

Matt Bowles: My guest today is Yulia Denisyuk. She is an award-winning travel journalist, photographer, writer, and budding filmmaker whose work has appeared in The New York Times, National Geographic, Time, Conde Nast Traveler, BBC Travel and Lonely Planet. She specializes in people-centric storytelling and has spoken around the world and led master classes on travel storytelling for various brands and organizations, including National Geographic. She is also the host of the podcast [Going Places](#) and the founder of [Nomad and Jules](#), a boutique travel company that organizes small group tours to places that are often misunderstood in the world. Yulia is also the founder of [Travel Media Lab](#), a storytelling and educational platform for individuals interested in getting started in travel journalism, and brands looking to advance their storytelling. Most recently, Yulia authored the [Travel Industry for Palestine Petition](#) and has been organizing people, communities, businesses, and content creators across the travel industry to stand together against the genocide in Palestine and call for a permanent ceasefire. Born in Kazakhstan and raised in Estonia, she got her MBA in the United States and has now traveled to over 100 countries.

Yulia, welcome to the show.

Yulia Denisyuk: Thank you so much, Matt. Wow. What an introduction.

Matt Bowles: Well, you deserve an incredible introduction. You have been inspiring me so much lately. We actually connected initially because I saw the [Travel Industry for Palestine Petition](#). I read it; I signed it immediately. And then I said, I need to figure out who authored this and find them. And so, I actually sought you out based on that and have subsequently been diving through your articles and your podcasts and all of the incredible things that you're up to. And I have been so inspired, and I am so excited to have you on the show.

But before we dive into all of that, Yulia, let's just set the scene and talk about where we are recording from today. Unfortunately, we are not in person, but we have agreed to make this a virtual wine night. So, let's also talk about what we are drinking. I am actually in the Blue Ridge mountains of Asheville, North Carolina today. And I have just opened a bottle of Côtes du Rhône from France, so I'm going to be drinking through that during the interview. But where are you tonight, Yulia, and what are you drinking?

Yulia Denisyuk: I'm drinking a Pet-Nat from California, I've been on my Pet-Nat streak for the past, I guess, year and a half. I started that streak at the end of the pandemic and haven't gotten off of it yet. I really enjoy Pet-Nat, and yeah, this is a Californian wine. And I'm recording in Chicago, this is where I'm based.

Matt Bowles: Well, I was born in Chicago, Yulia, so we should probably start with that part of the story. Yes, Northwest suburbs, Arlington Heights, those are the roots. I have not lived there for a long time. I actually moved out when I was about two years old, but that's the roots, Yulia. That's where it all began.

Yulia Denisyuk: We're only three degrees or however many degrees away from each other, right? Because I used to live close to Arlington Heights, actually. So, what do you know?

Matt Bowles: Well, I go back to Chicago as frequently as I can. I was just out in Chicago about a month ago, and I tend to go through it frequently because it is one of my favorite cities, and I know you love it as well. So that's a great piece of background. But I want to start this interview with your backstory, Yulia, and where you grew up. And I think even before you talk about where you grew up, can you share a little bit about your parents' background and culture and where they are from and then where you were born and where you grew up?

Yulia Denisyuk: Sure. So, I'm a Soviet Union kid, I was born in the 80s, about a decade before the Soviet Union fell apart. And in that time, well, most of Soviet Union's history, people really moved around a lot through this huge union, right? That represented many different republics, many different nationalities, and many different ethnic groups. I was born in Kazakhstan, but my mom, she actually comes from central Russia. So, there are these mountains called the Ural Mountains, and they separate Russia into two parts, into the European parts and into the Asian part. So, if you imagine this kind of mountain that divides the country into two, that region is where my mom was from.

And she's actually a Chuvash by ethnicity and Chuvash is one of many different ethnicities that comprise modern Russia, I would say. That's one of the things that's not very well known for people, I think, that when you think of Russia, current situations all aside, people think of Russia as this, you know, a place for Russian people. But actually, inside Russia, there are many, many, many different nationalities and ethnic groups, and not all of them are Slavic by nature. So, Chuvash is actually a Turkic ethnicity. Their language and their beliefs and their customs are more closely related to Turkic groups than Slavic groups.

So, you know, it's, it's a very interesting conversation that's maybe a topic for a whole episode really, cause there's a lot there, but that's my mom. And then my dad, he was partly Russian, partly Jewish, partly Ukrainian. And I say that because we don't actually know that much about him because they divorced when I was very little, and we lost touch with him. So, we know some things, but we don't know that much. Oh yeah. So that was me, my mom and dad. And then the family moved to Kazakhstan in the sixties and seventies and that's where I was born.

Matt Bowles: Can you share a little bit about your childhood? And where you grew up? And what that was like for you? And particularly, thinking back about where some of these interests that you have now, like photography and travel, and as you were coming up, where did some of this come from?

Yulia Denisyuk: We have this expression in Russian, you look straight into the roots of things because that is really my origin story and how it ties to where I'm at today, really. So that's an excellent question because ever since I was little, so I was born in Kazakhstan, but when I was three, we moved to Estonia because my dad, he was part of the Soviet military. So, he got moved to Estonia as part of his army service, and that's how we ended up in Estonia. And even in that time, Estonia was part of the Baltic region, which was very close to the West in thinking, in culture, in the way people lived. And then Kazakhstan was Central Asia, a very different environment, you know, close to China, close to Mongolia and those parts of the world. And so, from an early age, I always felt like I'm traveling two different worlds.

In Estonia, I was this weird kid from Kazakhstan who wasn't born in Estonia but lived there. And then when I would come back to Kazakhstan, because we still had family there, I was this weird kid from Baltics who is very Westernized now. So, from an early age, I had this kind of understanding of how different places are and how different cultures are and really feel like an outsider, but also an insider, somebody who can blend into multiple cultures and things like that.

And I traveled since an early age, you know. My first flight was when I was five years old, for example, I used to take these long train journeys from Moscow to Kazakhstan. They would take five days long and it's me and my grandma. And I'm looking out the window for days on end and looking at the mountains and looking at the steps and looking at the camels and looking out there in the distance. And this idea of kind of moving between places and becoming familiar with places everywhere I go, that was something that was part of my childhood. So, it felt very natural to me.

Matt Bowles: Yeah. The trains in Russia are pretty enormous and remarkable in terms of how far you can go. I did the Trans-Siberian Railway in 2019 and the route that I did was Moscow to Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia, so it was the Trans Mongolian route, but it was unbelievable. First of all, just how enormous Russia is. I mean, I think it spans like eight time zones or something incredible like that.

And then also to your point, how really interesting and diverse it is. I can remember going, for example, to Kazan in the semi-autonomous Islamic Republic of Tatarstan, which is right on the Trans-Siberian route, and then going through Novosibirsk, going out to Irkutsk and Lake Baikal. And in each of these places, you just have really different types of communities. And then of course, going down, obviously over the border into Mongolia, where I know you have been as well is just really a spectacular memory that I had. But it was remarkable. And you just really understand, I think the size, I mean, of Russia, it's just unbelievable how huge it is.

Yulia Denisyuk: Yes. And I'm glad that you actually took that journey and ventured outside of the big cities in Russia because Moscow is not Russia and Russia is not Moscow. Moscow is its whole kind of beast, its own beast, but going outside of Moscow and really going into those small towns, villages, the trains, seeing how ordinary people live, that's the experience of Russia today. And for me, the last time I was there was in 2016 or 17, I think.

And I went back to the place where my grandma used to live, where my mom was from very small villages and towns there. And to be honest, I was just shocked at how little things have changed since the eighties and the nineties, since the things that I remember, you know. In those small towns, things haven't really changed that much, but for anyone visiting another country, it's important to see that.

Matt Bowles: Well, I also want to ask about your move to the United States. Can you talk about how old you were and the context for that? And then talk a little bit about that cultural transition and what that experience was like for you.

Yulia Denisyuk: Yes. So, I moved, well, I should preface that with, and mom, I'm sorry that I'm telling this story. In Estonia, we were quite poor, you know, growing up, for example, you asked me earlier about how life was like back then. And we lived in what was known as Kamunalka, have you ever heard that word; Kamunalka?

Matt Bowles: No.

Yulia Denisyuk: The Kamunalka is a holdover from Soviet times, it's basically a communal living. So, several families live in one apartment and share a bathroom, sharing a kitchen. So that was our living situation. That's how I grew up for 15 or however many years I spent in Estonia. So, we shared an apartment with one other neighbor, let's say. And we had no hot water, for example, if I wanted to bathe, I needed to put water on the stove, that's how I bathed. So, stuff like that.

So, we were quite poor in Estonia, and it was just me and my mom. My mom worked three jobs trying to support us. And so, she actually went to the United States in 1998 to make some money and improve our situation. Back then in the late nineties, there was a huge wave of immigration to America from the Eastern bloc. I don't know if you remember that, but on our side of the world, that was all everybody could think and talk about was moving to America. Because we all somehow thought, and I don't know if it's movies or what was the source of that, but we all thought that in America, once you set foot here, money grows on trees, honestly that's what we thought.

But anyway, so my mom went, and I stayed in Estonia for two years, and then eventually I joined. I came to the States as well, and I was only supposed to be here for a couple of months, just to see her and go back home. But she decided for both of us that it's better if I stay and if we both stay. And so, I stayed because at that point I was 16 years old. I had no say in what happened, she made the decision.

And at that time, it was really difficult for me to be honest. I did not want to stay in America. I had all my life and my friends, which at 16 years old, your friends are your life. And they were all back there in Estonia and I left, and it was quite difficult for me. And I came to Miami, which coming from Estonia to Miami was a huge culture shock because Miami at the time was all party, it was quite insane. And the culture shock was huge for me.

Matt Bowles: Can you talk a little bit then about your journey in the United States as a teenager and then coming into adulthood and then ultimately your decision to join the United States military?

Yulia Denisyuk: Coming of age in America now in hindsight I think was one of the best things that has happened to me because even though I really had a huge culture shock in America, I missed Estonia so much. When I came to the States and had all the experiences that I had here, you know, going to the military, going to college, getting an MBA. Going to corporate and now becoming a travel journalist, it just has expanded my world and my life so much that I often think about, had I stayed in Estonia, I don't know if I would be doing the same things I'm doing right now. I don't know if I would have seen over a hundred countries. I don't know if I've done some of the projects I've done.

For as much as I see so many problems with America, and we can get into those as well, maybe, but as much as I see all those challenges, I'm also very grateful because I do think that coming here has expanded my world just so much. So, I decided to join the military when I was 21 years old and really at that time, my goal was to get into international affairs. I really wanted to be in the sphere where I'm working with different governments of the world and working on diplomatic missions and issues, that was my goal.

But somehow or other, a recruiter from the Navy got a hold of me and he was telling me, well, why do you want to work with governments around the world? The Navy is the best way to do that. So why don't you come and join us? And in hindsight, knowing what I know now, of course, is not the best way. You know, instead I should have gone to university and gotten like an international affairs degree or something. But anyway, he convinced me. So long story short, couple of months off to that, I joined the military and almost immediately got shipped to Afghanistan as a result.

Matt Bowles: Can you talk about that? I would love to hear about your experience. First of all, I know that you actually trained with the Navy Seals at the beginning of your journey. And then you did tours in both Iraq and Afghanistan, can you talk about what that experience was like? And also, what your reflections were and what you learned through that experience and how that informed your current perspective on U.S. foreign policy and what the U.S. government is doing in those regions.

Yulia Denisyuk: So, being in the Navy was extremely hard for me. Almost immediately after I joined, I realized what a mistake I had made because here I am, standing in a boot camp entrance facility where they're processing all the new recruits, and people are yelling at us, screaming at us, telling us to undress, and taking all our stuff. They're really taking us through a process that is meant to disorient you and make you forget everything you knew before, starting afresh with this huge level of authority over you. As a recruit in the service, you don't own your life; the military owns your life.

For me, that was really difficult because I wanted to be in charge of my life. I wanted to do things that I wanted to do or go where I wanted to go. You know, I always had that kind of free spirit. So almost immediately, I realized what a mistake I had made. But when you sign the contract, you sign the contract. There is nothing you can do. And when I learned that we were going to be going to Afghanistan, that was extremely difficult for me, especially as somebody with my background from the Soviet Union.

Almost everyone in the Soviet Union knows somebody who lost somebody or was affected by the Soviet war in Afghanistan back in the '80s. To go and stay at a base where the Soviet army had been years before me and walk by a hangar on the way to work every day where something had happened at that time, it was extremely difficult for me. On top of that, I was not, and still I'm not, aligned with the policy of the US I did not want to be there. I did not believe in what the government was doing, but I was part of the service, and I got shipped there, and I was there.

So that was extremely difficult for me. At the same time, Afghanistan and the place where we were at, next to the Hindu Kush mountains, is heartbreakingly, hauntingly beautiful. The country of Afghanistan is so extremely beautiful. And to be there at that time, imagine I'm 21 years old, I have all these emotions and thoughts about being there. It was an extremely important experience for me because I was also very close to home where I was born; like Kazakhstan is just three countries away. I know this region; I know this land. But I'm here as part of the US military effort.

Like it messed with my head so much, and people always get surprised nowadays when they get to know me, and they know my stance on the US military-industrial complex. They get so surprised when they learn that I was part of it at some point, but at 21, I honestly didn't know any better when I joined; it kind of opened my eyes through that process.

Matt Bowles: Well, I want to talk about your journey from there, can you talk a little bit about post military service, the traditional career path that you initially started to go down before you pivoted?

Yulia Denisyuk: So that comes from being an immigrant, honestly, because as immigrants, we get so much pressure to succeed in the United States. Our parents' generation made such a sacrifice to come here. They left everything behind. They left the family behind. They left everything for us to succeed. And so, I felt that pressure. I know a lot of other immigrant friends of mine who have felt that pressure as well.

And so, we are expected to succeed in the most traditional sense of the word, a good job, a good salary, security, all of that. So that's the road I followed naturally after the military, because one of the things that the military has allowed me or has helped me to achieve is my education because I actually went to business school, graduate school through the military, through the GI Bill program, right? That was the path I followed, and I was very determined to succeed on that path.

And so, I started climbing that ladder pretty successfully, but all the while having this really annoying feeling inside my gut that this really all there is to life? Am I really meant to be sitting behind PowerPoint and this Excel all day and all night? Am I really meant to be working on this widget that I don't care about? At the time I was working on consumer goods and so I just started having this dissonance in my head that here I am succeeding. Here I am making the most money that anyone in my family has ever made, but all the same questioning, questioning, is this all there is to this?

Matt Bowles: So, you got the MBA, you were working for fortune 500 companies, brand manager, successful financially, and all of those types of things through those lenses. Can you talk then about your

transition from that path? And I think I want to ask you about the role of Morocco and your trip to Morocco in that transition, can you talk about that?

Yulia Denisyuk: Yes, that was about two or three years into my corporate career. And I just kept having those feelings becoming louder and louder. I tried traveling as much as I could in those times, but it was very difficult because, of course, only two weeks' vacation, standard corporate policy. So, it was really difficult. But at some point, I took this trip to Morocco, which I'd been dreaming about. I just really wanted to go to Morocco for the longest time.

And I went there with my friends. And that is when I think my obsession and my passion or my passionate love affair with deserts really began because we went to Merzouga Dunes, which, by the way, is not the Sahara. Everybody thinks when they go to Morocco that they go to the Sahara Desert. And they don't, it's a misconception because actually the Erg Chebbi and the Merzouga dunes, they're not part of the wider Sahara Desert. They're just kind of a separate moving dune that is there in Morocco. But anyway, at that time, we were determined to go to the Sahara. So, our tour guides took us to the dunes. And so we spent the night there, and I've never seen anything like that before. You know that huge dune that's there. Have you been there yourself?

Matt Bowles: So, I have been to Morocco a couple of times. I have actually not been into the desert. So, there's a number of places actually in Morocco that I haven't been to that are incredibly famous that a lot of people go. The other one is Chefchaouen, the blue city. I have not been there. I have spent probably about a month in Morocco. I have been twice, and I've spent time in Marrakesh, and I've been out to the coast, Agadir and Aswera and Tazout and I've been up to Casablanca and Tangier, and I've been to Fez. And so, I've done a number of things, but there's so much of Morocco that I feel like I have not yet done. And that is one of them.

Yulia Denisyuk: Well, it's an interesting conversation because like so many other places around the world, when they become popular, they become not only overrun with tourists, because that's one thing, but also become so, let's say, inauthentic almost, you know? Because communities there really try to offer you the product that they think you want. And a lot of us, we actually don't want that product. We want the real thing. We want to be with them as they are. And I think in the dunes, if you go to Morocco now, I think that's the experience you're going to get. You're going to get those luxury camps. You're going to get all those bells and whistles. You're not going to get the real thing.

Matt Bowles: It is really interesting. I do find that it is really sometimes jarring reality when you go to a place and the local folks realize that you have an impression of something, and they are going to sell you your impression of their place. Whether it's like people in the Middle East selling you an image of white Jesus or like, you know, I mean, it's just so circularly bizarre, but also disturbing. And then it really makes you think about like, what is actually going on here? There are all of these constructed impressions of this place. These people realize that that's who's coming there and that's their impression. And that's what they want to experience, is what they want to find, is what they want to see, is what they want to buy. And so the economy then is created for them to sell that back to you.

Yulia Denisyuk: Yeah, I've seen a number of places now trying to address that. I've seen a number of places that are developing tourism products rooted in the community and their everyday experiences, basically showing us their culture and everyday lives. But it's not easy. There needs to be a concerted

effort, community leaders who want to put those products together. Not everyone wants to do that; some just want to make money from tourism, and that's fine too.

They have every right to do that. Anyway, if you go to Morocco now and see the dunes, it's not going to be the experience you're probably imagining. But when I went there in 2015, it was powerful. I remember it vividly. It was a starry night, brilliant. At that time, I lived in Manhattan, so I hadn't seen a starry night in a long time. I was sitting on top of this dune and I just started crying. I had an emotional experience because I realized that the life I wanted, the life of adventure, seeing places, connecting to people, I wasn't living that in a Manhattan cubicle.

It was a breakthrough moment for me because I realized something needed to change. Otherwise, years would go by like this, and next thing you know, you're 10, 20 years down the line still in the same cubicle, maybe with a different title or salary, but still doing the same thing. So I really wanted to change something, and I did.

Matt Bowles: Can you share a little bit about the path that you then decided to go on and maybe give a little bit of background in terms of your historical interest in photography, experiencing other cultures, and writing stuff? How did that choice of direction come in to play? And then, what was the initial transition like for you in those early entrepreneurial days?

Yulia Denisjuk: I've always taken photos. I've always written stories ever since I was little. I remember I had this little notebook where I was writing stories. My first camera I got when I was 10 years old. So I've always loved that, but I never saw anyone doing this professionally in my life. I had no idea that could even be a possibility. You know, of course I, like everyone else, read National Geographic and imagine that maybe someday something can happen, but really it felt like such a far-fetched dream.

The first several years were extremely difficult, to be honest, because I didn't know anybody in the travel media industry, in the travel industry. I tried so many things that didn't make any sense or didn't work because it was just a lot of trial and error. A lot of reaching out to editors, a lot of kind of knocking on doors that would not open, a lot of things like that. So, everything I did was very kind of trial and error based, but I was persistent.

I didn't want to give up. And I think that's really the biggest thing, because a lot of times I see people try something a few times and it doesn't work. And they give up and they, you know, maybe pivot and do something else. For me, I was dogged in my determination to make this work because I've been on the other side. I've been too corporate. I knew that I didn't want that life anymore. So, I was very determined to make it work. People often ask me what's the key or what's the trick or what's the secret? And I think the secret to anything you do is really determination and not giving up too soon. I think that's really it.

Matt Bowles: A hundred percent. Agreed. I mean, I have the same type of story in my entrepreneurial journey because I as well pivoted, got fired from my job at age 30 and decided to go in a totally different direction and build a location independent business with no business background and then do it in a way that's fully remote so that I can start traveling the world and all this kind of stuff. And the learning curve was unbelievably steep. I had no background in any of those things.

I had to just figure it out from scratch, how to do it. I started driving to the bookstore and reading books on how to build a business. Cause I had no idea how to build a business and started learning it step by step.

And then you try a whole bunch of stuff and none of it works. And then you're like, 'Oh, maybe just other people do this, but I can't do it right.

And then you start questioning that and then so forth. Yeah. There's an enormous amount of stuff not working. And there's a huge amount of time and effort that goes into trying things that don't work. And then it's really, I find, just about your total dedication to figuring out problem-solving and trying enough things and enough different things until you figure out a path that will work for you and that can make you work. And that perseverance and that resilience, I think, is such a core piece of entrepreneurship.

Yulia Denisyuk: It is absolutely. And I would also add to that, figuring out how to sustain yourself financially while you're doing all that, right? Because I mean, for me, the first few years were really rough. And even today, to be honest, this industry is not the most lucrative industry. And at least I would say for the travel journalists in the mix, the travel content creators, whole other story, right?

We don't need to get into that so much, but for travel journalists, for people who write for publications, I mean, that industry has been bleeding for many years now. And the rates have gone down so much. So that's, yeah, it's a tough one to be in. That's why a lot of us, we're doing so many different things. You know, we're teaching, we're doing content, we're doing strategy, we're doing workshops. If we really want to stay in this industry, I believe you want to be a jack of all trades kind of person, because yeah, it's really hard to make a living just writing articles for publications because they don't pay that much.

Matt Bowles: Well, I want to talk about some of your travel experiences and the experiences that you have written about and documented. The first place that I think I want to ask you about where I went for the very first time, uh, a little over a year ago is Rwanda. Can you share a little bit about what your experience was like in Rwanda?

Yulia Denisyuk: So, Rwanda was really interesting for me because in that year, it was 2019, I went to three places in a row that had genocide in their history. I went to Cambodia, I went to Guatemala, and I went to Rwanda. Out of those three places, Rwanda was the place that really shook me to my core because I saw a place where people were able to move on from their traumas. I spent a lot of time talking to everyone I met and trying to figure out how they did that because both in Cambodia and in Guatemala, I saw places still being haunted by that, especially in Cambodia.

I don't know how much your listeners are aware of recent history there, but to this day, some of the people in the government in Cambodia are the very same people who committed atrocities during the Khmer Rouge regime. I remember so clearly the guides that we had in Cambodia. I was speaking to him on a bus, and I was asking him some questions, and he's like, Julia, we cannot be talking about this. He was so scared sitting in this bus with me.

He was so scared to talk about some of those things because of the government and how it might be listening. I just saw a lot of those traumas and scars in those places. And when I went to Rwanda, sure, the history was there, sure, the traumas were there, but I also saw people really moving on and being at peace somehow with the history, which was so interesting to see.

Matt Bowles: That is interesting. Yeah, I went to the Genocide Memorial and the Genocide Museum. It was unbelievably powerful. I mean for folks that haven't been, the Genocide Museum is also part of a memorial which is a mass grave for 250,000 people, and when you read about the history of that, it was incredibly

powerful. I spent time. That was the main reason I wanted to go to Kigali as well, was really to just learn about that there and stuff.

And it was an incredibly powerful experience, but I know you are also connected with artist collectives. I mean, one of the other things that I noticed about Kigali when I was there is that the art gallery culture was really remarkable. I was going out to these galleries, and it was like really quite something that really stood out to me. I mean, there's a lot of amazing things about Rwanda, but the art was one of them. Can you talk a little bit about the artist collectives that you got to spend time with and what you learned from them?

Yulia Denisyuk: Yeah, I agree. Kigali is an incredible city, you know, very vibrant, very fresh and green and beautiful. Folks have any chance to spend some time there, they should take that chance. But a lot of my work focuses on stories of artisans and stories of people working on crafts and working on interesting cultural traditions that they have. So, when I was in Rwanda, the collectives that I connected with were actually a women's Imigongo collective.

So Imigongo is a tradition in Rwanda of making art from cow dung. And it is one of the most interesting and beautiful things actually that I've ever seen. So, it comes from the 18th century, a royal tradition in Rwanda, actually, where there are these royal cows that the Kings in Rwanda used to own. The legend goes that one of the Kings there, he used the dung from his royal cows to decorate the insides of his dwellings. And so that's kind of how the tradition was born. But I spent some time with these Imigongo collectives, and I learned the process of making art because there's some intricacies that go into it, you know, mixing it with certain chemicals to eliminate the smell and the bacteria.

And then turning that into almost like a clay-like substance, and then you create these almost like 3D sculptural art pieces from it, and then you paint them, and the end result is absolutely stunning. I have a couple of them in my home here. They're very beautiful geometrical pieces of art, and so it was just incredible for me to see that, and of course, the genocide has to come touch that story as well because during the genocide, that tradition was nearly gone, you know, because people weren't paying attention to that.

They needed to survive, but there was a collective of women that organized outside of Kigali and started working on reviving that tradition and bringing it back. And they're quite a thriving collective today. And they supply their art to a lot of different stores in Kigali as well.

Matt Bowles: Well, the continent of Africa is one of my favorite places on the planet. I've probably spent a total of about two and a half years on the continent, but you have been to some countries that I have not been to that I want to ask you about. Can we start with Sierra Leone? Can you talk about your experience there? I know you wrote a piece for Condé Nast about Sierra Leone. Can you share a little bit about what Sierra Leone was like for you?

Yulia Denisyuk: So, you mentioned at the beginning of our conversation that I work on people-centric storytelling. So, people-centric storytelling is a phrase I came up with, and it really encapsulates the way I travel. Everywhere I go, I really want to just connect with people because I think that's what makes travel so special. It's connecting with people who might be so different from you, but yet have such similar experiences. And you just see that at the end of the day, we're all the same and we all want the same things. And I find that so incredibly powerful.

But in Sierra Leone, first of all, it's a beautiful country. It has extremely diverse and beautiful landscapes. It has miles and miles of coastline. Some of the most beautiful beaches I've ever seen are in Sierra Leone, beautiful Atlantic waters. It has incredible wildlife. And it also has a very difficult history because to most of the outside world right now, Sierra Leone is known for its civil war in the nineties. It's known for Ebola because that's where the Ebola outbreak happened in 2015, I believe. And it's known for just economic hardships. And most of the people, especially outside of Freetown, which is the capital, they live very humbly. They do not have much at all, but the people are incredible.

So again, the people that I connected with in Sierra Leone, they went through unimaginable things. The country carries the scars of the war on the shoulder. You see mutilated people. You see people, everybody lost somebody in the war in Sierra Leone, our guide. In Sierra Leone told us just absolutely insane stories. He was a child soldier in the war. He told us stories about how it gets really hot in Sierra Leone in the summer. And so, he was forced to crawl on the pavements, and it was like burning his hands and burning his knees. And if he refused to do that, they would shoot basically. So, there was a lot of kind of psychological trauma and just crazy things happening there.

But at the same time, I've never met a guy more peaceful and more good-hearted and more welcoming than Peter, the guy in Sierra Leone. It just reminds you how resilient and how beautiful the human spirit is.

Matt Bowles: Well, one of the other places that I want to ask you about that I have not yet been in Botswana. I have been on safaris in Kenya, in Tanzania, and I have had people tell me, you must go to Botswana because it's just different. It's just on a different level. And I know you were out in the bush with an all-female guiding crew and you wrote about it. Can you share a little bit about that experience in Botswana?

Yulia Denisjuk: I would agree with your friends who told you that Botswana is different because it is. I've also been on safari in Rwanda and in a few other places. And I don't know, honestly, what it is about Botswana. But as soon as you land, you feel like you're in a very special place with a very special energy. I believe in things like that. I feel like I can read energy pretty well and certain places just hit me in a certain way. And Botswana is one such place. It was so hard for me because I really wanted to stay in that bush. I did not want to leave.

While I was there, I was trying to figure out a way. Okay, what do I need to do to stay? Stay here for the rest of my life because this is just incredible. And what is incredible about it is the feeling you get while you're out there in the bush. You're so close to the animals. You are in this incredible landscape of beautiful golden light, incense, smell of sage, of wild African sage. There is nothing like wild African sage out there. And again, the people are just so free and so happy and of course, they all have their stresses, they all have their problems like everyone else, but there's just some energy about them.

And I think that comes from being close to nature and being close to that bush and really not sitting in these cubicles in these long high rises the way that a lot of us do. I see parallels of that in a lot of places I go to. For example, one of my favorite places in the world is Wadi Rum in Jordan. And the Bedouin communities that live there, I see the same thing in them. They also get stressed. They also have problems just like the rest of us do, but there is some kind of internal energy about them that I think comes from the fact that they live in this majestic natural setting that a lot of us have lost.

Matt Bowles: I know that you have a very special relationship with Jordan, and it has a very special place in your heart, and I want to go into that. Can you share a little bit about how your love for the Middle East region, and Jordan in particular, developed and maybe start with your very first trip to Jordan in 2017 and go from there?

Yulia Denisyuk: So, I've wanted to come to Jordan, honestly, because of Instagram. You know, because at that time, there was this very popular image of Petra floating around on Instagram. And I didn't know much about Jordan, but I just saw those images, and I was like, how do I get there? I really wanted to see it. So that was the reason why I went to Jordan in the first place because I wanted to see that beautiful photo of Petra. But when I came there, I quickly realized that first of all, Petra is not Jordan.

Again, you know, it's just one representation, an incredible site by all means, an incredible site there's so much outside of that happening in Jordan as well. And I always encourage everyone to dedicate more time to places outside Petra in Jordan because a lot of people just come to spend time in Petra, and that's it. But there's a lot more to see there than that. I also fell in love in Jordan, both with the country, but also with the person. And that, I think, helped me develop a really strong relationship with the place. You know, I started coming back to Jordan a lot.

I started building a community there. I developed friendships and became just really intimate with the country and the people and the culture and the situation in which they live. Because some people maybe don't realize that actually a third of Jordanians are Palestinians and of Palestinian descent, because these are the people that came during the 1948 Nagba event and had families there and built a life there. But so, when you talk about Jordan, you cannot not talk about Palestine as well because those are very related.

Matt Bowles: One of the things that you wrote about Jordan—you've written a lot about Jordan. One of the things you wrote was, That you found overwhelming kindness and fierce hospitality that was akin to balm on my weary traveler's heart. And I thought that was so lovely and such a wonderful way to put that for people who have never been to Jordan. Can you make some recommendations? Other than Petra, what would you put people on to, and maybe some people, a lot of people who listen to this podcast are digital nomads, people can go and stay for an extended period of time in places. And so, what would you put people on to and share with folks about Jordan?

Yulia Denisyuk: First of all, stay in Amman. People really ignore Amman. Amman is the capital, you know, people use it to come and go from Jordan, but then they really go outside. I would encourage people to spend some time in the capital. It's an incredible city. There's so much happening there, culture-wise, music-wise, literature-wise, just a lot of really interesting events, a lot of really interesting discussions, communities growing in Amman.

When I go to Amman, I stay in this neighborhood called Waibdeh. It's kind of this hipster neighborhood where a lot of artists and also expats live. A lot of art galleries, and nice coffee shops. Just a really beautiful neighborhood.

And then I would also encourage people to go and stay in Wadi Rum for at least a couple of days. So Wadi Rum is the desert in Southern Jordan. It's one of the most beautiful deserts I've ever seen because not only it has the sand, like any other desert wood and dunes and all of that, but it also has these beautiful granite mountains that are rising from the sand, and you can see Wadi Rum multiple times because

it's actually a setting to a number of blockbuster movies. Most recent one is Dune. Of course, Dune is shot mostly in Wadi Rum.

Also, Star Wars. The Martian was also shot there and a number of other movies. But so that sort of crazy Martian landscape with red sand and granite mountain, that is Wadi Rum. And that is a place where I specifically go to get some stillness and to get some silence and to disconnect from the world and also to connect with my Bedouin friends. Because again, for me, I really crave that connection to nature and a return to a lifestyle that I think a lot of us have lost in the western world.

Matt Bowles: We mentioned how many Palestinians are living in Jordan, and I was listening to [one of your podcast episodes](#) where you had convened this sort of a round table discussion among artists that are based in Amman, some of which were Palestinian. Can you share a little bit about who those folks were and share a little bit about your reflections on that discussion, because I thought it was incredibly powerful?

Yulia Denisyuk: Thank you, Matt. I appreciate it. For me, it was actually quite hard. I was very nervous. I will tell you; I was very nervous to host that discussion because it happened literally days after October 7th, and I didn't want it to be a discussion where they had to do a lot of emotional work of educating the rest of us on the issue of Palestine. Like I did not want that to happen. You know, I wanted it to be a forum where they could share their emotions, which were very raw at the time.

But as a podcast host, I'm sure you can relate to that challenging situation to be in. I'm just so glad that you pointed it out and that you said it was powerful in discussion because yeah, it was a new experience for me to do that, to host that. But I had three incredible Ammani artists on. I had Rawan Roshni, who is a Palestinian musician based in Amman, and she's actually the author of the song that we use for the whole season of the podcast, which is dedicated to Jordan. And it's a really lovely song called *Abar El Shams*. We also had Sara Shabbar, who is a journalist based in Amman.

She's actually a returnee from the United States. She grew up in the States and then she, several years ago, moved back to Amman to really build a life there. And by the way, this is something I see a lot of immigrants are doing nowadays. They're returning back to their homelands because, well, multiple reasons, but one of them is that a lot of them feel that the lifestyle in the States is just not tenable anymore, you know, but again, that's a whole other discussion. And then we also had Hussein Al Azad, who is a calligrapher, a designer, a renowned artist in Jordan.

He actually designed the new dinars, the new currency, that Jordan just came out with a new currency, and he was the one who designed all the designs of it. And he has a studio in Weibdeh in that neighborhood that I often stay at called El Harf. And I recommend anyone who's ever in Amman to stop by his studio because it's such a treasure trove of Arabic culture, history, interesting books, comics, posters from the 70s, from the 60s and 50s. Like he literally goes through all the thrift shops in the Middle East region and looks for these comics and posters and whatnot. And it's just such a beautiful time to spend in his space that I really recommend it to anyone. And it's called El Harf Studio.

Matt Bowles: We are going to link up that specific podcast episode in the show notes. I want to encourage folks to go and listen to that. We'll obviously link up your podcast in general, but I'm going to put a specific link to that episode so that people can find it and go listen to it.

All right. We're going to pause here and call that the Part One. Everything we have discussed in this episode will be linked up in [the show notes](#), so you can find all of it in one place. Just go to themaverickshow.com and go to the show notes for this episode. There you will find direct links to everything we have discussed in this episode and be sure to tune in to [the next episode](#) to hear the conclusion of my interview with Yulia Denisuk.

Good night, everybody.