute one.

Matt Bowles: Well, I know that one of the priorities of your travel content is highlighting underrepresented stories. Can you share some examples of how you've been able to do that?

Marissa Strang: Yeah. Well, this kind of goes back to something we talked earlier about the Sheroes Hangout with the acid attack survivors in India. I was able to craft a story about that and to share about the women led businesses in India, the Pink City Rickshaw women chauffeurs, the Tenacious Bee Honey Company, the Sheroes Hangout. It's a way that I've been able to craft these stories to make sure these stories still get told. The way I opened that video was Taj Mahal wasn't the highlight of my India trip. And I think that shock value was able to pull people in and say, okay, then what was? And then I was able to tell these stories about women led businesses in India or to talk about Tucson, Arizona and the fact that the black population is only 5% of who lives there.

But they've been able to create these amazing community spaces and being able to tell those stories. So, these are examples of some of the stories that I've been able to tell. The Comuna 13 in Medellin and being able to tell the story of this place that was struggling with drug and cartel violence in Colombia and how they used artwork and solar escalators to be able to transform this community into a beautiful place that is now safe and it was one of the most dangerous places in Colombia at a time. These are some of the stories that I really enjoy telling and I want to get more deeply into the storytelling. It's just about crafting that narrative in a way that draws people in and still rewards them with information. That's super interesting.

Matt Bowles: What conversations around race and representation in travel still aren't happening honestly enough.

Marissa Strang: I talk a lot about black culture and black travel, and I think a lot of brands have a want to accurately represent us in media, but it's not necessarily happening. I think that there's a difference between diversity and inclusion. And diversity might be the poster child of like, okay, we had a campaign and there are two black women in the video. And yep, we checked our box and now we did it. But the people at the table making those decisions still very much aren't inclusive. And so, I think there's this really important conversation that we need to continue to push for. It's great that you're including people of color in general in your campaigns, and it's great that maybe your influencer campaign had a press trip and you included two black influencers. Great. Good job. I guess I'll pat you on the back.

But the person who's sitting at the table, a lot of times you're not having representation. At the corporate level, you're not having representation. The people who are making these ad campaign decisions, the people who are crafting the narratives, the people who are crafting the itineraries and getting to decide what's important to talk about, crafting the talking points and creating these commercials or whatever else, aren't having people at the table who are representative of the people that they're casting for the campaigns all the time. There's a disconnect in that representation. And so, I think it's important to realize, okay, it may look diverse, but is it inclusive and who's at the table making the decisions? Also, just talking about now when it comes to places that are heavily nonwhite, I guess is the best way to put it. When it comes to places like that and travel and tourism, a lot of the times, the people who are tour operators, tour guides making these experiences happen, they're not the ones who are getting most of the revenue. They're not the ones sitting at the table. They're not the ones who get to have ownership over these tourism experiences.

So, yes, okay, you might have had a black tour guide who's getting paid, what, I don't know, \$5 an hour. And it looks like they're getting to share their stories and bring you into their communities. But who's behind? Who's getting the money? Where is the money going? They're not the owners, they're not the CEOs, they're not the executives, they're not the marketing people. They're just at the lowest level being treated as tour guides. They're not getting to have ownership. I think that it's just very important, especially when we talk about community led tourism, to make sure that they're not just being reduced to tour guide staff or whatever. They're getting to sit on these higher levels. And I think that's a hidden part of the conversation that we're not talking about enough.

Matt Bowles: When you think back about your own experiences traveling to nearly 40 countries on all these different continents, how does being a black woman shape your experience in different countries?

Marissa Strang: I would definitely say an element of what I have to do research about is, am I safe in this place? How do they treat people like me? What do I have to be aware of when I go there? Not just as a woman, but as a Black woman. And that is one of the reasons that led me to Iceland in the first place actually, was I bought that flight immediately and I was going no matter what. But one of the reasons I felt comfortable not canceling it is because it's one of those places that people say are very safe for Black women. And I was very welcomed and I was very comfortable. And I did have to research that and look up am I safe here? And that's a hidden part of research that not everyone has to do. So, I think it's really important to realize that.

And maybe when you're in places that are so homogenous and everyone looks one way and then you go there, you have to remember, okay, I look different. People might treat me a little differently at times. Whether that's for better or for worse. India was one of those places. You know, I had a lot of people as well as the other black travelers I was with, running up, wanting to take pictures, sometimes with consent, sometimes without consent. Something that I had to be aware of. There's a level of hyper awareness of my identity that, that I have to be aware of when I'm going places. I've been to places that people said that they don't treat people of color well. And then I went there and I was comfortable. And I've been to other places where you wouldn't expect. One of my biggest stories of feeling like I was being treated differently was in Cartagena, Colombia, which is crazy because it's literally on the Caribbean coast and they have tons of Black people there. But I was treated differently by a hotel reception.

It's really interesting because you can do your research all you want, but when you're there and you're on the ground, you still have to be aware of the fact that every experience is unique and there are different layers to it. There is colorism. Someone who's treated better might have lighter skin. Someone who's darker skin might be treated differently. There's classism. There's also even hair texturism. Whether you have loose curls or whether you have an Afro, there are so many different layers to it. And that's why, to be honest, when people are on social media, places that Black women feel safe, 10 places where I felt safe. I honestly, that content makes me roll my eyes a little bit and I feel like there's a reason for it. And I get it. I understand that you're communicating your perspective, but at the same time, not everyone's to have the same experience. And so, you can't say with certainty when they say, come out and say, this was my experience. I appreciate that because you cannot say with certainty how someone's going to be treated somewhere. It's just not possible.

Matt Bowles: Well, you also emphasize that travel should not just belong to wealthy people. What barriers do you think are most invisible in travel culture and how are you helping to break those barriers down?

Marissa Strang: I'm going to take this moment to say rest in peace to Spirit Airlines. I know they have always been made the butt of the joke and I get it, you're nicked and dime for everything and, oh, you might have to drive the plane yourself and all these jokes. But I don't think people realize the impact this is going to have on the travel industry. And honestly, Matt, it can be its own podcast episode. And so, I'll try my best to keep it brief. But the way that Spirit was applying downward pressure on these other competitive airlines to keep their tickets low in a way that legacy airline was not doing before they had pressure from airlines like Spirit. It's a real shame. And my friend, I don't know if you follow him. His name is [Chew](#) from *ChewsToExplore*.

Matt Bowles: [Chew](#) has been on the podcast. We hung out together in person at the Black Travel Summit in Rio. He is a dear friend for sure, and we'll link that episode up at [the show notes](#) as well, if anybody hasn't heard it because it's an amazing conversation.

Marissa Strang: He's like such a great advocate, especially when it comes to the budget travel. But flight prices, I feel like it's the first barrier because you can't get a lot of places if you can't afford a flight. Just being able to create this environment where people understand ways that they can get cheaper flights, ways that they can maybe move the goalpost. Not saying, oh, I want to go to Miami from this day, to this day, I need to fly from this airport. And expanding their worldview, trying to give these different tips for cheaper flights is where I would start all the time and say that is a barrier. It really stops people's trip before it even begins is the first flight. And so, I'm interested to see how that develops as spirit has now gone under.

But I would say that's a hidden barrier, but also just a lack of information, a lack of availability of information. Not everyone grew up understanding about credit card points and financial literacy and creating this separate account for travel and being able to set aside money or using the built card and earning on paying your rent. Not everyone is aware of this. So, I think just lack of information and having this mindset of I can't afford it so I'm just not going it to do it. But even things like world packers and volunteering and having access to these fully paid ops that you can apply to that [Gabby](#) from *Packs Light*, she posts a lot of those ops on her dashboard. There's so many different methods and ways that you can travel and I think a lot of people just don't have access to that information. I think there are so many different travel creators championing that and being able to put out these different methodologies for people who may not have had the traditional means to be able to travel, but there's so many different ways and opportunities, opportunities. And so that's why I think social media is so important and what travel creators do, they're a large part of that.

Matt Bowles: Well, shout out to [Gabby Beckford](#) at *Packs Light*. She was actually on the podcast probably like five years ago, but it was an amazing interview and we'll link that one up in [the show notes](#). And it's really been amazing to watch her journey and see everything that she's doing now in the space. So, she's also an amazing person to follow. So big shout out to her.

Marissa, what tips would you have for black folks in particular who may be at the early stage of their travel journey?

Marissa Strang: I would say having an open mindedness and being willing to experience different things that maybe you didn't experience growing up is so important. I think that's where it starts, the mindset of being willing to get outside of your comfort zone. [Jeff Jenkins](#) from *Chubby Diaries*. I watched his Nat Geo series and something he said that literally lives in my head rent free is that adventure begins where comfort zone ends. And I loved hearing him say that because it's so true. And a lot of times when it comes to getting outdoors or maybe doing something where you get dirty or swimming in the ocean or things of that nature, it's not something we always saw ourselves represented in doing.

I think just starting with an open mindedness and being willing to do things that are outside of your comfort zone is where to start. But also doing your research and not being afraid to get uncomfortable, that's probably the biggest thing I would say is just being able to get uncomfortable within reason is so important when you're starting your travel journey and understanding that your feelings are valid. And it may be an emotional journey when you're going to certain places, but once you get outside of that comfort zone, you'll never turn back.

Matt Bowles: Well, shout out to Jeff Jenkins as well. I interviewed him on the podcast before his Nat Geo series came out and for anybody that has not seen *Never Say Never* with Jeff Jenkins on Nat Geo, highly

recommend it. It is a spectacular series and we'll link it up in [the show notes](#) as well. Jeff is certainly somebody that you should follow *Chubby Diaries*. And if you haven't heard my interview with him, definitely we'll link that up in [the show notes](#) as well because you should really hear that conversation. He's a really special guy and an amazing person to follow.

Marissa, for female solo travelers in particular who may be at the very early stage of their travel journey, what tips do you have for women traveling solo?

Marissa Strang: I would say when you're first starting your solo travel journey, to start small. I used to be one of those people, believe it or not. I remember saying to my friends who solo traveled, I said, I would never solo travel. I'm not comfortable with it. I don't like the idea of it. I verbatim said that to my friends. I said, I will never solo travel. I don't want to do it. I'm not comfortable. And now look, I'll go anywhere by myself. I'm living testament that it is possible and it's wonderful. And I would say start small. My very first technically solo trip was a little weekend trip to Philly and then after that was Reykjavik, Iceland. So, I guess I went from zero to a hundred. So, I would just say to start small and to continue to grow outward from that.

Obviously use your WITS about you. Any common sense that you would use in any big city is the same thing you would use abroad. Lie a lot. Lie as much as you have to. If someone asks you, are you alone? Tell them, my friends are coming, I'm meeting with them. I'm just going to go grab dinner and then I'm going to go meet with them. Lie. That's fine too. Wear a fake wedding ring if you have to. There are so many great tips and that can be a whole episode too. But I would say use your common sense. Don't be afraid to lie. And just once you do it, it will really spark your confidence levels of realizing I am more than capable to do things by myself. And you will just be very proud of that.

Matt Bowles: And there are amazing communities out there that you can join as well. You and I, Marissa, have hung out at multiple WITS Travel Creator Summits. We're going to see each other again in Chattanooga this year. For people that may not be familiar with the WITS Summit and may not be familiar with the wonderful community that puts on the WITS Travel Creators Summit, can you just share a little bit of background about what the wonderful community means to you and what the experience is like coming to an in-person event like the WITS Travel Creators Summit.

Marissa Strang: It is just this incredible community of women who love to explore the world. It's not just bloggers or social media content creators, although that is a big bulk of the population, but it's also just people who love to travel, women who love to travel in general. The last WITS I was at, I met this woman and she just genuinely loved to travel and that was the reason that she wanted to be there. She didn't even create online content. So, it is just this great communal space of hundreds of women travelers from across the world who come together every year to talk about their experiences, to share tips and tricks and really just fellowship and be in community with one another to share about our different travel experiences. And it's like a big family reunion. Everyone is just so happy and sweet, excited to talk to each other and hear each other's stories and share photos and it's just this amazing gathering of strong women who love to see the world and have made it their mission to do so. And so, anyone who likes to travel, whether you're an online creator or not, I highly recommend being a part of WITS. Wanderful also has an online community where they host meetups in major cities all year long. They have D.C. meetups, Chicago, Boston meetups, so New York. So, it's not just the WITS Summit every year, but they also have things throughout the year. It's really treated.

Matt Bowles: It's an amazing, amazing event. Everyone is welcome by the way. Male allies are welcome. It's a super queer friendly space for gender diverse people, trans folks, everyone is really welcomed and supported and empowered at the event, I've been so, so, so impressed with it. Can you, Marissa, talk about your role at the upcoming WITS conference in Chattanooga, what you are presenting on, and the mentoring sessions that you're going to be offering there as well?

Marissa Strang: I am going to be creating the Chattanooga Content Lab, which is a very new concept at WITS. Essentially, it's a working session where I'll talk a lot about storytelling, different angles and hooks and way to kind of what I was talking about a little bit earlier, crafting a story and crafting a narrative and pulling people in and, and getting to get their attention and tell a story. And so, I'll be showcasing different ways that you can create hooks and angles and craft your storytelling. And then we'll be having a workshop where it's actually a running workshop where people can work in real time on things, on content that they have ideas on hooks, on captions, on video editing, and they can get my help to help improve or help provide any feedback on what they're currently working on. So, I've never done anything like it. I'm super excited. I think that it's so fun because sometimes you're sitting in a session, you take all your notes and then you go home and you say, what? So, it's cool to have someone there in person, in real time workshop with you. So, I'm very excited to be presenting that on the 29th.

Matt Bowles: It's going to be awesome. We are going to link everything up in [the show notes](#). If you're not yet registered for the WITS Summit and you'd like to come and hang out with me and Marissa in person and meet a whole bunch of amazing people, there's tons of Maverick Show guests that are all going to be there. It's going to be a really great crowd. So, we'll link all that up in [the show notes](#) and through that, you can then register for the conference and get signed up for Marissa's mentorship sessions and all of that good stuff. And if you do that, definitely also send me a DM on Instagram [@maverickshowpod](#) and just let me know that you're coming and then we can connect and make plans to link up in person, which is going to be awesome.

Marissa, I want at this point to ask you about some of the reflections on your, your travels that you have done up to this point. What version of yourself only exists when you travel?

Marissa Strang: I love travel Marissa. She is insane. I have seen so many different iterations of her from the first time she visited Travel Con and literally jumped up as a background dancer on someone's stage during karaoke. The first time we ever met each other, he sang Vanilla Ice and I was his background dancer. I've jumped off cliffs. I have jumped on the back of someone's motorcycle in Greece. He did not speak English. He was just on the motorcycle. And I jumped on the back of it and was like, let's go for a spin around the block. And that's what we did. She is that girl. I love her. She is just crazy and so outgoing and willing to learn and open minded. And I feel like there really is a version of yourself that only exists when you're on a trip. And she's fearless and I love her and I want to see more of her. And that's why I like to unlock her and go on so many trips. It's so cool to see the type of person that you become. The type of person that is confident and is excited and is fearless. And it's so cool to see her when she's revealed.

Matt Bowles: Have you ever returned home after a trip and realized you had outgrown something in your old life?

Marissa Strang: I think, and maybe this is an indirect consequence of just being on the go all the time, but I think the version of myself that has always said yes and been a people pleaser and had no boundaries and didn't know when to rest, I think she died. And I think that part of that had to do with travel and realizing this

is just not sustainable anymore for me to be this person. And it's a symbiotic relationship. And I feel like almost the traveling sparked me having to be in that place where I felt I couldn't do that anymore. But I definitely feel like I've grown into a new person. And also, it could just come with age. My 30th birthday is this year, so that might have something to do with it too. I've actually grown into a person who knows how to say no now. And I don't think I was maybe within the past five years. I wasn't the person who would say no. I was a yes person all the time.

Matt Bowles: And why are you so passionate about continuing to travel and seeing new places? What does travel mean to you today?

Marissa Strang: First of all, I feel like it's addictive. It just feels like an addiction. It's just something that every single place you go, you learn something new. You take something with you, a piece of you changes or grows. And it could be as dramatic as, oh, I'm so proud to be a woman and to support women owned businesses. And it can be as not crazy as, oh, I went to Atlantic City, New Jersey, and I'll just never go back because I know what I don't like. And that's a real story. Sorry. For anybody who's from Atlantic City. I'm passionate about travel because of how it's transformed me as a person. But also outwardly, it feels like an act of rebellion. It feels like an act of support for others. When I can go to places and I can create content and I can spend my money with them and I can support their way of life and I can put money into their economy, it feels like I'm also doing something good. And it is a good feeling to feel that. And I can learn more about other cultures and I can spread that to other parts of the world. So, in a world that feels so soul crushing at times, with everything that's going on, travel feels like a small act of retreat rebellion to help spread cultures across the world, help foster more global understanding, and support local economies. So, it's a win-win. Why wouldn't you want to do it, right?

Matt Bowles: Well, I think that is the perfect place to end the main portion of this interview. And at this point, Marissa, are you ready to move in to *The Lightning Round*?

Marissa Strang: Ooh. Okay. I'm hot. Let's do it.

Matt Bowles: Let's do it. All right. What is one book that you would recommend that people should read?

Marissa Strang: It's called [Don't Sweat the Small Stuff by Richard Carlson](#).

Matt Bowles: Who is one person currently alive today that you've never met that you'd most love to have dinner with, just you and that person for an evening of dinner and conversation?

Marissa Strang: Hmm. Jo Franco. So, Jo Franco is this amazing writer and multilingual storyteller and travel host. And she is just amazing. She's a polyglot. She speaks all these different languages. She had a Netflix series about vacation rentals. She's just the type of woman that anyone would aspire to be. The way she tells stories, the way she talks about language and culture, and she's producing her own travel show right now. I just look up to her so much and I just think she's the coolest. She's one of the OG girlies in this space.

Matt Bowles: Marissa, knowing everything that you know now, if you could go back in time and give one piece of advice to your 18-year-old self, what would you say to 18-year-old Marissa?

Marissa Strang: I would tell her that friendships are important, but you can't make them your entire personality. You have to put yourself first at times and sometimes that means disappointing people and that's okay.

Matt Bowles: Of all the places that you've now traveled, what are three of your favorite destinations you would most recommend, other people should definitely check out?

Marissa Strang: Oh, that's so hard. Okay, let's go with Jordan, Iceland and Japan.

Matt Bowles: Great picks. All right, last question, what are your top three bucket list destinations places you have not yet been highest on your list you'd most love to see?

Marissa Strang: Vietnam, Kenya, Brazil.

Matt Bowles: So, I have been to all three of those places multiple times. Amazing choices. And so, when you are ready to plan those trips, Marissa, feel free. Free to hit me up because those are outstanding countries. All three of them.

All right, at this point, I want you to let folks know how they can find you, follow you on social media, check out your amazing travel content and then also we'll link up the link for the WITS Travel Creator Summit in [the show notes](#). So, if they want to connect with you in person there and join your mentorship sessions, we'll have links to all of them that. But how can people find you out in these Internet streets? How do you want people to come into your world?

Marissa Strang: You can find me on [Instagram](#) @*marissa.daily* and on [themarissadaily.com](#) you can find my blog and you can find my [TikTok](#) @*marissadaily_*.

Matt Bowles: All of that is going to be linked up in one place, just go to [themaverickshow.com](#) go to [the show notes](#) for this episode. There you will find direction links to everything we have discussed in this episode, including all the ways to find, follow and connect with Marissa. I hope some of you will come and hang out with us in person at the WITS Summit in Chattanooga at the very end of May. If you are able to come through, definitely send me a DM on Instagram at *maverickshowpod* and let me know so we can plan to link up in person.

Marissa, this was such a special conversation. Thank you so much for coming on. You thank the show.

Marissa Strang: Thank you, Matt. I had such a good time.

Matt Bowles: All right, good night, everybody.