Matt Bowles: My guest today is Irina Papuc. She is the co-founder and managing partner of Galactic Fed, a multinational remote-first marketing agency that she built while traveling the world and scaled to nearly 100 staff people in under three years. Galactic Fed provides companies with a suite of services ranging from copywriting and paid media to SEO strategy and analytics. Irina's clients range from Fortune 100 companies to startups and small businesses. Born in Romania and as a small child, Irina immigrated to the United States with her grandparents. She then grew up primarily in Chicago and is now a full-time digital nomad who has traveled to over 40 countries. She attended universities in three different countries, has an undergraduate degree in particle physics and a master's degree in cultural anthropology. Irina, welcome to the show.

Irina Papuc: Thank you so much for having me. Really excited.

Matt Bowles: I am so excited to have you here. This is going to be such an awesome conversation. We've been trying to set this interview up for a while.

Irina Papuc: We have.

Matt Bowles: I'm super stoked that we are finally doing it and finally going to have this conversation because you have done some super interesting and amazing things. But first, let's set the scene and talk about where we are today. I am recording this from Washington D.C. and where are you?

Irina Papuc: I am in the lovely sunny Chicago where we've been having summery weather for the last few days.

Matt Bowles: That's awesome. I was actually born right outside Chicago, so I have some shy city roots that I can claim.

Irina Papuc: Oh, nice.

Matt Bowles: Now I moved when I was 2, so I can't claim an enormous amount of Chicago heritage, but I can tell you that I was a die-hard Chicago Bears fan for the first two years of my life.

Irina Papuc: Wow. Yeah. I remember I grew up in the 90s, like hardcore Chicago Bulls times. I remember that. Like, there was a massive mural in my, like fifth grade lunch just of the Bulls. That was a big deal. It was like a religion back then.

Matt Bowles: So, let's talk a little bit about your upbringing and growing up. What was your childhood like? Where exactly did you grow up and how did your interest in travel develop as you think back to that.

Irina Papuc: I was raised by my grandparents. They're both oil painters. So back in Romania, they both worked as full-time artists and they brought a lot of that spirit about art and culture into the household. So, it was really nice. I grew up with them, lived-in inner-city Chicago. I would say really diverse experience. If I look back on it now, you know, a lot of the kids in my class were coming in from all over the world. Some of my best friends were from, like South America, parts of Asia, kids from all over the place. And it was really nice to grow up in this really diverse environment. And my grandparents being really into art, I had the opportunity to really, like, absorb those values about, like, appreciating fine art, learning about art history. They really encouraged a lot of reading and a lot of learning. I look back on that and I feel a lot of gratitude for that.

Matt Bowles: As a kid, were you traveling at all or where did your interest in travel come from as you grew up? So, you had those different, diverse cultural connections with different people. But were you actually able to travel outside of Chicago at all when you were growing up?

Irina Papuc: Not at all. That is the funny part of it. So, I was basically a homebody until I went off for college. Until then, I would say I mostly traveled through books. I loved reading as a little kid. I was a bookworm before I was even able to write properly or hold a pencil. I was already taking notes. I had my grandma journal on my behalf. But I would say I didn't really get into travel until I was already properly an adult. But I do remember my favorite childhood book at the time, maybe about seven or eight, was the Atlas of Exploration. It was just this short little book that shared all these stories of all the famous explorers, ranging from Vasco da Gama to Ferdinand Magellan to Roald Amundsen. And I just completely ate this up as a kid. For me, there was absolutely nothing more badass than setting out into the world and exploring something like that's unknown.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. Now also, when you think back on your upbringing, I know you were intellectually interested in a lot of different areas. You Ended up doing a degree in particle physics. You have a master's degree in cultural anthropology. You have all of the artistic appreciation and historical background and everything there as well. But when you think back, did you have any entrepreneurial tendencies and can you trace back your current day business inclinations to any entrepreneurial tendencies when you were coming up?

Irina Papuc: Yeah, I mean, I had a little brief stint with entrepreneurship. I'm almost a little embarrassed to talk about it, but this was back in third grade. My uncle had given me as a present, like a bunch of bookmarks. They were Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle bookmarks. I think I had something like 100 of them. And I ended up bringing them to school and the kids were like, whoa, those are so cool. We want one too. So, I ended up setting up a little business where I sold bookmarks to the kids during lunch hour, took the profits there, had a decent profit margin and spent it on some good candy. So that was my early brush with entrepreneurship. But then before Galactic Fed, my partner and I actually did start another business. We briefly started and launched a company called Odyssey. This was a dropshipping eCommerce platform, kind of similar to Etsy. So, we were all about selling eco-friendly products. And we did end up building the site, setting it all up. We had built relationships with I think like 200 vendors. We had about a thousand products on the website for sale. And then as we went through the process, I realized, damn, this is not a very easy business model to scale up because for every product that we sell, there's a very small profit margin. And to really take this off the ground, we're going to have to definitely raise funding. And I just wasn't in the mindset back then where I wanted to go down that route. So, we ended up pulling the plug on that. But we did learn a ton, a ton of experience was gained from that about how to like just how to build a website that's beautiful, how to set up those relationships. So, I wouldn't say it was a wasted experience at all. There was a lot that we learned that we brought into our next venture.

Matt Bowles: For sure. And then let's also go back to the travel thing so you get to college and then how did your international travels begin? What was sort of the impetus that made you, having not traveled as a kid growing up, want to take that leap and go out of the country and start traveling the world. And what was your first step in doing that, first place you went?

Irina Papuc: As I mentioned earlier, I was a total homebody up until age 21. Never really traveled Anywhere. And then I was really lucky to apply to this German fellowship program. It's called the *Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst*, the Reis Dad Fellowship Program. It is a fellowship program

open to college students where the German government will sponsor you to come in and do research there for a summer. And I applied and I was really lucky to get a spot at CERN. So, this was my brief foray into working as a paid intern on the Large Hadron Collider. So that was my first time in a foreign country on my own. I was 21 years old. This was back in 2010. And it just opened up my eyes like I had never lived on my own in a foreign place. And I just really enjoyed the challenge of it. I really enjoyed the process of self-discovery, the process of learning how to, like, sort of just figure things out on my own, how to make friends in the foreign place, like, how to build a life from scratch. I found all of this, like, deeply interesting and desirable at the time. And Germany itself was lovely. I was living in a town called Dortmund, which is close to the Dutch border. Not the most touristic part of Germany, I've been told, but it was a really flat area full of canals and people loved biking around. So, I got a lot of, like, just a lot of biking in that time. I don't know if you're familiar, Matt, with Big Bang Theory.

Matt Bowles: Yes.

Irina Papuc: So, I was basically living German version of Big Bang Theory there. Like, it was like something straight out of that show. It was me and then like eight guys, all of them extremely smart, brilliant people in physics. And we just nerding out, like every Wednesday we would gather together, we'd order Chinese takeout, and we would play StarCraft. And then we would watch Big Bang Theory, which was a little meta, but we basically nerding out. And I remember one of the traditions we had was we would go on these bike rides together. Like the whole physics team would all go on these bike rides around the countryside there. And I was really impressed to see how in shape everyone was compared to me. I remember there was a guy on my team who was probably in the 70s, and he would be up and down that hill three times before I was finally even close to getting to the top. I remember once they were joking that I'm the American there, so I should probably get a bike that's on automatic, you know, that would certainly have helped at the time.

Matt Bowles: So then from there, what was your next international travel experience? You got inspired by that. And then what was next?

Irina Papuc: Well, during that same summer, I ended up traveling to Switzerland, of course, to see CERN, to check out the LHC which was currently radiating. So, we couldn't quite go down there to check it out, like eyeball to eyeball. But went checked out Geneva, Switzerland, traveled around, backpacked around Germany. And then the following year I was already bitten by the travel bug, but I was still a physics student. So, to placate this, I ended up signing up for a semester abroad. I actually moved to Sweden for a semester and lived in Stockholm. So early experiences were mostly Europe.

Matt Bowles: Let's talk about that because you spent a lot of time in Asia, which is obviously very different from those European locations that you were in. So, what was that transition like? At what point did you decide to venture out of Europe and head over to start checking out Asia?

Irina Papuc: Yeah, so I graduated in 2012. And I remember when I graduated it was almost like, I don't know, I didn't really like the prospect of going into the workforce, of getting a 9-to-5 job, sort of falling in line in that direction. There was this part of me that just was yearning to travel. I felt like I was finally free. I had spent my four years in college and I really just wanted to go out there and see what's out there in the world. So, in 2012, I ended up saving up a bit of money. It took me maybe six months to do that. And then I ended up buying a one-way ticket to Taiwan. And there's actually, there's a little bit of a backstory to that because

what I was going to do is teach English in Asia. I didn't really have a particular place I wanted to do it, but I actually originally had my sights on South Korea and I applied to teach English in South Korea, went through the extensive process there that requires like FBI background checks and whatnot, and got rejected because my fingerprints were too light. The ink they used was not strong enough. So that rejection came in like after I had already planned this whole trip to Korea. And then I had to quickly pivot in a new direction. So arbitrarily I ended up in Taiwan.

Matt Bowles: Wow, that's really interesting. I just spent some time in Korea. It's a really amazing place.

Irina Papuc: Yeah.

Matt Bowles: So that forced you then to choose a different country and you picked Taiwan for your year of teaching English?

Irina Papuc: Yeah, it was literally an overnight decision. I remember when I got the rejection from South Korea because of the poorly inked fingerprints. Go figure. I was actually backpacking in Costa Rica with my ex-boyfriend and I got the emails like, damn, I'm supposed to be leaving for Korea. So now I have to rethink things. So that's how I ended up choosing Taiwan, which luckily accepted me. The way it worked was I applied for the job while I was still in the States. So, I already had an acceptance letter in my hand. I knew that I was going to be working for a specific company in Taiwan. All of that was laid out. I didn't have to just fly there and then figure all that out for myself, which was really helpful.

Matt Bowles: So, this is going to be your first experience in Asia. You committed to at least a year there. So, what was that like? You arrive in Taiwan and when, what was the year in Taiwan like for you?

Irina Papuc: It was a trip in every possible way. I mean, coming out of my life and I had been quite a homebody until then with my limited travels to Europe, I almost felt the same sense of wonder you feel as a child when you're first discovering the world as a little kid. That's how I felt going into this trip. In my early 20s, everything was new and I was working in a Bushiban, which is the name of a private kindergarten there. So, in Taiwan they have public and private kindergartens. And so, I was teaching kids ranging from like 3-year-olds in the morning, then I would be teaching middle schoolers in the afternoon. I'd be teaching high schoolers some days of the week, and then I would be teaching adults in the weekend. So, I really got a chance over the course of that year to interact with a whole slice of Taiwanese life from all the different age ranges. And I had the good luck of making a great friend there. A local Taiwanese guy who was my landlord, who really like took me under his wing. I got to meet his family. I really got a chance to spend time there, hanging out with local Taiwanese people. Most of my time there, I hung out with local people, not foreigners. And there were just a lot of really interesting things going on there. Like, I remember realizing that most of the kindergartens are actually run by the mafia. So, this is not like Godfather style mafia. This is like more of like a lucrative business mafia. But apparently in Taiwan, like a lot of the kindergartens, most of the electronics industry, also a lot of the fish markets are run by, “The mafia”. And I remember when I got there on my first day of work, my then boss at the time, the director of that kindergarten, she actually showed me her tattoo. She had a tattoo on her, like shoulder that was mafia tattoo. And she like jokingly was like this Is my mafia tattoo. Don't fuck with me. So, it was like, kind of like a wild experience to, like, sit in this kindergarten. The walls were all covered with, like, pictures of hello Kitty and hippos and all these cute things. But then you're like, damn, these people are all working in the mafia. Like, I better be on my good behavior here.

Matt Bowles: That is unbelievable. Wow. So, I've only been to Taiwan for probably, like, four days. Just kind of like a long weekend. I spent the whole time in Taipei. I mean, it was amazing, right? I mean, like, the night markets in Taipei.

Irina Papuc: Oh, yeah, the night markets.

Matt Bowles: Bonkers, right?

Irina Papuc: Yes.

Matt Bowles: I mean, it was really spectacular. But I only got, like, four days there. And I've just heard that Taiwan is so amazing when you're able to spend more time, go to other parts of Taiwan outside the city and kind of get that deeper cultural experience and connection, which obviously you did over the course of the year. So, I mean, what were kind of some of your reflections by the end of that year? How had you sort of grown as a person from when you landed there to the end of that year? And what did that inspire you to do next? Like, what did that year kind of do for you as a person?

Irina Papuc: Okay. Starting with the more, like, practical things. I became a complete fruit fanatic. So, Taiwan introduced me to the art of finding and eating quality fruit. I never thought this was the thing. Like, they have something like seven different varieties of mango there. And I remember the friend I was living with there, the landlord guy I told you about, one of my closest friends to this day, he was a complete fruit fanatic. Every season, he would keep track of what fruits in season. We'd go out and we'd buy just crates and crates of mangoes. Buddha head fruit. I learned about all these new fruits I never even knew existed, as I'm sure you've seen in your travels, too, Matt. And it was cool. Another thing I've learned was I actually spent a few months living with Buddhist nuns when I was in Taiwan. So, while I was teaching, I also would spend a lot of time at a local Buddhist nunnery. It just happened to be, like, down the block from where I lived. And I always had a bit of an interest in Buddhism. This went back to my time learning physics in college. But when I was in Taiwan, I actually really got to get deep into that. So, I spent a lot of time hanging out and even living a bit with Buddhist nuns, sort of learning alongside them, like, just being a fly on their wall. And I think that Definitely contributed to, really, some of the stress management techniques that I have that carry with me to this day.

Matt Bowles: Wow. Can I just interject there and ask you to maybe share some of those? Like, what were the biggest lessons and takeaways from the Buddhist nuns and what have you implemented in your life from that experience? I'd love to hear about some of the stress management techniques.

Irina Papuc: Definitely. Yeah. Okay. The biggest one, I know this sounds super basic, but how to breathe like it is a thing we're born literally doing. But it wasn't until I hung out there and started meditating. It's something I hadn't really done before. I mean, I had tried to over the years, but not really successfully. That was my first, like, serious attempt at meditating for more than five minutes. So meditating, learning how to breathe properly, how to breathe to calm myself down. I found that to be really key. And also eating very simply prepared vegetarian meals. The nuns were very generous with me. Every time I visited them there, they always allowed me to dine with them. So, we would sit in silence and eat, like, simple dishes of rice, bok choy. What else do we have? Just really simple vegetarian meals. And I think all of this kind of prepared me for my later travels because I learned how to live with very few things, you know, and how to appreciate a simple meal. I mean, one of the biggest pluses of Taiwan was just saving up money. When I got there, I was almost dirt poor. This was way before any of my entrepreneurial experiments had started. So, I was

able to save up about $2,000 a month while living there. I remember at the time, my living costs were 10% of my salary, which I think is pretty amazing if you ask me. So, I was able to save up considerably over that year, which later on was very important as I went off on my travels.

Matt Bowles: And so, by the end of your year, what then was your next move? What did that experience in Taiwan then inspire you to do? And as that year was coming to an end, what were your next moves?

Irina Papuc: Yeah, I don't even know if it was quite the end of the year, but halfway through, I was already planning my next move. And I knew that I wanted to spend a year just wandering. So, after saving up the money, I called up a really good friend of mine, a dude named Steven LeBlanc, who I ended up traveling with quite a bit on that trip. And we started planning together a journey we wanted to do, a *Journey to the West*. I watched a Hong Kong blockbuster while I was in Taiwan called *Journey to the West*. That Ended up inspiring the name of the trip. But yeah, basically the idea was to go on this like year-long, roughly year-long trip, start as far east as we can. So, we ended up in Thailand and just go as far west as we can. And the destination for me ended up being Romania because I really wanted to reconnect with some of my long-lost relatives there, including a grandmother that I had never met before.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. And I know you spent a lot of that trip retracing the Silk Road, which is one of my real bucket list things that I want to do. I have, I have not done it. It's been so high on my list. And you just, you know, slow traveled the Silk Road as part of your year-long journey, which I'm super excited to get into with you and hear some stories from that. But first let's just start at the beginning of that. So, you went to Thailand and your first stop was in Southeast Asia before you went on to Silk Roads. What were your experiences? Where did you go in Southeast Asia and what were your reflections on that part of the world since it was your first time there?

Irina Papuc: Yeah, so I spent a lot of time in Thailand, Laos and Myanmar. These were the three areas of Southeast Asia I was in. And for me, the most impressionable now looking back is definitely Myanmar. And it remains one of my favorite places. I think it's because it was such a closed off nation for so many years. So, when I actually went there back in 2013, and I've been there a couple times now since because I loved it so much, it was like stepping into a time capsule, Matt, like you really felt like that. I remember when I entered the capital there, Yangon, I felt like I was in the 70s. Like there were things going on there that I hadn't seen anywhere else in my travels I didn't know still existed. Some good, some bad. I remember seeing child labor, for example, sitting down in the cafe. There were kids as young as seven serving me. So definitely not all good things. But I was also amazed to see people working on typewriters. You would be walking down the street there and there would be businesses where you can pay a dollar or two and have an entire legal document typed up on a typewriter by somebody right in front of you. I remember walking through the streets of Yangon and just seeing all these ruins, these beautiful ruins from back in the British Empire time. Just these like majestic buildings that have been sort of gracefully falling into decay for decades. That really left an impression. And I was also impressed to see like just things that left a memory. Now that I look back on it, the second time I went to Myanmar, I just happened to be there during Buddha's birthday. I don't know if you've ever been in a Southeast Asian country during Buddha's birthday, Matt. It is an experience in and of itself. So basically, it's a giant water fight. Like a city wide, possibly country wide water fight. It's a little bit like Holi festival, but with water. So, when my friend and I stepped into Yangon, we didn't even know this was going on. We just stepped into the city we had flown in. This was the second time we went there. And suddenly people are like attacking us with water balloons. There are people, kids coming out of the buildings with water guns, like pelting us. And then we realized we asked somebody,

what's going on? It's Buddha's birthday. Oh goodness. So, we started like covering up our bags. I remember at the time I was already a digital nomad. So, I had my laptop in my backpack. I had all my tech gear with me, right? So, a really nice old man helped me out and like covered my whole backpack with a garbage bag just to prevent it from being completely drenched. And I remember there were pickup trucks driving around. They had been outfitted to look like almost like a float in a parade. And there were like young people on these trucks going around with firemen, hoses, like just drenching people with them. It was a complete cacophony. It was amazing. It was like we were hiding behind cars and stuff. It was really something else. We actually ended up joining one of those roaming trucks that was going around. They adopted us into their clan and we sort of just like hung out with them. They were a bunch of really nice young people, all Burmese. And we sort of just joined their little party and started pelting everyone else with like water balloons, water guns, stuff like that. Another thing that was cool about Myanmar was just like the way they organized their commerce. Like, I remember there was one street there that was completely devoted to selling like brooms. There was another street that was like all ruby dealers. And then there was another street I found where they were basically selling used like car keys, shop after shop of rubber, like specialist dealers selling you every possible used car key you could ever not want. It was there. It was just remarkable to see all of this sort of happening. And there was this long street that just went on and on and on. I think it was probably 20 or 30 streets long that was just lined up with old books. And this is a great way to really capture the sort of the DNA of a city, right? Walking down the street and looking at the literature along its sidewalks. And I remember looking at the books and seeing a mishmash of like books going back to the 20s, like back to like how to Be a Good Servant, which was really weird. And then you had like *Windows 95 for Dummies* or How to Be a Self-Made Millionaire Overnight or like Part of, you know, there were like books, like *Advanced Nuclear Engineering* textbooks, like everything, all the mix. And you could really get a sense of like the ambition and like the eagerness to learn and pick up new skills. So, it was really interesting.

Matt Bowles: That's awesome. And then after Southeast Asia, I know you also went to the Indian subcontinent and in South Asia you spent time in India and Nepal, which I would love to hear about. I've not yet been to Nepal. I have been to India, so maybe I've been to India a couple times. So maybe let's just start there because I'm super excited to hear where did you go in India? Because it's absolutely enormous.

Irina Papuc: Oh yeah.

Matt Bowles: And how was your Indian experience?

Irina Papuc: I think for me it was just a place that I felt every spectrum of human emotion when India, like there was never a dull moment, especially as a solo female traveler. And first of all, to assign geographic location. So, I spent time in the northern half. So, I lived in New Delhi for a month and then traveled around the northern bits, making my way up to the Himalaya region. So hung out in places like Himachal Pradesh, Dharamsala, which is the Dalai Lama's hometown, right where he's based, made it into areas like Manali, which are also up there in the Himalaya region. And I spent a solid month living in Delhi. I really wanted to see what it's like to live in a big Indian city. So, I ended up renting an apartment in Delhi and living there for a month. And some of the highlights. Wow. Well, one of them was I was there during Holi festival. So, one of my good friends there, really nice Indian guy who's a filmmaker, we ended up traveling to Krishna's birthplace, a town called Vrindavan, which is like one of the quite possibly the holiest city to be in during Holi. So, it was like a war zone.

Matt Bowles: Can you explain, just for people that don't know, what is the Holi festival both in terms of, like, what is the inspiration for it and then also what happens there just for people that have never Heard of that?

Irina Papuc: It's a Hindu festival. It takes place every spring, and it's really about welcoming in the spring season and celebrating the end of the winter. So, it usually falls on the day of the full moon and it's a two-day event. And traditionally the idea is that you go around and you sprinkle people with a little bit of colored powder. But I have to say, like, being in Vrindavan, which is, like I said, the holiest place to be during Holi, no pun intended, it was like next level in terms of just intensity. Like, we'd be walking down the street and, man, people were pelting us with colored powders. I definitely stuck out probably because I was one of the few foreign females out there. I didn't really see too many other foreigners in general. And at the end of it, I actually have a picture, Matt. I'll share it with you after our podcast. But at the end of it, all you could see were the whites of my eyes. Like, my entire body was. You know what happens when you take all the colors, like all the paints and mix them together? That was me. You couldn't even see. Like, my hair was permanently dyed red for the rest of my trip. And the eyeglasses that I continue to wear to this day were like, for a while they were dyed pink. I was seeing things through rose-colored spectacles as a result of being pelted with tons of pink paint. So, it was pretty cool. I remember at one point, my friend and I, we were being so freaking destroyed by the people there with paint and like, every possible form of, like, water gun filled with colored paint that we ended up taking, like, seeking refuge in a little store. We were like, hiding behind the displays in the store. And the old guy running the store there, he kept trying to get us to leave because he knew that we were a target and he didn't want his store to be covered in paint. So, we, like, quickly got a couple Cokes and a couple Kit Kat bars, and at the end of it, we just kind of sat and like, just reflected drinking our Cokes. Like, what did we just go through? He was even worse off. I think because I'm a lady, they were a little bit more caring. But he lost his shirt. Like, we don't know where it went. But at the end of that trip, there was no more shirt on him. Like, it was ripped in half for a while, then it was gone. And I remember at one point it got really bad and, like, my glasses fell off my head and all the, like, just the craziness of the whole event. And the car almost ran over my glasses. I remember thinking, okay, I need to take a break. I've had enough of this. It just so happened that right next to me, there was a temple. So, I remember I, like, stepped into that temple. There was a group of old ladies from Bangladesh who were sitting there in the temple. There were monkeys, like, walking along the temple walls, eyeing my eyeglasses. And I remember I just sat there for, like, a good half an hour with these old ladies in that temple, holding on. The ladies were, like, motioning to me to hold on to my eyeglasses because the monkeys were definitely going to come and grab them anytime. And I must have elicited some degree of compassion or pity or mercy from the old ladies there, because they just kept feeding me biscuits and tea. And my friend went off to keep attending the holy events, and then he came back later. It was an experience for sure.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. Those monkeys can be remarkably aggressive if you've never seen monkeys like that before. I can remember very distinctly, actually, also going to a Hindu temple, but this one was in Indonesia, in Bali, right? Which has some of the most amazing Hindu temples I've ever seen in Bali. And so was going to this one, and it's this whole complex, and it's in a beautiful area overlooking a cliff, overlooking the water and all this kind of stuff. And we go in, and our guide tells me immediately, he says, take your sunglasses off and put them in your pocket. Like, zip them and secure them. I'm like, secure my sunglasses? He's like, yeah. I'm like, why? You know, because it's, like, sunny out. He's like, just trust me. He goes, because of the monkeys. I was like, because of the monkeys. I'm like, six foot five. I'm wearing my sunglasses.

Irina Papuc: It'll be easy for them to reach them.

Matt Bowles: Yeah. I'm like a monkey. But he's like, just trust me. So, I do it, right? Like, I zip them into my pocket, you know, and sure enough, we're over by the wall, you know, overlooking the water. And there is another dude there who's wearing sunglasses, right?

Irina Papuc: The next victim.

Matt Bowles: And he's just standing there. And this monkey comes up from the other side of the wall, you know, is standing on the wall, and the dude's kind of just looking. He's like, oh, look at this cute little monkey. The monkey reaches over, grabs his sunglasses off his face, right?

Irina Papuc: Oh, my gosh.

Matt Bowles: And then the monkey puts the dude's sunglasses on himself. Okay, so there's the monkey looking at the dude wearing his sunglasses. Okay? So, then the guy and the other people. First, he's, like, in shock. He's like, oh, my gosh, my sunglasses. And then he looks. And the monkey puts the sunglasses on. And then him and his friends are like, oh, that's so cute. Look, the monkey's wearing my sunglasses. At that point, the monkey takes the sunglasses off, puts them on the wall, and stomps on the sunglasses with his foot and shatters them, and then just looks at the dude like, what? And then the monkey just takes off. Off the other side of the wall. And I just looked at our guide. I was like, oh, man, I am so glad that you want me to take my sunglasses off.

Irina Papuc: Oh, my gosh. Yeah, that monkey was in it. She/he was in it for the blood. He wanted to show that guy.

Matt Bowles: He was gangster. Yeah, no doubt. So that is amazing. I mean, the other thing I'll say about India, though, is that it is maybe my favorite food in the whole.

Irina Papuc: Yes. Yeah. No doubt.

Matt Bowles: Right.

Matt Bowles: Whatever else is going on my India trip, on any given day, as long as I'm eating three meals a day, I'm just delightfully happy in India.

Irina Papuc: Oh, my God. Yes. I was completely spoiled there.

Matt Bowles: And then after India, I know you also went to Nepal, which I have not yet been to. Super high on my list. I've heard amazing things. But what was your experience like in Nepal?

Irina Papuc: So, we took a motorcycle from Delhi all the way up to Kathmandu. So, biking down the sand dunes towards Nepal, you know, had to go through some desert terrain. There were some sand dunes, bike got caught up, tipped over on the side. Now, the part that was kind of embarrassing for us was because this was a small town we were heading into, the people along the way saw us. You know, these two gringos tipped over on the side of a sand dune. And by the time we reached the town, the people there had already talked about us. They already knew about us. They knew our story. They knew, oh, those two people bubbling on that sand dune. They're coming into town now. So, by the time we reached our hotel, the owner was like, are you the guys who fell on that sand dune an hour ago? Yes. So, this was in Nepal. We had already crossed the border, and we ended up going down these really epic mountain roads. You

probably know what I'm talking about. Those really curving, quite narrow roads where there's barely enough room for two cars to pass by, let alone one big truck. And while we were going along this road. A big truck came towards us and our bike ended up sort of tipping into the ditch between the mountain and the road. And the bike actually fell on top of me and Steven got away with a couple of broken ribs. I was very lucky not to have any injuries.

Matt Bowles: Geez. Wow.

Irina Papuc: Yeah, it was, it was a game changer. We realized that we're not going to keep doing the motorcycle thing, not on this trip. Too many potholes, too many weird traffic, things to bypass, too much stuff to carry. It wasn't working out. But we did serendipitously end up in a really nice little village because of that accident. So, people pulled us out, helped us get back on our feet and we were invited to come to the nearest local village there, nestled in the mountains of Nepal. And we spent a few days there just living there with the locals. And I met some really lovely women my age who kind of adopted me into their home, which was coincidentally a foot shorter than me. So, when I had to enter their house, I was like a giantess. I was wearing these giants like motorcycle boots and I already felt big. And then I also entered their home, which was like a solid foot and a half shorter than me. So, I was crouched the whole time I was in their house. But it was really like a tear-jerking memory because the girls there were probably three, all of them my age. They gave me this present. It was probably one of their most cherished possessions. This is where the theme of hospitality and generosity really started to begin the trip. I've never met such generous souls as I have on this trip. People are just genuinely nice. And they gave me the one book they had in their house that was really special to them. It was a copy of the Bible in Nepalese, which continues to sit, I'm actually looking at it now, on my bookshelf. They gave that to me as a little present. Yeah, it was really special to just end up in this random little village I would have never ended up in if we hadn't ended up in a ditch with our motorcycle.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. And then didn't you tell me also that Nepal was the place where you got into a chess match and you had a bet on the chess match or something like that.

Irina Papuc: Oh, yeah. So, when I was in Kathmandu, Steven and I, we went to a sushi bar, as one does. And when we were in there, we were playing a game of chess and then just a random person came up to us. It was a really nice like maybe in his 50s English guy who placed a bet on our game. And I just happened to win the bet. And he's like, all right, you win. I'm going to buy you a drink and I'm going to introduce you to a shaman. And I was like, oh, my God, yes, please. So, he gave us instructions where to go the next day. And as luck would have it, I figured out how to get there, although it was really labyrinthine. But I ended up at the house where the shaman was visiting. And this was his friend, a French guy who was living in Kathmandu. He was an antiquities dealer, and he'd been living there for a couple decades now, sort of splitting his time between Europe and Nepal. And he knew a lot of shamans, and they regularly visited his home. He sought them out for spiritual help, for medical help. And I got to meet face to face, a real shaman. Not only did I meet the shaman, who is a really nice guy, but I spent a solid, what was it must have been about two weeks just hanging out with him. He invited me to come along on his life, like just to stick around and see what it's like to be a shaman. So, the next day, we actually traveled to the outskirts of Kathmandu, where he was hired like a consultant to come to a family's house there and cleanse the house of bad spirits. So, I was able to sit, you know, kind of on the margins and watch the shaman prepare the ceremony, like set up clay figurines, set up this whole elaborate series of figurines of candles, eggs, just all the different parts that make up the shamanic ritual. And basically, cleansed this family's house that they had

just moved into, which was remarkable. And then after that, he invited me to come to his home. So, we traveled. I think it must have been an eight or a nine-hour bus ride to the middle of Nepal, somewhere deep in the mountains where he lives. And it was a little village. I don't think it was maybe more than like 15, 16 houses. And I stayed there for a week, got to meet his son, which was also very interesting to see what it's like to be sort of an apprentice or the son of a shaman. And I realized after a few days of living there that not just this one shaman lived there, but all of his neighbors were also shaman. I think something like seven of the houses there were all Nepalese shaman living there.

Matt Bowles: Wow, that's amazing.

Irina Papuc: Yeah. So just hung out there and, like, got to see what it's like for him to practice these rituals. At one point, they invited me to join in on the ritual as well. Never had this before in my life. But I ended up wearing this belt of birds. These were like mummified birds that went around my body with bells and whistles. And there was a shrine where you would leave fruits and other offerings to the gods. And I remember we went into this trance like state where we drummed almost nonstop for about an hour. And then after that we had this local yogurt drink that is drunk in a lot of places, not just in the Paul. That was meant to be like a kind of cleansing ritual. That was easily one of the most memorable experiences. And hanging out with the shaman's son was really interesting. He was a teenager at the time. He must have been maybe 16 or 17. He was obsessed with Metallica. Obsessed. Like he had liked all of his T-shirts were death metal T-shirts. It was just funny to see this, like in the middle of all this.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. Okay, so after Nepal, you ditch the motorcycle idea and then you go to begin the Silk Road journey. Can you talk a little bit about and just give some very basic context for people that have never heard of the Silk Road? What is it? Where is it? Why is it called that?

Irina Papuc: Totally. So Silk Road, this goes back to maybe like from around the 2nd century BC up until the 14th century AD. This was the historic trade route that connected Europe to the Far East. So, people like Marco Polo being the most famous, they would take the journeys along the Silk Road, which was really a series of routes to bring back or to do trade with countries like China, India, Malaysia. Well, back then it wasn't Malaysia, but Java. So, these were the ancient trade routes that connected Asia and Europe. And it's really interesting to go there because you don't see a lot of foreigners coming into those places, especially not Americans. So traveled from Kyrgyzstan, where we flew from India to Kyrgyzstan.

Matt Bowles: And then the idea was you were going to start in Kyrgyzstan because you can start as far as like western China, I think. Like all the way over in Xi'. An. But you guys were going to start in Kyrgyzstan and then go all the way through Central Asia to Turkey and then continue on to Romania after that. That was your route, right?

Irina Papuc: Exactly. That was the route. We began in Kyrgyzstan in the capital, Bishkek, which I knew very little about before I got there, which made it super exciting, and then made it overland all the way to my destination being Romania.

Matt Bowles: So, okay, so for Central Asia, I've never been super high on my list. What was that like when you got to Bishkek? What was Kyrgyzstan like? How was Your experience?

Irina Papuc: Kyrgyzstan is really special to me because it is over. I don't know if you know this, Matt, but It's like about 80% of its surface area is snowy mountains.

Matt Bowles: Wow.

Irina Papuc: Yeah, it is a beautiful, pristine place. And there's just so many places for you to just get lost in the nature there. So, the places that were the most special to me in Kyrgyzstan were just spending time in the mountains there. I actually ended up traveling to one of the highest altitude lakes on the planet. It's called Sand Cool. And by this lake, there were a group of semi-nomadic people living who spend, like part of the year in urban areas and then part of the year with their horses out in nature. And they let us stay with them. We ended up crashing in their yurt. And I don't know if you know, but one of the national drinks in Kyrgyzstan is horse milk. So, they don't have a lot of cows there, not a lot of dairy options. So, horses are a very prized animal and so is their milk. And I remember when I met the nomadic people there, they were very generous, very hospitable, and they really wanted me to try the horse milk. And because I was a guest coming in all the way from Chicago, it couldn't just be any horse milk. It had to be freshly milked. So, they made me some. They prepared freshly milked horse milk. There were like a whole family clan gave me a cup of fresh, hot horse milk, and they stood by, you know, like, eagerly waiting for me to take a drink. That was an interesting experience, I have to say. Not the worst thing I've ever tried. I wouldn't order it off the menu if given the chance in the future. But I definitely appreciated the gesture, let's put it that way.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing.

Irina Papuc: Another memory in Kyrgyzstan was the bazaar there. So, there are three major bazaars in the world, right? One of them is in Iran, one of them is in Istanbul, and then one of them is in Bishkek, actually. So, it is one of the largest shopping experiences you can have. This thing just stretches on and on. It's actually a collection of a dozen different little bazaars. You can easily spend the whole week just wandering through this giant shopping market. And that was for me, at the time, this just my eyes dropped. I had never really seen anything like this before. And I remember as I was wandering through that bazaar, I just happened to pass through the section where televisions were for sale, and I just walked through the aisles there where people were selling televisions, and I stumbled upon A birthday party. Like, the people were just having a random birthday party while selling televisions there. And I remember they saw me there, and they're like, oh, you. Where are you from? Come join the birthday party. And I suddenly became a guest of honor there, and they brought out the vodka, and they were serving up slices of cake. And, you know, I made the mistake of complimenting their music. So, they're like, take the music. They were giving me the CDs. Like, I learned very early on the importance of not complimenting anything, because the moment you compliment something, they will give it to you.

Matt Bowles: Wow.

Irina Papuc: This is how deep hospitality goes there. And this actually goes back to Marco Polo's days. I was reading a book on his travels when I came back from this trip and just studying more. This idea of hospitality that is so different from what we're used to in the West. They really believe out there that guests are a gift from God. So, guests are treated in a very special and very generous way. And as a newbie out there, I made the mistake multiple times of just out of a good nature, complimenting a woman's ring. She immediately gave me her ring. I could not give it back. No possible way she would entertain that. I made the mistake once of being welcomed into somebody's home and making a compliment about the painting on the wall. And I remember he just started taking the painting off the wall to give it to me, and I'm like, no, I cannot carry that in my backpack. Please put it back on the wall.

Matt Bowles: Unbelievable. Wow.

Irina Papuc: The people were just outstandingly kind and generous. And at that time, going back to your earlier question, Matt, about what I've learned from my trips, man, my faith in humanity was fully restored. Like, I have to say, in those 11 months of traveling around, a lot of people ask me later on, were you afraid? Were you in danger? Did you ever feel somebody was, like, you know, in some way going to target you? No. Absolutely no. I did not have a single bad experience with a human being. I did have one with a dog, but that's another story.

Matt Bowles: That's so amazing. I love that. Okay, so your Silk Road trip, though, this is a completely overland trip. So, you're traveling over land through Central Asia. So, after Kyrgyzstan, you're next, you went into Tajikistan.

Irina Papuc: Exactly. We went into Tajikistan, which is south of Kyrgyzstan. So, Tajikistan was its own thing. How to begin? I mean, a lot of time was spent in nature there, too. I actually ended up traveling with a couple friends to the southern border of Tajikistan, which is. It's an autonomous Region that has occasionally had skirmishes because Tajikistan's had some civil war experiences, it has wanted to be its own thing. So, it was really interesting going out there and seeing that restricted, sort of autonomous region which borders Afghanistan. There's a beautiful chain of mountains along the Afghan Tajik border called the Pamirs, which are, coincidentally, a big ski destination, especially for Russians. Apparently, this is a place that has probably been the way it is for thousands of years. We're talking stone houses where the stones are laid on top of each other using ancient building practices. Large, beautiful rolling hills that are pastoral, you know, mostly pastoral people with sheep and goats. We're really talking about off the beaten path here. And it was something to behold. Afghanistan, across the border. I made it all the way to the river that bordered Tajikistan with Afghanistan. There was a really small river. I probably could have swum it. Didn't try to. But I did get to see on the other side, I think there was a little group of teenage boys. And we communicated through, like, body language, like, waving at each other, trying to communicate that way. But that was my brief, like, sort of view into Afghanistan. And heading down there along the border, we were really lucky because we ran into a wedding. It just so happened that the night we were there, one of the nights there was a wedding in town, and of course, the entire village of whatever 100 people were at the wedding. So of course, we were invited to. And going to a Tajik wedding is an experience in and of itself. Like, the whole wedding took place in a rather large room. Not too big, maybe the size of two living rooms. Men on one side, women on the other. In the middle was a very tiny dance floor, big enough for two people. Far end DJ playing the latest. Well, nothing like what you would hear, not the stuff we hear at our weddings. And people would take turns, two people at a time, dancing while everyone watches. And it was just remarkable to see this. The women wore these beautiful velvet tunics. I remember, like, really impressed with the fashion there. Velvet is completely in. Everyone wears velvet.

Matt Bowles: And then how are you guys getting around these countries when you were going through them?

Irina Papuc: Yeah. So, we bought a car. We bought a proper station wagon. Back in Kyrgyzstan, life was so small and simple. I would sleep. The back of the car became my home. It's funny, like, the door of the car became like a bookshelf. Each little pocket in the door was a special place for me. The backpack that I carried around with me, it was like my own little living room inside, every single possession took on a special meaning. So, like, looking back on those simple days, I feel like they really filled me with a kind of resilience because I look back on that time. Sleeping in the back of that station wagon with very few possessions, very little money in the bank. Very simple times. No job at the time. I didn't even have a phone

for those 11 months, Matt. Like, nobody could get in touch with me. I was legally gone. I had disappeared. And I was really happy.

Matt Bowles: That is amazing. That is so amazing.

Irina Papuc: Yeah, no phone, no job. I communicated with my family through email and that's it. It was about as simple as it gets. Truly living in the moment, you know.

Matt Bowles: Wow.

Irina Papuc: And I loved sleeping in the back of that car. I would return to that in a heartbeat. It's good to return to that. I think it really fills you with perspective.

Matt Bowles: So, after Tajikistan, next up was Uzbekistan.

Irina Papuc: Exactly. So, Uzbekistan was interesting. It was a different vibe for sure. It's a bigger country, bigger economy, more industrialization. When we got into Uzbekistan, one of the highlights was this little town called Khiva. And what's really special about it is it's got an old part of the town that's really ancient. And the buildings there are all made out of sand and mud. So as far as the eye can see, you just see this like it's almost like a view out of Aladdin where all the buildings are ancient. There's this fortress wall that goes around the old town that you can actually climb and scale and walk along. And I remember the family that I was staying with there, they let me sleep on the rooftop because that is technically the nicest place to sleep. Because at night, all the females of the household, all the girls, all the sisters, they go up and they sleep on the rooftop because there are no bugs, no mosquitoes. You just have the perfect, like, balmy evening, full moon out. It was perfect. Like, I would go up there, bring my tea, lay out my sleeping bag. I'd have the full moon lighting my way. And then I would have this amazing 200-degree panoramic view of this ancient stone city. Stone and sand city.

Matt Bowles: Wow.

Irina Papuc: There were little bits and pieces of the city that were this beautiful, like, turquoise blue from the mosques, you know, those famous, like, blue mosques that you see in Uzbekistan. So, yeah, that really left an impression.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. So, I've not been to Uzbekistan. I have definitely seen the pictures of the bright blue turquoise mosques and it was amazing. Last year I did the Trans-Siberian Railway and took the train from Moscow. All the way across Siberia to Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. And on that journey, we stopped in a city called Kazan, which is part. It's part of a semi-autonomous region of Tatarstan. And there it's a super majority Muslim population. And they had there those bright turquoise blue mosques, which is what I associate with Uzbekistan because I've seen pictures. I was like, oh my gosh, this is amazing. And it was like unbelievable. Like, I mean, it was just absolutely gorgeous. The architecture was stunning.

Irina Papuc: Yeah, I mean, it is just next level. I'm so glad you got to do the train trip. That is something that's been on my bucket list for a while.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, we'll have to trade tips here because you want to do the Trans-Siberian and I want to do the Silk Road. So, we'll definitely exchange details on that. But that's amazing. So then after Uzbekistan, you crossed the border into Kazakhstan. And what was that experience like? How was Kazakhstan?

Irina Papuc: I really can't say that we did its justice. We just drove as fast as we can through it. We wanted to get to our next destination. But where we were in Kazakhstan was the southern part. First of all, Kazakhstan is a massive country. A lot of the cities are more towards the north. We passed through the southern part, which was some of the most desolate regions I've ever seen. Like, we drove for hours and there was nothing around, like just completely flat, barren land. But then when we finally ended up on the other side, we reached a really nice town bordering the Caspian Sea. And there we started inquiring about how to cross the sea. So, what we discovered was there are actually multiple ships that cross the Caspian. None of them are like ferry-type ships. They're all ships that bring supplies, industrial supplies and stuff like that. But even us as backpackers, we can secure a cabin on the ship. So, we ended up securing cabins and then we just had to wait for the ship. There's no set schedule. I think we waited about a week in that town and just stuffed our faces with pizza and drank Cokes and watched the sea life go by until the ship came to port. And then we got on the ship and on that ship, it was us and a bunch of truck drivers. So, I got to hang out with the truck drivers for a solid two days. These guys were passing through the Caucasus with their trucks entering into Europe. And it was very 70s, I think the inside of this ship was solidly made in the 70s. So, a lot of like fake wood lining on the walls. There was kind of this like 70s style bar there where you can order food. Like one evening I ordered spaghetti that was on the menu. So, they brought out, literally, spaghetti, but no sauce. No sauce. And I was impressed by just the journey there. I felt like I was sitting on this ship for ages. But we did make it to the other side and then we were suddenly in Azerbaijan.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. I spent about a month last year between Azerbaijan and Georgia, so I got to do a little bit of the Caucasus. Super interesting region of the world. But I know you also went to the Nagorno Karabakh disputed region between Azerbaijan and Armenia. So, I would be really interested to hear how that experience was for you.

Irina Papuc: Yeah. So, as you probably saw in the news, Matthew, it's not looking too good right now there. There are some increased violence happening, which is very sad to see, especially because I had been there just a few years before when it was quite peaceful. First impression was of all the places on the trip, we had GPS with us. We actually had three. We had two backups. And this was the one place in all of our travels where the GPS did not work. I don't know why; it just didn't work. It's like it couldn't register where we were. So, we were sort of nowhere. And when we got to this region, we visited areas that had seemed to have been frozen time. Like there were towns there that had been completely razed to the ground, bombed, ruined, and the ruins were still there. And you could still walk down the fields there where the overturned rusty tanks were still there. And my friend Monique and I, this really great German lady I was traveling with, we were like, we definitely want to avoid stepping on a mine. So, we were following in the footsteps or sorry, not the footsteps in the hoof steps of cows. There were lots of cows on those fields. And we figured, all right, if a cow goes kaboom, then, well, we won't be following in that direction. So, we followed in their hoof steps, walked around there, walked along those ruins there, saw the ruined towns that just a few years before had been part of the big wars going on there, and tasted fresh pomegranate fruits. Because even in the most war torn deserty places, you're going to still find just a giant, like, wild orchard of pomegranate trees. I'll never forget that.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. So, what were some of your takeaways or reflections on traveling through the Caucasus? Because you also went to Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Azer region. What did you think?

Irina Papuc: Yeah, for me, personally, as a Romanian, I felt almost like There was a cultural connection. The Caucasus is kind of the in between area. Not quite Asia, not quite Europe, technically Asia. But it really

felt like I was in an extended part of Eastern Europe in many ways for me personally. While I was there, we drove around a lot of the natural places there and just saw a lot of castles, a lot of ancient towns that were again, like built hundreds of years ago out of stone. Had a lot of cheese pies. This is one of the most popular dishes there. It's called *khachapuri*. And it's a really decadent, rich, cheese filled piece of bread that, let me tell you, after a day of driving around or hiking around, you come home, you drink a little wine, you eat this cheese pie, you're all good. So, we had a lot of that, got a little fat, I have to say, but it was totally worth it. We traveled through. I did quite a fair bit of hitchhiking in the Caucasus, actually, and I found it to be very easy to hitchhike not just there, but also in Central Asia. In between our travels along the way in the station wagon, I would also go off on little detours and hitchhike. And what I found interesting in Georgia is people were more afraid of me getting in trouble by somebody else picking them up instead of them, that they would pick me up instead just to be protective of me, which I found interesting.

Matt Bowles: Wow.

Irina Papuc: So, there was this general fear that somebody else could cause you harm. So let me be, let me be the good Samaritan and step in and help you type of thing. I guess was kind of funny because at the end of the day, nobody was causing anyone harm. And actually, in these countries, hitchhiking is a very popular way to get around. You see five-year-old hitchhiking, you see old ladies hitchhiking. There's just not a lot of public transport in some areas. So, hitchhiking continues to be the popular way to get around.

Matt Bowles: Wow. And then you went all the way across Turkey from the very far eastern part to the very far western part to get to Bulgaria. And what was your Turkey experience like?

Irina Papuc: Turkey was profound. So, we spent, of course, a lot of time in, you know, the classic places like Istanbul, Cappadocia, got on, you know, did the hot air balloon ride, all that stuff. But what really sticks out now in this conversation, Matt, is what it was like to be on the east side of Turkey, which not a lot of tourists go to. And particularly I made it all the way to the border with Syria and back in 2013, that was kind of a hot place to be because ISIS was starting to flare up in Syria, in Iraq, and we were, I think, maybe 14 kilometers from the Syrian border, which was absolutely packed with Turkish military at the time. Lots of tanks. Really interesting to see all that unfolding. And in the middle of all of this, I visited a town called Hasakah, which, if you look it up, it's a really special town. It's very old, but it's one of the most continuously habituated places on Earth that you'll find. And at the time, it was just something to see because since then, I don't know if it has happened yet, but I read recently in National Geographic that the town will be completely submerged underwater because they're building a dam. So, it was remarkable to go there and to see this town that has been sitting there for such a long time before that happened, to get that memory, I think is quite special.

Matt Bowles: Wow.

Irina Papuc: If it hasn't happened already, then either this year or next, it will be completely submerged underwater, like all the ancient buildings there, everything. And the people moved to a new location. So, I'm glad I was able to catch that before it happened.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, that's amazing. And Istanbul is actually the only place in Turkey that I have ever been. I've not been to any of those other areas. I definitely needed to spend a lot more time in that country because Istanbul was just such a spectacular city. I was so enamored with it and definitely want to go back and do more of Turkey. So, then you finally got into Europe and you went through Bulgaria and back to

Romania. And I would love to hear about how it was for you to reconnect with Romania as an adult, as an experience, experienced world traveler. What was that like for you?

Irina Papuc: Yeah, that was a remarkable personal set of moments for me. So, you know, when I moved to the U.S. with my family when I was two, there was a bit of a separation there between the two sides of my family, between my dad's side, my mom's side. So, there were just the whole side of the family I had never really met before. I was really determined to go back to Romania and to find my roots. This included a grandmother that I hadn't met before. Included just the whole, like, just a whole family of cousins, aunts, uncles. So, getting to Romania, thankfully I speak the language because otherwise I don't know how I would have been able to navigate this. I was able to meet my grandmother for the first time, connect with that whole side of the family. And it was just. It really helped heal a lot I really got to see a part of myself. You know, you always want to question and understand your origins, where you come from, and I'm lucky to say that I was able to do that. And it is funny when you go back to your country of birth. I spent my whole life from a small age speaking Romanian, but always in the context of home, not really out there. And it was funny to suddenly hear a whole, like, be immersed in this environment where everybody is speaking this language that you speak normally at home. It was a little bit surreal to see that. But, yeah, spent quite a bit of time walking around the streets of Bucharest, the capital there, where part of my family is based, and then heading up into Transylvania, which is where I was born and where, you know, my mom's side is based, where Dracula is from. Did I mention he's my great grandfather? Probably should drop that.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. So, Irina, after all of this world travel, when you think back, and I know you've been to a number of other places we haven't discussed on this podcast, you know, you've been to over 40 countries now. So, as you think back on all of this travel and you reflect on your overall experiences and learnings and your takeaways, why do you travel? What do you get out of it overall? What does travel mean to you at this point in your life?

Irina Papuc: There's a writer I really respect. Her name is Anaïs Nin, and she famously said once that when you write, you taste life twice. So, I had the good fortune as I went on these travels to take meticulous notes. I actually have something like 10 notebooks full of notes from that 11-month trip alone. And after I wrote the notes, I kind of just shoved them away and didn't look at them for a while. So, I've been using this time to just go through the notes, make sense of what I saw all those years ago, and maybe even pull some stories to write about. That's where I'm at right now with travel. But I think once this pandemic is over, my favorite way to live life is as a semi-nomad myself. I kind of like to spend half of my time here in my home, sort of recharge, and then I love to spend half of the year out there just traveling. So that's what travel means to me now.

Matt Bowles: And you've also mentioned to me, and I want to ask you about this, that you feel that you thrive in diverse, fast changing environments and that you enjoy risk. Can you talk about that and what you mean by that.

Irina Papuc: Yes, I think it's important to say that I practice what is probably most closely described as calculated risk. So, I think everything in life, if you ever want to experience anything worth experiencing, there's going to be risk involved. There's just no way around it. And in doing this trip, this 11-month trip, I absolutely had to put myself out there and I had to accept and deal with risk. Camping in the middle of nowhere in a small town in Tajikistan, accepting hitchhike offers, all of these are little risks. But I think that as you go through life and as you sort of learn to tune into your own intuition, and intuition is so key, if something feels wrong in your gut, I don't do it. I try to make well informed decisions, what I call calculated

risk. And I find that generally things do work out and in the worst case, you can always usually negotiate something. But I also tend to jump out of situations if I feel that they are not going in the direction I want them to go to. And I certainly can say that in those 11 months of traveling, there were things that I backed out of that I thought were too risky for me and that looking back in my early 30s now, I probably made a good choice. But yeah, definitely calculate risk is key. You just, you can't have a lifetime full of interesting memories if you don't put yourself out there and take that risk.

Matt Bowles: And do you have any other tips, particularly for female solo travelers that may be at the beginning or the earlier stage of their world travel journeys?

Irina Papuc: Yes, couple tips. I really practice this; I field tested this in my own travels all the time. Try to blend in as much as you can physically. Like for example, when I ended up in India, I was very proud to say that if I compared my experiences first getting there, people were constantly staring at me, taking me into it, you know, giving me their attention as it makes sense. I stuck out like a sore thumb. I was tall, I, you know, I was wearing hiking clothes in the middle of Delhi. I stuck out. So, within a few days of getting there, I realized, wow, I really need to change my appearance. I need to act like Romans do when in Rome. So, I bought the local clothing, I bought the Shalwar kameez, the tunic and pants. I changed how I look and I really tried to blend in with people in each country. And this is something I tend to do everywhere I go. I usually when I go off on a long backpacking trip, I don't bring too many clothes with me because I realize that when I get there, I'll be buying the local clothes that everybody wears. So, I find that to be very important to do. And something else that sort of as a testament to that, by the end of my time in India, I actually had somebody come up to me in Delhi and speak to me in Hindi. They thought I was Hindi, so it clearly was working for me. And it probably doesn't hurt that I have brown hair. You know, I tend to blend in most places, but I found that to be practical. Another tip I had was when you're traveling on long train trips, for example, I did a couple overland, like really long, like two to three day long train trips in India as a solo female, I would go to the train ticketing office in Delhi and I actually like for a couple bucks, you can bribe the person there to tell you this is not very nice, but you can bribe somebody there to tell you exactly where on the train, like in which train carriage you have the other foreign females, their names, their age and where they are in the train. And you can actually have yourself placed along with them in the train. That's what I did. So, I never really was all that solo in my trips. I tried to orchestrate little situations where I wasn't traveling alone. I made good friends along the way and found ways to travel with other people. And I found that to be useful.

Matt Bowles: That's really good advice. Well, let's use this concept of calculated risk as a pivot point to start talking about your business. Galactic Fed and Maverick Show listeners actually know your business partner, Zach Boyette, who I interviewed. That was Episode #94 of The Maverick Show. If anybody has not listened to that episode yet, highly encourage you to do it. He's another amazing person, as you obviously know, an incredible world traveler, super brilliant entrepreneur, and your business partner. So definitely want folks to listen to that episode. But I would also like to get your take and sort of your perspective on the founding of Galactic Fed and maybe just starting off with your reflections or tips on how to select the right business partner, because I feel like that is something that is really hard to do. And I would love your take on how you did that.

Irina Papuc: I mean, it is not easy at all to find your business partner. It is up there with the difficulties of finding any partner, marriage partner, dating, it's kind of the same situation. It's really hard to find a business partner that resonates with you, that shares your values, shares your work ethic, shares sort of the

direction you want to take a business. And it isn't something that I thought was going to happen until I met Zach. I was really lucky to meet Zach back when we were both working at Toptal. So, I was heading up SEO at Toptal. Sorry, probably a little bit of context is helpful here. Toptal is a big online services business. That's where I actually started in SEO. And I was lucky to be promoted there to heading up their SEO channel within a few months. And Zach was running their paid media channel. So very complimentary services. SEO and paid media. And Zach and I actually, you know, because this was a remote company, Toptal is a fully remote company. I never really got a chance to meet Zach except like once in the time we worked there. We did a remote on-site meeting with the rest of the team and we just kind of hit it off. Like we realized pretty early on that we have very similar sort of trajectories in life. We're both entrepreneurs. He had previously started Rexy. I know he mentioned this in his interview. He had already also worked on different startups before I had done the same. We both brought really interesting yet complementary yet different. Like not overlapping, but different set of skills to the table. Of course, Zach's super brilliant. He brought to the table a lot of creativity, inventiveness, technology. He had worked with big companies like *Procter and Gamble*. Just a whole slew of different skills that he brought to the table that I didn't have. I had other skills. I came from more of a research background with physics, more of a process background. And we just kind of clicked and we realized that, wait, we're both essentially trying to do the same thing here. He was keen on starting a paid media agency, I was keen on starting an SEO agency. And we just kind of came together and realized we can just combine forces and start Galactic Fed. And in the Myers Briggs language, we're both quite similar. We're both ENTJs. So, it really worked out. Like we really felt like we have a very similar sort of way of looking at systems. Like the way we organize our team is very scientific. We love like the scientific method, sort of testing ideas, data driven ways of looking at results. It all just kind of clicked into place.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. And can you talk a little bit now about how Galactic Fed formulated their service offerings? What is it that you do offer to businesses?

Irina Papuc: Yeah, so there were different approaches to this philosophically, but we decided that instead of trying to own all of marketing, which is a giant space full of a lot of specialized areas, we wanted to stick to just the things we know really well. That we can really speak to authoritatively. And in our case, that's going to be paid advertising and SEO. So, our bread and butter continue to be to this day, organic growth marketing and paid ads. And we branch out within those because those are two really big rich fields. We branch into things like content creation, building ads for a variety of different channels, link building, social media strategy, all the different little moving parts behind SEO and paid ads.

Matt Bowles: All right, so now I'm going to ask you the million dollar question, Irina, which is, and I know this because I've been in business for a long time myself, I want to ask you about the value proposition position of Galactic Fed vis a vis other digital marketing agencies. Because the reality is that there's a lot of digital marketing agencies that say that they can perform in the areas of paid social media, advertising, SEO and so forth. And the reality is that the super majority of them cannot. And I want to ask you, what is the difference between Galactic Fed, what is the value proposition? What are you guys able to do well, that most other agencies are not able to deliver on consistently?

Irina Papuc: That is the million-dollar question, Matt. I mean, there's different ways of answering that. There's the front-end answer and then there's the back-end answer. So, I'll start with the back-end answer. What makes this kind of unique is the fact that we're both scientific people. I come from a physics background; Zach comes from an economics background. We're both, you know, deeply entrenched in this

technical way of looking at things. We love the scientific method. We love the idea of not just going in blindly into a problem and trial and erroring our way through it. We approach things in a very methodical and very systematic way where we have a, we lay out a hypothesis, we test it, we look at the early-stage results, and then we decide to scale accordingly. That is our tried-and-true approach. And we work with clients to come up with experiments that make the most sense for their space at this point. We've worked with such a varied sort of group of clients over the years that we have a lot of learnings to pull through from different industries. Another thing that sets us apart is the fact that over the last few years we have grown primarily through inbound marketing. The majority of our clients are very happy with us, so they refer us other clients. So, this has kind of snowballed over the years where we have happy clients referring other happy clients. And because we want to have the results speak for themselves, we're constantly publishing new case studies on our website showcasing what we were able to do to help the brands grow, oftentimes not anonymized. So, you can see real results from real companies of how we were able to help them achieve their growth goals.

Matt Bowles: And what would you say are the biggest mistakes that businesses are making right now in this area? Either because they're trying to do it themselves in house, or they've hired the wrong agency. But when somebody comes to you and you take a look at what they're doing with either paid advertising or SEO, what are some of the biggest mistakes that businesses are making right now that you're able to help them correct?

Irina Papuc: I'll speak to SEO here because I head up the SEO part of Galactic Fed, but I think that we've absolutely surpassed that age where it makes any sense to treat this like a hacker science. We're completely outside of that way of thinking at this point. I really like to liken SEO these days almost to being a lawyer. Our job as SEOs these days is to take Google's canon, which is published on the Internet. You can find their best practices clearly stated in sites like the Google Webmaster Blog and other resources published by Google. And really our job as an SEO person is to really stay on top of algorithm updates, stay on top of best practice recommendations, and advise your clients on what those best practices are. And one of the biggest things we have to do is educate. Don't keep it a black box. This is, I think, a mistake. A lot of agencies do. They keep their services a kind of a mystery, like a black box. But really, it's not about that. It's about taking the knowledge you have as your client's SEO lawyer and building documentation and just giving that knowledge away for free. Like give that knowledge away for free. Help educate your clients on best practices. Because it takes more than just an agency or a couple of agencies working with a client to bring SEO results. You really have to have the engineers on the team, and I'm talking about the client's team. You got to have the engineers, the writers, the PR people on their team. Everybody plays a hand in SEO best practices. So, it's in everybody's best interest to keep things lines of communication open and help keep everybody up to date on what those Google best practices are.

Matt Bowles: All right, I also want to ask you to putting on your business owner entrepreneur hat. I want to ask you from your perspective, how did you and Zach scale this company from a brand-new startup that the two of you founded to almost 100 staff people in under three years. I want to ask you if you can talk about the actual scaling process at that speed, and then also any managerial tips you have for running a completely distributed, remote team.

Irina Papuc: Definitely. All right, well, let's start with the second question that's a little bit easier to answer. So, managerial tips? Yeah, I mean, thankfully, you know, Galactic Fed, we've been fully remote even before it was cool, right before COVID hit. We've been remote from day one, largely because Zach and I were

really inspired from our time at Toptal, which is also a fully remote company. We were able to learn firsthand what it's like to be in that kind of environment, which we found to be really thrilling. And now that remote team management is becoming increasingly mainstream, it's pretty clear that this is here to stay. It ain't going anywhere now. So, it is really crucial that executives learn to lead and inspire a team virtually. A couple tips I have are. And some of these really mirror what it's like to manage a team face to face. But the first tip I have is to learn to let go of the reins and trust your team. There's really no way around this. And something I've learned, especially along my journey, is learning how to relinquish control, learn to trust the expertise of my team. Because really, at the end of the day, there's nothing more motivating to your team than knowing that you trust them to be do their job well. This is the greatest motivator of all. This is what we've seen time and again. Something else we've noticed as we've scaled up our team is it's pretty easy when you have a team of five people to wear a lot of hats and step in and the different parts of the process. But as you scale that from 5 to 10 to 20 to 50, you know, 50 plus people, it's pretty easy to become the bottleneck of your own company. So, my tip is do not become the bottleneck of your own company. Make recruiting a priority. Don't just make it a priority, but make recruiting top people your priority. There's absolutely nothing more worthwhile investing in than investing in the best people you can find. And hire enough people around you so that you have the means to then spend that time making smart decisions quickly. And I would say that has been a huge part of our success. You asked me how did we scale in less than three years to such a big company, and it really came down to building a team around us that helps us make those smart decisions quickly. That was key. We've invested, we could have taken more of our profits with us, but we decided to reinvest it time and again into our brand, into growing it, into cultivating a team of the best people we can find. And we find that now as we scale up and we have more projects, that's paying back in dividends, if that makes sense. Okay, this is not so much related to remote team management, but something I've definitely learned having run the company for a couple years. Make sure that the problem you're solving is one that you truly care about. You know, when you jump into a venture, you're not really just jumping into a job. You're really committing to a lifestyle that's going to be yours for years to come. So, I found it absolutely crucial that I care deeply about the problem I'm working to solve. And, you know, day to day in Galactic Fed, I get a ton of satisfaction from helping empowering brands that are doing good. Like lately we're starting to work with more and more nonprofits, for example, so it's really refreshing to sort of work with companies that are doing good and helping them grow. And also, marketing, kind of like podcasting, marketing is a very eclectic space, so we meet a lot of really interesting people from all walks of life there. So, it's really never a dull moment.

Matt Bowles: That's awesome advice. I want to ask you one more question before we move into *The Lightning Round*. Irina and I want to ask you about your personal productivity techniques and how you structure your day. Do you have morning routines? Do you have evening routines? What's your optimal day structure or week structure for being as productive and getting as much output as you do on the business side?

Irina Papuc: Before the pandemic hit, I was a semi-nomad. I find that I personally work best when I have a change of scenery every couple week. So, I would spend part of my time here in my home in Chicago, part of the time traveling. I would rotate usually every few weeks on this, so average, I would end up spending half the year traveling, half the year at home. Now, granted, with COVID happening, this has forced us to rethink our lifestyles and our routines a bit. So, I'd say for the past year or so, my routine has been pretty standard. I like to spread my work across all seven days. I actually prefer that. So, my days are largely the same every day, but I also have less work than on any given day. I typically start the morning with some

meditation, some mindfulness. I keep a journal that I've been journaling in for most of my life, I have this habit, so I like to journal and gather my thoughts in the morning as a way to sort of collect my mood. I have been caffeine free now for maybe five years, so I typically don't take any coffee in the morning. Little known fact, I actually have ulcerative colitis. So, you might be familiar with this, the autoimmune disorder. So, for me, managing stress has really been an issue of health. Like ulcerative colitis is heavily stress caused. So, over the years I've had to find ways of like shaping my diet, shaping my lifestyle in such a way that I can manage this disease. And one of the biggest factors for me, especially in the last couple months, has been cooking. I've been taking up a lot more cooking in general and I've come across this AIP diet. I don't know if you've heard of it, autoimmune protocol diet, but it's basically something I've been trying out now for a year and I found it to be really healthy. For me, it's basically focusing on removing like restricting certain vegetables or certain types of food that are known to cause inflammation. So, I've been removing those from my diet and just generally eating more lean proteins and veggies. But yeah, in terms of like productivity routines, I start in the morning with my mindfulness meditation, journaling time. I don't like to sit for long stretches of time, so you'll find me getting up every half an hour or so. I like to do some push-ups, some sit ups, some squats. So, I try to do that throughout the day actually. And it's a habit I actually picked up from. I think it was Kurt Vonnegut, the famous writer. I think he also liked to split up his day by like doing push-ups or sit ups every hour. So, I thought that was cool. And then I like to take walks. So, every day I will go for a long walk, usually in the afternoon. And I do some of my best thinking there. So yeah, that's kind of how I like to structure my time.

Matt Bowles: That's awesome. All right, Irina, at this point, are you ready to move in to *The Lightning Round*?

Irina Papuc: Boom. Let's do it, Matt.

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

Irina Papuc: Free PR. So, this is 100% a business book recommendation. I thought it was helpful. Free PR, an amazing book that covers like a playbook for how to get the most out of your PR. When you're running a business, I found it extremely helpful.

Matt Bowles: What is one travel hack that you use that you can recommend to people?

Irina Papuc: Always put your precious items in your carry on and keep all your toiletries and keep an extra fresh T-shirt in there for when you land.

Matt Bowles: Awesome. Who is one person currently alive today that you've never met that you would most love to have dinner with? Just a one-on-one evening you and that person?

Irina Papuc: Salman Rushdie. I'm a big literature buff and I absolutely love his works. I would love to have dinner with him though. He probably would think I'm a bit of a boring dinner guest, but I'd love to hear him talk.

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

Irina Papuc: Don't work so much and don't be so serious. I think I was way more serious back then than I have been now. Like live a little.

Matt Bowles: Awesome. Okay, of all of the places that you've traveled 40 plus countries and many places within those countries, what are your top three favorite travel destinations of all time?

Irina Papuc: All right, first one, Himalaya region in Nepal, Kyrgyzstan and India. Basically, the beautiful mountain areas.

Matt Bowles: Nice. All right, what are your top three bucket list destinations, places you've never been that are the highest on your list you most want to go?

Irina Papuc: All right, at the top, definitely Papua New Guinea and then basically all of the Pacific. I would love to see Kiribati and Vanuatu.

Matt Bowles: Awesome. All right, Irina, I want you to let folks know how they can find you, follow you on social media, contact you and learn more about Galactic Fed. And maybe you can even say who would be sort of the ideal customer for Galactic Fed, what type of business would be an ideal customer for you? In case anybody's listening that would be interested in your services.

Irina Papuc: Totally. Well, first of all, please, if you're listening to this, do not be a stranger. I do not bite. Even though I am from Transylvania, you can find me on LinkedIn. Just search for me there. *Irina Papuc*, please add me. I will be more than happy to chat with you and you can also email me at irina@galacticfed.com. In terms of working together, I mean we've worked with a variety of different brands from early-stage baby tech startups that are about to secure their series a to Fortune 100 companies, Fortune 500 companies like Shell. So, I would say yeah, we're open to any type of company that is interested in an agency that has scrappy startup experience because that brings a whole new type of marketing that you don't usually see at the corporate level and we find that fits really well in a fast-paced hyper growth type of company.

Matt Bowles: Amazing. All right, we are going to link all of that up in the show notes folks, so you can just go to one place at TheMaverickShow.com we're going to have Irina's LinkedIn handle there. We're going to have her email address; we're going to have the website for Galactic Fed. All the stuff on how to contact her as well as everything else that we talked about in this episode, including all of the cool places that she has traveled that we discussed. All that stuff is going to be in one place. Just go to TheMaverickShow.com show notes for this episode will all be listed out there. Irina, I want to thank you so much for being on the show today. This was a blast.

Irina Papuc: Matthew, this was absolutely awesome. Thank you so much for having me on the show.

Matt Bowles: Good night, everybody.