

**Matt Bowles:** My guest today is Lauren Gay. She is a premier voice for amplifying Black voices in adventure travel and relatable outdoor recreation via her online brand and blog, [Outdoorsy Diva](#). She is an adventure travel content creator, award-winning podcaster, published photographer, speaker, consultant, YouTube travel show host, and on-air TV travel expert. As a travel writer and content creator, she has worked with over 100 brands and is passionate about inspiring and empowering Black women to step out of their comfort zones for new experiences in travel, adventure, and embracing nature as therapy. Lauren is a dedicated lifetime advocate for racial diversity and inclusion in outdoor recreation and adventure travel and is a founding member of the [Black Travel Alliance](#). Lauren, welcome to the show.

**Lauren Gay:** Hey Matt, happy to be here.

**Matt Bowles:** I am so excited to have you here. You and I have crossed paths multiple times over the past year. I have been following you and all of your amazing content for quite some time. I am so glad we're able to put together this conversation. But before we dive in, let's just set the scene and talk about where we are recording from and the fact that we have agreed to make this a wine night.

**Lauren Gay:** Indeed.

**Matt Bowles:** So, let's also about what we are drinking. I am actually in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Asheville, North Carolina, and I have gone with an Italian red tonight. I have just opened a bottle of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, so I will be drinking through that this evening. But where are you, Lauren, and what are you drinking?

**Lauren Gay:** I am hailing from Tampa, Florida. Just the beginning of fall, and it's still a balmy 90 degrees and feels like a sauna outside. But I brought some fall inside wine. So, I'm actually drinking Aldi's house brand, which is Pacific Fruit Vineyards, and they've got a lovely apple wine, and so it makes me feel like fall, even if it's not fall. And I'm repping the Brown Girls Can brand—shout-out to them from Chattanooga, Tennessee. They gifted me this super cute wine tumbler, so that's what I'm drinking tonight.

**Matt Bowles:** I love that. And I feel that we need to start this episode off by giving some love to Tampa. I just watched the new season of the show *Places to Love* by the legendary travel show host Samantha Brown. And in the Tampa episode, you were one of the people who showed her around the city. So, first of all, what was it like hanging out with Samantha Brown and spending time together?

**Lauren Gay:** Insane. So, this is a story I haven't even fully gotten a chance to tell publicly yet, but we actually shot this around this time last year. It was last October when she came, and this was for the ninth season of her show. She actually has been on my vision board for a few years, and it wasn't even manifesting meeting her. It was just manifesting, being like, her being on TV, having a travel show. And she started following me shortly after I put her on my vision board on Instagram. And there were some haters because I was all excited, and they were trying to make it seem like it's just her people and not really her. And she saw it. And so, she reposted one of my funny stories about her following me to her stories and gave me her stamp of approval and was very complimentary about my work. And from that, we forged this online kinship, which then became a friendship because she reached out and was like, "Hey, I'm coming to Tampa to film. Are you in town?" I wasn't even supposed to be here. I was supposed to be in Japan, but I hadn't committed yet. And so, thank goodness, I had not. And so, I was actually here for those dates to film with her, and we had a glorious time. She asked me to film two different segments with her, which is not the norm. And some people say, "Don't meet your heroes," but not with her. She was every bit as gracious

and amazing and a true ally. Super sweet, super funny, and yeah, it's been awesome to now have one of my lifelong people that I admire now be able to call her a friend. It's crazy.

**Matt Bowles:** Can I tell you; my favorite clip is the post that you have on Instagram with Samantha Brown as your backup dancer. Can you explain this post for people that have not seen it? And then how did that come about?

**Lauren Gay:** Yeah, it's pinned to my Insta. And this was being a content creator. On the day of our shoot, we shot a hike in my favorite park at Hillsborough River State Park. And I'm still feeling her out. I'm kind of still fangirling. I want to be professional, right? Because we're working. And I asked her assistant, who's also named Sam, I was like, "Sam, you think she'd be down to do some kind of cute, funny video?" So that way, when she announces the episode, we can do something fun. And she was like, "Oh, she's totally down for stuff like that." And I was like, okay. And so, I showed her one of the videos that people had been doing similar, and she's like, "Yeah, let's do it." And so, her assistant, Sam, videoed it for us. We took a couple of takes, and then Samantha had her own that she wanted to do about something else, about using trekking poles. So, we actually shot a couple of funny TikTok-style videos for each other's content. Both of which went crazy viral. People were so surprised at her jumping out from behind me while I'm lip-syncing to Whitney Houston, "I Wanna Dance with Somebody." Totally her idea. Unscripted, unplanned. I didn't even know what she did till I turned around and looked at her, and I died laughing.

**Matt Bowles:** It is amazing. It's pinned on your Instagram. We'll link it up in [the show notes](#). Everyone should go watch it. I was laughing out loud, and I was appreciating both of you for that clip. It was amazing. So, for people that have never been to Tampa, people that do not know about Tampa Bay, why should they visit? What are some of your personal favorite things about Tampa Bay?

**Lauren Gay:** Tampa really is a beautiful city, and a lot of the reason for it is honestly its location to get to other things. But for the city itself, got to go to old-school Tampa, West Tampa, and get you an authentic Cuban sandwich. I don't care what Miami says. Tampa is the originator and the home of the Cuban sandwich. So, you have to do that when you're here. You have to go to the Columbia Historic Restaurant from the early 1900s for authentic Spanish cuisine. It's incredible. And they have a live flamenco show, so it's one of my favorite places for special occasions. Hillsborough River State Park is an impeccable, beautiful park. It's rare you see rapids. It's actually one of the few places in Florida with rapids. You can't get in them. Obviously, we have alligators. This is Florida freshwater, but a beautiful park. And then, of course, you have the historic Ybor City, which may have actually turned around a lot since I moved here as a teenager. And it wasn't the fun place to be. It was kind of a little dicey, but now they really turned it around. The Riverwalk downtown Tampa, they've done a gorgeous job of building that and restoring that. And I have to shout out Madame Fortune's Speakeasy, which is a really cool Black-owned speakeasy restaurant. They have impeccable food, but it's named for a Black woman with some incredible history in Tampa. And there's a bridge by that same name.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I have not been to the Tampa Bay area in probably at least a decade. But I will tell you, the last time I was there, I went into St. Petersburg and I went to the Dali Museum, and my mind was blown. I have been talking about that since I was there. They have something like over 2,000 pieces by Salvador Dalí at this museum. I mean, this is an absolute world-class museum. I was not expecting it to be at the level that it was, but I have been talking about that for the last decade, since I first went to Tampa Bay.

**Lauren Gay:** And it's beautiful over there. St. Pete is a whole other vibe, and so that's why I didn't even mention it. But having St. Pete so close is definitely worth the trip. It's a lot more artsy, and that's where the beaches are. People make the mistake of coming to Tampa, going to do the beach. Tampa proper does not have the real pretty beaches. You have to actually go to St. Pete, Clearwater area, or go down to Sarasota.

**Matt Bowles:** All right, so today people know you as the [Outdoorsy Diva](#), but you've said that being outdoors was not something that you grew up doing. So, can you take us back? You also just mentioned that you're not originally from Florida. Talk about where you were born and raised and what your relationship with nature and adventure were like as you were growing up.

**Lauren Gay:** I am a Texan through and through. You will hear me greet you with "hey, y'all" all the time. I was born and raised in Dallas, Texas, South Dallas, to be specific. And my family, typical Black Southern family. So, we had, of course, roots in what we call the country, so in rural areas. So, I had family in rural Louisiana, rural Arkansas. So, there were summers that I would go there. And you're left to your own devices. And so, you're in nature just because you're playing outside. But as true recreation, it's just not something that I was exposed to. We didn't camp or hike or intentionally go find things or go to national parks or state parks or anything like that. I did your typical urban recreation that happened to be outside. But intentional time with nature was not something that I got exposed to until my teen years.

**Matt Bowles:** So, do you remember the first outdoor experience where something clicked and you thought, wait, I actually love this?

**Lauren Gay:** Vividly. I was 14 at Camp Windy Gap in North Carolina, actually. I went with a church group, and we zip-lined, we hiked, we did mountain biking. We had that blob where you jump down on the inflated pillow, and somebody jumps down and propels you into a lake. I rolled down a hill, all of the fun, kitschy stuff. And it was so cool because I was a fan of Camp Anawanna on Nickelodeon—Millennial, telling my age here. So, it was like real-life Camp Anawanna. It's the first time I rode a horse. I was really smitten just with that whole environment. I loved every minute of being in those forests with those tall trees, being on the horse for the first time. Even 14-year-old me, I remember thinking, this feels good. I would like to do more of this.

**Matt Bowles:** So how did that feeling impact you moving forward? Like as you were coming up, what messages had you absorbed about what black people did or didn't do for recreation? And then how did that experience impact that?

**Lauren Gay:** The message was more so just nonexistent, right? Because we just didn't do it. We didn't prioritize it, didn't see it, didn't do it. And being 14, I had zero autonomy over my time or transportation or anything, anything. So, it was like, yeah, I did this cool thing. My mom was like, "Yay, good for you. That's why I paid the money and sent you." But it wasn't like, "Okay, now that you're home, how can we do more of this or incorporate this?" It wasn't even a thought. And I didn't even see it that way. I saw it as, oh, I got to do this cool thing away from home. Now I'm back to my regular teenage life as a cheerleader and what have you, doing all the things 90s teenagers were doing, and none of that was a forethought at all. And so, the opportunity didn't arise again until college.

**Matt Bowles:** All right, so let's talk about college and let's give some love to FAMU. I have interviewed a number of FAMU rattlers on this podcast.

**Lauren Gay:** They can't see it, but I'm doing the strike for us.

**Matt Bowles:** She's doing the strike. And I will also tell you this. I meet FAMU Rattlers all over the world. I mean, it's unbelievable. One thing I will say, FAMU grads travel, because I meet them all over the world. And so, I'm curious, though, if you can take us all the way back before FAMU—the decision to go, first of all, to an HBCU. Why did you make that decision? Why was that important to you? And then, what was your experience like when you got to FAMU?

**Lauren Gay:** So, the decision to attend an HBCU was honestly never really truly up for debate. It's something that was instilled in me because my mom's a graduate of Prairie View A&M in Texas, an HBCU in Texas. So, I just saw that as the thing that I'm supposed to do. And when it came time for me to make my decision, FAMU was very active in doing recruitment at my high school. And so, I was identified early as talent, probably in, I think it was my sophomore year, that I was offered a full ride as long as I kept my grades where they were. And I ended up being number two in my class. So that was never going to be an issue. And I did. Now, I'm no fool, right? I did apply to other places, just in case. You always have other places. And my number one was actually Howard. I really wanted to be a Bison. And my mother, my very Southern, very traveled mother, was like, "No, you can't go to Howard. It's too far. It's in the hood. DC is dangerous." All of the tropes, none of it backed by fact, and me being young and having no recourse to refute it. What could I do? She's like, "You have this full ride to FAMU. You're going to FAMU." Okay, fine. Which was fine because FAMU was known for their SBI MBA program. That's what I was going to do. And I was good with that decision. However, my story is different in that I ended up getting pregnant right after I graduated high school, in between high school and college. And so, I almost didn't go. I wanted to just scrap it, stay home, go ahead and go to USF, University of South Florida in Tampa. And my mother was insistent that I still go and have the experience, and so I did. So, I was already a pregnant college freshman in the honors dorm. Thank goodness I was in the honors dorm because it's bigger and it's a little nicer. The kids today will never know what it was like to be a McGuinn in one of the old-school dorms. They have fancy apartments now, but it wasn't like that back then. But I had a really nice dorm. I met one of my lifelong best friends as my roommate, my FAMU-lee. A lot of them have become lifelong friends. And I did ultimately end up transferring to USF because that just made more sense for me, having a child, being with the support system. And I changed my major. I started as an accounting major, which was fine for the SBI program. After a semester of that, I was like, "I'm good at it, but this is boring." And I actually took a computer class there. And that professor was like, "This comes really easy to you. You should probably look at changing your major." And so, at that time, the only way to do that was to either go to FSU or transfer. So, if I was going to have to transfer, I was like, "Well, I might as well go home." And so, I ended up coming back and finishing my degree at University of South Florida. So, I am a Rattler and a Bull. Go Bulls!

**Matt Bowles:** Well, you mentioned that during your college years you did end up reconnecting with nature and reestablishing your love for and the outdoors. Can you talk about what experience in particular really made you feel that?

**Lauren Gay:** So random. So, the best friend that I met as my roommate at FAMU, she got an internship in Mooresville, Northern Alabama. So, there was not a lot to do, and I went to visit her, and one of her coworkers was like, "Why don't you guys go to the waterfall?" And we were like, huh? What do you mean? Now she's a native Floridian, and the concept of a waterfall, we've seen it on National Geographic. We know about Niagara. We know they have those at Yellowstone. We know those are in tropical places. A waterfall in Alabama? What do you mean? And so, they were like, "Yeah, it's called Noccalula Falls." We were like, huh? And so, we looked it up, we printed off our MapQuest directions, and there we went and found this waterfall, which has a really cool legend around its name about a Native American indigenous

woman. And we went, and we were like, "This is so cool." And from that, we went to look up other waterfalls and discovered there's tons of waterfalls in this area. Let's do a road trip later in the summer. So, I actually went back up there a year later, and we went and did a whole day of waterfall hunting. Zero idea what we were doing. No real hiking gears. I look at this now, I'm like, "God really protects fools," because we probably could have died because we did not know what we were doing. But beautiful. Had a great time. And our friends teased us endlessly. They were like, "What do you mean you're going to chase waterfalls? Hike. Black people don't do that. That's white people shit." That's what the stereotype was and is for some people still. So, they teased us so much, we had the best day ever. And we still finally looked back at that. And so that was really the spark of, I want to intentionally go find more of this. It started with the love of waterfalls.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I know you've also been very intentional in terms of the way that you raised your son. Can you talk about why it was so important for you to raise him hiking, snorkeling, camping and exploring parks.

**Lauren Gay:** So, he was with us on that first trip to Noccalula Falls. He was like 2, so he was just a little guy, and he was all about it, trucking down with us, crawling over the rocks. And so, it was just natural to him. And in his younger years, it was stressful being a full-time mom. I started my first corporate job, and so I was stressed all the time. Stressed, tired, and broke. And so, parks are generally free or cheap, for one. And so, we would do a lot of that. I would do a lot of looking up and finding parks just out of the necessity of being a single mom looking for free and cheap things to do with my son. But we both got a kick out of it. We would feed turtles and feed ducks and go walking. And so, it was mild adventure until he got a little older. And he was the one who asked, "Mom, I want to try camping. I want to try kayaking. I want to try this." And I'm like, "Boy, I don't know how to do that." And so, I had to go and find that and learn about it.

**Matt Bowles:** What is one adventure with him that captures who the two of you were together during that chapter of your lives?

**Lauren Gay:** I think in the beginning, one of those adventures that sticks out—well, definitely kayaking, because it's something we truly learned together. And we were less like mother and son on those kayaking adventures and more like the odd couple. The way we would bicker and argue and fuss, to the point where, as he got bigger size-wise, he made a declaration like, "Okay, I'm too big. I need my own kayak. We cannot be in the same kayak anymore." But being on Hillsborough River with him for the first time, we saw gators up on logs for the first time, and we were both immediately like, "You good?" He's like, "Yep, I'm good." And we turned around and came back. So those beginning years, those are some of my favorite memories. But I was able to take him swimming with whale sharks when he turned 22, and it was 10 years exactly from when I took him to Atlanta, to the Georgia Aquarium, and he saw whale sharks in the tank for the first time. He was obsessed with sharks growing up, so he was telling them all about what they are and all the types of sharks as a kid. So then to be able to take him to do it in the wild and watch him just become a kid again in the water, that is one of my proudest mommy achievements. He still talks about that trip.

**Matt Bowles:** Where did you swim with whale sharks in the wild?

**Lauren Gay:** We did this in La Paz in Baja Sur, Mexico.

**Matt Bowles:** Amazing. I did it in Thailand, and it was amazing because I was going out to get my PADI scuba certification, and they sort of gave us this thing on the boat going out. They're like, "Okay, so today

we're going to do the following curriculum. We're going to teach you this, and this. Unless we see a whale shark, in which case all bets are off, and we swim with the whale shark." And we literally saw one. I mean, it was completely random and just absolutely by chance. And it was one of the most special experiences I have had. What was it like for you?

**Lauren Gay:** Oh, I was so emotional because it was a bucket-list thing. The first person I ever saw do it was Kellee Edwards. Hey, girl. Hey. She's another one of my people I really look up to in the space. And I saw her do it for the first time with her matching bathing suit to match the whale shark skin. And I'm like, "She is such a badass. One day I'm going to do that." Never fully realizing I was really going to do that. I did a partnership with [UnCruise](#), which is a cruise line that's not a regular cruise line. And every day you do an adventure, and it's why it's called [UnCruise](#). And I took my son, and so to do it. And they do it in a very ethical, intentional way. There's a lot of regulation and limitations around it, which is important to me, if I was going to do it. And so, getting in the water the first time, there's a video I have up. I actually messed up. I didn't do anything the instructor told me to do, and it ended up swimming over the back of its tail because I panicked, and I got whacked by it, which is fine, right? If you're going to have a bruise from a whale shark, that's a cool-ass story to have. It's like, "Why are you limping?" "Well, I was in La Paz last week. Whale shark hit me. No big." So that was a battle scar that I was proud of. But they're just so majestic and beautiful, and I just felt honored that we got to spend time and be in their world. Every time I'm with any wildlife, that's how I feel.

**Matt Bowles:** What did traveling and adventuring together give you and your son that you don't think you could have gotten any other way?

**Lauren Gay:** It's just a different bond. There is something about watching the wonder of your child be awakened in real life. It's one thing to take them to a zoo or an aquarium. It's a whole other to be able to show him things in real life. When he was learning about space, okay, we're going to go to the Air and Space Museum in D.C. You learned about history. We're going to the Natural History Museum in D.C., so you can see the Megalodon jaw and the actual teeth, and you can see these fossils. And you can see and tangibly know that these things are real. You can see history. This is the Declaration of Independence. That's the Constitution. Those are real people. That curiosity, I used to call it "fungication." So, it was always fun. But you're going to learn something wherever we are. He wasn't a child who loved school, per se, but on our trips, he loved to learn. And he would retain it and he would regurgitate it. And my rule was I would make him plan something. You pick an activity, you research it, you find out where we can do it, how much does it cost? And that was kind of my bartering chip. That way, when I do boring adult stuff, he had something to look forward to. It's like, you do the thing I want to do, then we'll do whatever thing you want to do. So just being able to unlock his curiosity is a different kind of bond.

**Matt Bowles:** So, for all these years, you were making decisions as a mother. What happened when your son grew up and you suddenly had to figure out who Lauren was when mom wasn't the organizing principal of every decision anymore?

**Lauren Gay:** Such a huge shift, because unlike most people, I started adulthood that way. So, I never got to just be carefree and selfish and only concerned about myself. So initially, it actually started when he was 13 and he left for the first time, and I was a whole, ugly-cry mess in the airport, watching him walk down the jetway to leave me for three weeks to go to a camp. And I realized then, I'm not prepared for this. I was in bed for two days. It was all bad. And so that's kind of when I discovered I need to find some things I'm interested in that I like. And that really led me down the path of starting the blog to begin with. And even

though in the beginning a lot of my content was centered on us, it gave me something that I had that was my own. So, when he was gone, I still already had this thing that I could fall and lean into. And now the freedom to like, okay, I can plan whatever trips I want and I don't have to think about the rugrats, just me. When he graduated, once I dropped him off at school, I literally came back and went to Disney World. I took myself to Disney World. I stayed on property at one of the Epcot resorts. And then I went to Sedona for a trip by myself, for a full wellness trip. I wanted to hike, eat good, have spa days, and that's exactly what I did.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I've heard you talk publicly about your first solo international trip to the Azores, where I have also been. For anyone that doesn't know, this is a jaw-droppingly gorgeous volcanic archipelago. It's part of Portugal, but it's in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. But I know that trip for you came during a very difficult period in your personal life. So, feel free to share any context that you're comfortable sharing about that period. And then, what led up to your decision to book that trip?

**Lauren Gay:** So, this was a pivotal moment, and my first time really publicly getting into it was for Lonely Planet in the Women Travel Solo book, and I wrote an essay, and what I was coming up with was very surface. And the editor was kind of like, "I think you can go deeper." And I decided it was time to talk about it. So, I was on my way to leaving a domestic violence relationship that had just taken its toll mentally. It just breaks you down into a shell of your former self. And so, when I knew things were ending, we were making the plans to separate because we were in the same household. I was like, "Okay, I need to just get away for a minute." And I'm like, "You got the kids." There was no worry there as far as him being father and stepfather. So, he had my son and his son. And I was like, "I'm going to go away for a week." And I went on Groupon Getaways with my little budget. And I'm like, "Oh, the Azores. Never heard of it. Looks great." And I looked it up, and I'm like, "Sure, why not?" And I booked it. Before that, I had only been to Mexico, Canada, Puerto Rico, which is a territory, not international, but still, that's as far as I had gone. And I had done a cruise to some other places, but never really across the pond. And so, I booked it. Came with the flight, came with the hotel. And I don't know what gave me the audacity to think or know that I could or should do this. I say it's divine, because there's really no logical explanation other than I knew I needed a break and I needed a reset.

**Matt Bowles:** What do you remember when you think back? What were you feeling when you landed in the Azores? First impression. What do you remember?

**Lauren Gay:** I was just in awe. It is an absolutely gorgeous place. Even from the plane, you're like, "What?" It's kind of like Hawaii, but in the Atlantic. Atlantic. It's how it looks. There's breathtaking cliffs and the super-blue Atlantic water, and it's super green. And you're just like, "This is insane." And I had thankfully met a native Azorean man and his fiancée in the airport. I had a long layover in Boston, and I had been using Duolingo to prepare myself and learn a little Portuguese. And it was wrong, because Portuguese and Brazilian Portuguese, of course, are different, but Azorean Portuguese is also different. The way they pronounce things is very different. It has a French flair added on to it. And so, I was so glad that I met this guy because he helped me at least with basic phrases and get the pronunciation correct. And so just being able to say things like "thank you," "goodbye" correctly meant a lot. But I never really felt nervous. It was just like, "Okay, here we go."

**Matt Bowles:** What was the most impactful moment of that trip that really shaped your trajectory of your life moving forward?

**Lauren Gay:** There's a lake there called Sete Cidades, and it's the two lakes. One's blue, one's green. And just seeing that is such a mind flip, to see it with your own eyes from up high, that literally you're looking at this one body of water, but they're both different colors. You can see it with the naked eye. And then part of the tour, we drove down to the shores and got out, and I walked away from the group just to have some time to myself. And just sitting on the shores of that, I kind of had this very spiritual breakthrough. For me, because, as you said, it's a volcanic island. Everything there—I had that epiphany. Everything I'm seeing, all this beauty, because it's green and they have the big hydrangea flowers are blooming, and you'll see calla lilies in the wild. Expensive those flowers are, and they're just growing there. So, you see all this beauty around you. And even this lake, this is formed from destruction. Everything you see, this beautiful thing, came from destruction, from a volcano, from ash, from burning. And I was like, okay, this is my phoenix. Next time, this is it for me, my life. We're burning it to the ground. I'm going to go back, we're going to start over, and I'm going to come back even better, even more beautiful, stronger. And I am a person of faith. So, for me, it was just a reassurance that if God can do this with this creation, surely, he loves me as much, if not more, than this. And so, I don't have to worry. It doesn't mean it'll be easy, but I know that on the other side of this is going to come tremendous beauty.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, over the last decade since that trip, you have been adventuring in some of the most epic places on the planet. I think the first one I want to ask you about is another place that I have also been, which is the Galapagos Islands. What was one of your most surprising or memorable moments from the Galapagos?

**Lauren Gay:** Matt, and to think I've been twice, twice I have been able to go. I went by sea, and I went land-based, and we island-hopped and glamped. So, Galapagos for me as a kid, even though I went to school in the hood, it was a learning center. And we were one of the first schools in our district in Dallas that had this world-class science center. So, we got to watch scientists via satellite deploy those little Jason aquatic robots in the Galapagos. They were doing some exploration, and they showed us the giant tortoises and all of that stuff. I remember seeing that in the third grade, and I was like, "I'm going to see this one day." I don't know why. I had nothing to make me think that was a reality. So, to then get to do that and see those tortoises live upwards of 100 to 150 years, which means that wasn't that long ago, right? So absolutely, 30 years ago. Some of these same tortoises I saw are the tortoises I'm seeing with my own eyes now as a grown adult. I was beside myself just to see that. My favorite part was being in the water every single day like a mermaid. And every day I saw every kind of creature, from octopus to penguins to sea lions and sea turtles and eagle rays and marble rays and sharks and marine iguanas. The variety of wildlife that is in this one place on Earth all at once is insane. It's absolutely insane.

**Matt Bowles:** It's insane. Did you snorkel at the moment when the marine iguanas come into the water?

**Lauren Gay:** I did. I was there with a whole bunch of them, but there was a couple of them and I have a video pretty close up where he's just next to my head, just minding his business, swimming along.

**Matt Bowles:** It was one of the craziest of the Galapagos experiences, of which there are a litany of things that can only happen in the Galapagos, that are unlike anything else on the planet. But one of them, I remember, we went on the four-day catamaran, and so we had a marine biologist that was guiding us around, like I said. And we would do the mornings, we would do the land hikes, and then the afternoons we would do the snorkeling. And so, on one of the islands, we were walking around, and there were all of these marine iguanas. They're just piled up on each other, and they just sleep in the sun all day, and they look like they don't do anything. And we saw them, and there were just tons of them. Dozens and dozens. And I

mean enormous amounts. They're just laying on piles, on top of each other, sleeping. And so, then we come back out to the boat, and then we're doing our afternoon snorkel, and they tell us, "Okay, at this particular time, guess what? The marine iguanas are going to come into the water." So, you're snorkeling, and you're laying on the top, snorkeling, and all of a sudden, for us, it was dozens, I might even say hundreds, with an enormous number of them all at the same time.

**Lauren Gay:** Oh wow.

**Matt Bowles:** They got up from their nap, and they just all started coming into the water. And what they do, as you know, is they swim across the surface of the top of the water. So, we're snorkeling, looking right at them, and there are just dozens, if not hundreds, of marine iguanas swimming directly towards us, right on the surface of the water. But then, before they got to us, all of a sudden, they just turn downwards, and they swim all the way to the bottom to get their food. But the point at which we're both on top of the water, swimming towards each other at the same time, was crazy.

**Lauren Gay:** Listen. It's like little baby Godzilla.

**Matt Bowles:** Yes, that's exactly what they look like, little baby Godzilla's. It was crazy.

**Lauren Gay:** That was when I got over my fear of sharks in open water. I had been working up to that, and my guide took me through this—swim through this canal because it was walls on either side, but open at the top, so not a cave. He's like, "You want to see something cool?" And I'm like, "Sure." We were the adventurous ones in the group. And he took the few of us, and we're swimming, and I looked down, and I'm like, "Those are sharks just resting on the bottom." And I thought they were nurse sharks. And so, in my mind, I'm like, "Oh, that's fine. I'm not afraid of nurse sharks." And we swim through them, no problem. And we come out. And it wasn't until I looked at the footage later, and I was like, "Those are not nurse sharks. What did I just do?"

**Matt Bowles:** It's amazing. It's just such a protected ecosystem also, that it creates a different dynamic than any place I have ever been or seen or snorkeled.

**Lauren Gay:** And they have their own species. There are some species that are only there. There are species of sharks, there are species of penguins. Some of the different iguana species are only there, which is insane. And we also saw—I forgot what you call a group of eagle rays—but we saw hundreds of them come through. And I lost my mind. I was so excited.

**Matt Bowles:** That is amazing. Well, I also want to ask you about some places that you have been that I have not yet been. One of them is Central Asia. I know you just did a trip and I was watching your content from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. You went to an underwater forest. Can you describe the highlights of Central Asia and what it felt like to be in some of those places?

**Lauren Gay:** I was absolutely blown away. I completely underestimated Kazakhstan. I went for a conference. The TBEX conference was there, and so I went for that, and you're there, so I might as well add another country. So, I tacked on Uzbekistan on my own to do after. And I also had a FAM trip in the midst of that, after the conference, in the middle of that, which a FAM is a familiarization trip for people who don't know what that means. They take content creators and journalists, the tourism board hosts you, and then takes you to see things. I did not expect those cities to be as modern as they are. The subways are immaculate. They're impeccable. The cleanest subways you've ever seen, even cleaner than Japan,

because they're artistic, so they're full of art and decorated and tell the history and the culture of the country. So that was one of the really cool things. But the nature is incredible. I'm not done posting content. There's so much. And they're poised to honestly become the glamping capital of the world. These are the people of yurts. Similar heritage as Mongolian people. So, yurts are a thing for them, but they're expanding into the more commercial type of glamping. So, I saw all types of treehouses and different types of yurts and different types of cabins. And they're building up the infrastructure to get ready for it. And they have good reason to because the nature is incredible. We went to some waterfalls. We went to this hike that's in a gorge. And so, the entire hike, it's grueling, but the entire hike is next to running, rushing white water. So that's your soundtrack the whole time. The elevation is pretty high. You're over a mile of elevation, and once you get up to over 6,000 feet elevation, it only takes you about 30 to 40 minutes. There are hot springs up there. They put a bathhouse next to the river, and you're overlooking the river. You can even do a cold plunge in the actual river. And then it absorbed those waters. They built it up really nice. But that underwater forest happened through some earthquake, dammed up this area, and it became a lake. And those were birch trees that ended up dying there. And so that used to be land, and they ended up becoming submerged. It literally flooded a forest with this beautiful turquoise water. And so, it has now become this insane tourist attraction. There's also Koi Lake, which is another beautiful turquoise lake. So, it's very reminiscent of Banff or parts of northern Colorado or the Cascades. I wasn't expecting that at all. It's beautiful.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I also have to ask you about your experience in Norway. I have not yet been to Norway and I have not been anywhere in the Arctic.

**Lauren Gay:** What?

**Matt Bowles:** Yes, it's on my list. And I've been inspired by you. And did I see that you were not just riding on a dog sled, but driving it and doing the dog mushing yourself? Did I see that correctly?

**Lauren Gay:** Yes, you did. And not only did I do it, I'm great at it. I took to that like I have been doing this my whole life. That was one of the most fun things I've ever done. So, prior to this, I had done dog sledding in Banff in Canada, but as a rider, I didn't drive. So, this experience was— [Klättermusen Experiences](#) is a great group that does really nice, different, unique adventures if you're an adventurous person. They put together beautiful itineraries, and this was one of the things that we did. So, you go twice. The first time, it went at night, so we had headlights. And I'm like, "What are we doing here? What do you mean?" It's a shorter track, and you get to meet the dogs and you greet them and bond with them. And we did the short track, and we did our first run at night, and you have a partner, and we swapped off. It was a little intimidating; I'm not going to lie. But the second day, in the daytime—and I say that loosely, I should say sunlight, because it was daytime even when it was night. They just didn't have a lot of sun because it's the winter, so the sun isn't really up and the daylight is very short. But the second day is a much longer track. And I don't know, I just found my groove. I had the step-off and the braking, and I had bonded with the dogs. They were listening to my commands. My partner, shout-out to Susan, hey, girl. She also was really good. So, we would just take turns and take breaks. And then they have you mush out to this cabin that they've built out in this beautiful scenery of just mountains and snow. And they had made homemade soup and bread. And then they built us a little campfire around the fire made out of snow and ice, and then covered it with reindeer hide. And so, you sit there and you eat your lunch, and you roasted reindeer hot dogs over the fire. And it's just a complete Nordic experience. For real? For real. And then get back and mush back. But that was a long day. But, man, you just kind of become one with them, with the dogs. I don't have the right

words for it. It's like you're gliding. You literally feel like you're just gliding through this white landscape of snow. I felt like Elsa, completely Frozen. I'm Frozen 3.0.

**Matt Bowles:** Take us to the moment in Finnmark, Norway, 230 miles north of the Arctic Circle, where you see the Northern Lights and then break down crying. Can you set the scene, describe what you saw, what you felt, and then what hit you so emotionally in that moment?

**Lauren Gay:** So, I've been trying to see these dang lights for a decade. I had been to Canada, and I should have seen them and did not. If you don't know, it's predicated on them having this geomagnetic storm. So, there was a geomagnetic storm present, we didn't see them. Another time, there was a geomagnetic storm present. The weather was bad, we didn't see them. I went to Iceland. There was a geomagnetic storm present, but the weather—we didn't see them, too cloudy. So, every time I was supposed to see these blasted lights, I was let down and disappointed. So honestly, on this trip, I was kind of like, well, whatever. If I see them, great, but I'm not going to get my hopes up. And so, we were at dinner one night, and one of our guides was like, "I think the Northern Lights are on." So, we all drop our forks, bundle up, run outside, and I could not believe what I was seeing because it was not even anything like what I had seen on TV. The colors were like greens and vibrant purples and fuchsias. And it was like right overhead, not on the horizon. And it wasn't a swirl or two. It was like watching fireworks exploding over our heads, turning into these different shapes. And I was just so overwhelmed that, like, oh my God, I'm seeing this. I'm really seeing this with my own two eyes. I was so grateful. It was just gratitude. It was gratitude that I get to witness something so spectacular. Because sure, I could have seen them those other places, it wouldn't have looked like this. It would have looked nothing like this. And it was a really powerful geomagnetic storm. So, they went on for a long time. And I actually was wearing a turquoise jacket and fuchsia snow bib, so I was wearing the color of the Northern Lights. I feel like I called them in. And then I just kept going back outside, and they stayed all night. We got in the hot tub that night, they were still there overhead. And then the second night, we saw them again, but a totally different kind of storm. The only color was green, but it was a bright green. Something that's like toxic waste or something. That type of neon green lightning is what it looked like. And I almost got frostbite because I was out there with my camera, the tripod, the phone. I'm videoing, I'm taking pictures, and it's super cold. I'm by Santa. And so, at one point, I felt my hands, and I was like, I should probably go inside now because it's very cold. I think you've got enough pictures.

**Matt Bowles:** I have heard people say that seeing the Northern Lights in person is not anything that can be captured adequately through photography or videography or anything else. What is another truly spectacular thing you've seen somewhere in the world, in nature, that photographs simply cannot communicate?

**Lauren Gay:** I saw a whale breach. Another thing that has eluded me for I can't tell you how many years and how many trips, how many whale-watching trips I've done, and I have not seen a single whale. And so, last summer in Alaska, on the group trip that I led, we went on a trip in the fjords up there, and we saw a couple juvenile whales, but nothing crazy. And the captain was actually like, "Okay, where we're heading in, we have seen tons of other wildlife." So, it was a great day. I wasn't disappointed. But then, somehow, some way, I just had a feeling. I picked up my phone and I started walking. And the captain goes, "What's that?" "I think I might have just saw a blow in the distance." And I run towards the front of the ship. And just as I hit record, that whale launched itself fully, a full breach out of the water. And I am the only person that caught it because nobody else was prepared for it. And I was recording as I walked up, and you hear me screaming my head off on this video going, "Oh my God." And even the captain was like, "Wow." And this is

his job. And you hear somebody go, "Did you get it?" And I'm like, "Yeah." And just the sheer power and magnitude of that experience, the pictures are cool, but you can't bottle that up.

**Matt Bowles:** What is one place you visited with moderate expectations that ended up completely blowing you away?

**Lauren Gay:** Central Asia was definitely one of them. And Uzbekistan, I definitely didn't have super-big expectations. But that architecture of all those different mosques and the different buildings, and in the famous square in Samarkand where it's blue and white, and its things you see like in Aladdin—you don't think that's for real, and then you see it, and in the scale that it's built is just insane. I did not expect that to be so beautiful. I was interested, but I didn't expect it to be as beautiful as it was.

**Matt Bowles:** Of all the places that you have now traveled, where have you felt the strongest connection with the local people?

**Lauren Gay:** There's been a lot, but I would say it has to be what I call going home. Finally going to the continent, visiting Africa, particularly in Zimbabwe, it was just a different kind of feeling for literally everyone around me to look like me. And that is not something that you're used to as a Black American. You're just not. There was just different kinship in that realization. And we did get out of the city and go into a village to meet a family who was actually living more primitively and off the land and all of that. But to still be able to share in jokes and share in humor and bond in music and things like that, it felt very much like going home.

**Matt Bowles:** All right, we're going to pause here and call that the end of part one. If you would like to meet Lauren in person, she is going to be a keynote speaker at this year's Black Travel Summit, which is happening in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, October 15th to 18th, 2026. And you can get a 10% discount on your ticket just for being a Maverick Show listener. Just go to [TheMaverickShow.com/BTS](https://TheMaverickShow.com/BTS)—that stands for Black Travel Summit—and there you can get all the details, and then use the code **MAVERICK** at checkout for your 10% off. And then, once you get your ticket, shoot me a DM on Instagram, at *maverickshowpod*. Let me know you're coming so we can plan to link up at the event. There are going to be a bunch of Maverick Show guests coming this year. Some of them are speakers, some of them are hosting, some of them are just attending like I am. So come through, and you'll be able to hang out with a really dope community of travelers once again. [TheMaverickShow.com/BTS](https://TheMaverickShow.com/BTS) for all the info on how to get your ticket, and then, if you would like to follow Lauren, connect with her. All of her social media handles and everything else are going to be in [the show notes](#) for this episode. So just go to [TheMaverickShow.com](https://TheMaverickShow.com), go to [the show notes](#) for this episode. There you will find all of the ways to follow and connect with her, as well as direct links to everything else we have discussed in this episode. And be sure to tune in to the next episode to hear the conclusion of my interview with Lauren Gay. Good night, everybody.