

INTRO: This is part two of my interview with Yulia Denisyuk. If you have not yet listened to [part one](#), I highly recommend you go back and do that first because it provides some really important context for this episode. If you have already listened to [part one](#), then please enjoy the conclusion of my interview with Yulia Denisyuk.

Matt Bowles: I want to ask you, Yulia, if you can talk a little bit about your journey learning about Palestine and the Palestinian struggle, and how you came to the level of consciousness that you have about it today, and the informed activism that you're doing and everything else. Can you take us back and share a little bit about maybe your first trip to Palestine?

Yulia Denisyuk: I think that's one of the most powerful things we can really do. Travel is, I mean, going to these places, one of the most powerful things you can do. And that is one of the reasons why I still go on in the travel industry, even though I also feel like there's a lot of challenges with this industry as well. But fundamentally, I still believe in the power of travel to shape minds and to open perspectives.

I came to the West Bank for the first time without knowing much about what's happening there. Ages-old religious conflicts are what I knew from the headlines, really. But when I went to the West Bank and I saw this monstrous wall with my own eyes—this 30-foot tall wall, when I saw the checkpoints and soldiers with guns pointing at everyone, when I went through the checkpoints myself, when I got yelled at. I wasn't even Palestinian. I'm obviously a white girl looking like an American girl, and I got harassed as well and yelled at as well.

When I spoke to some of the folks that I met in the West Bank who told me some of their stories. Once you see that, it becomes so visceral that nothing that you read in the headlines can compare with that. When you have this literally personal experience of going to a place to see it, nothing can compare with that. I come from Jerusalem. So, I was in Jerusalem just hours before, which is a very nice city, very well maintained, very polished, very beautiful, especially the side that I went to. And then you go to Bethlehem, and you see broken sidewalks, you see half broken buildings, you see the checkpoints, you hear the yelling, and you're like, what is this nightmare? That's so close to Jerusalem, but it's a very different world.

I read a lot about Gaza as well and how that experience is like. I've never been to Gaza myself, but I read a lot of accounts of people visiting Gaza and it's the same thing, you know, once you see it with your own eyes, no headlines can ever compare to that. I really encourage people to try to go if they can. Of course, not everyone can go and see it with their own eyes. If you can't, get the next best thing, which is to talk to or hear from someone who has been there and who's seen it with their own eyes. Hear from Palestinians themselves. You know, it's very easy.

There are a lot of stories out there, a lot of resources. I mean, social media is a lit right now with all the accounts and stuff, but that was my first experience. I just went there as this naive traveler. I went there actually to see the opening of the walled-off hotel. Banksy opened the hotel facing the wall. And it was kind of this project, the political statement project that Banksy did in Bethlehem. I saw that, I saw the West Bank and I could never unsee it again.

And that's when I started educating myself. That's when I read about the works of Edward Said, who is a Palestinian philosopher and thinker. That's when I learned about Noam Chomsky and his work. That's when I learned about the Nakba, and I learned about the occupation and all of that. Like, that was just this whole new world for me, because I was not aware of any of that before.

Matt Bowles: It is so heartwarming to hear you say all of these things, Yulia, because so much of that resonates with me. The first time that I went to Palestine was in 1998, and Bibi Netanyahu was the prime minister of Israel then too.

Yulia Denisyuk: Really?

Matt Bowles: If you can believe that. And I got to go to the West Bank, and I got to go to the Gaza Strip, so I've been to both. And then I went back again, so I've been to both the West Bank and Gaza twice. And I think, to your point, I had an almost identical experience. Actually, the context in which I went was as part of a peace and conflict resolution semester program. And I knew virtually nothing about the conflict when I first went there. So, I was in college at the time, and I was studying sociology, and my advisor was native American.

And so, I had taken his native nations class, and I had studied the colonial processes over native nations, and I had that context. And then I had studied abroad in Ireland. And I am of Irish American descent. And so, while I was there, I was then studying the British colonial processes over the Irish. So, I had the context of the British colonial processes over the Irish, and then the European colonial processes over native nations.

And then I went to Palestine, and I was like, oh, okay, I see what's going on here. And so, when you have that settler colonial framework and you have these other comparative contexts to put it in, then it just becomes remarkably clear what's happening here. Okay, I understand apartheid in South Africa. Okay, I understand these genocidal colonial processes over these other indigenous people in these other places. It's really not very complicated.

What's going on here. And so, the amazing part about this particular trip that I went on, my professor, she was actually an anti-Zionist Israeli Jew, and I just happened to wind up in her class and I just got very lucky. And she's the one that took us there. And the idea was that we would be able to go and actually have in-person interactions with the entire political spectrum of folks. I mean, like we met with literally everyone from settlers in Kiryat Arba to Islamic Jihad in person. And we just heard their perspective, right? And got to engage with them and speak to them and learn about their perspective on things. And so, when you actually get to talk to everyone, and then you actually get to see everything.

So, we actually went to a settlement and then we went to a refugee camp in Gaza. And we went, as you said, through the checkpoints and all that stuff. And once you see the whole thing, there's like zero convolution at all about what is happening there. And so, after going on that trip, I then came back and then the second Intifada happened in 2000. And I was in grad school at the time, and I had already been to Palestine. And so, we were like, okay, we have to start organizing here in the United States.

And so, I was part of a group of folks that co-founded an organization called SUSTAIN, which no longer exists, but it stood for stop us tax funded aid to Israel now. And we organized in the United States starting in the year 2000, doing Palestinian solidarity work, but focused on what we could do here in the United States based on the U.S. government's role in all of these crimes that are taking place against the Palestinians. They are all being funded and armed and backed and supported by the United States government.

And so, we have a huge A, responsibility and B, influential opportunity that most people in the world do not have to actually affect real meaningful change here. And so, we've been organizing, and I've been involved in all sorts of different capacities, you know, over the last 25 years around Palestine.

Yulia Denisyuk: Knowing now that you've been involved with this particular cause for so long, what do you see that has changed? And what do you see that has stayed the same? Because I've only been in it since 2017, so my time limit is quite shorter. But it's been hopeful for me to see how many more people are speaking up now. And that gives me so much hope. But obviously, you've been through a few of these, so I'm just curious to hear your take on this.

Matt Bowles: Huge difference now from 25 years ago. So, in 2000, when we were organizing around this, what was happening at the time was there were large scale grassroots mobilizations against the World Trade Organization, IMF, and World Bank. There was the 1999 uprising in Seattle, which kicked off the movement that was starting to challenge corporate globalization and so forth. Right. And that happened in 1999 in Seattle. And then 2000, the Second Intifada kicked off, right?

So, what we started doing was trying to put Palestine on the radar of the folks that were concerned broadly about some of the larger concepts of U.S. imperialism and these anti-democratic concentrations of power and some of these global economic organizations and everything else that people were protesting. And we were saying, hey, listen, Palestine is a real important linchpin in understanding this whole picture in terms of Israel being the largest recipient of U.S. aid and all sorts of other things that Israel is doing as a client state of the United States, right?

And I'm sure you know, Yulia, that Israel's crimes and atrocities are not confined to the Palestinians, and they're not even confined to the Middle East. You mentioned, for example, that you were in Guatemala and studying that genocide. Israel had a role in the Guatemalan genocide, right? Israel has had a role in a lot of other things around the world, right? And I mean, that was largely part because the United States was backing the Guatemalan genocide and then came under so much human rights pressure that they needed to step away.

And then Israel came in and sort of filled that void in terms of training the Guatemalan death squads and dirty war tactics and all of the things that they ended up doing. And people can research that and learn about that. And so, we felt that U.S. aid to Israel in particular was a real centerpiece that we wanted to sort of educate starting with the people that were conscious of the problems with these global financial organizations because it became a sort of a panoply of issues, right?

Environmentalists were linking up with people that were concerned about what the WTO and the IMF were doing, and they were linking up with people that were concerned about these other things. And so, you had this coalition of groups coming together and we really at the time were pushing Palestine into that, so people would understand what that was and then starting to move more towards the center, right? And starting to say, okay, now we need to kind of move it as mainstream as possible.

And so, it was really a time, I think, of just trying to figure out how we can get these different people together and these different coalitions and stuff and then really focus on this type of education. And okay, if people understand South African apartheid, we can use that and talk about Israeli apartheid. Remember, this was before the BDS movement even began. The Palestinians didn't launch the boycott, divestment, and sanctions campaign until 2005. So, we are talking about prior to the BDS. So, we didn't have BDS as a demand because the Palestinians hadn't called for that yet.

So, there were things like what started happening was, for example, the International Solidarity Movement, the ISM, which started calling for internationals to come over to Palestine and do nonviolent direct action

with the Palestinians and use our passport privilege and everything else to try to be in solidarity with them. And this kind of stuff was going on at the time. And so, it was really remarkable. I mean, first of all, because the people that were really committed to those issues came together and found each other, it was one of the most interesting.

Extraordinary groups of activists that I've worked with or met or been around in my life. And so, the community was remarkably inspiring. I mean, just like today, I mean, it was Palestinians and Jewish folks and atheists and people from wherever all over the spectrum were there, but it was a much smaller group that we had as our core. And, you know it, but it was an amazingly inspiring group of people, but it was much smaller. So now today you just look and it's like Jewish voices for peace can mobilize 4,000 Jewish New Yorkers to shut down Grand Central Station in a direct action.

I mean, that is unbelievably inspiring in terms of, I think, where we are now with this stuff and how not just American Jews, but young folks in general are just looking at this and saying, no way, like, there's just no way I'm going to support this. And now we have, of course, also social media. Obviously, in 2000, we didn't have social media. So now you have literally for the first time in history, a people live streaming their own extermination during a genocide on social media in real time in broad daylight.

And so, everyone can see that unless you're really making a point not to look at that and really trying to exclude that through intentional blinders that is there for anyone that wants to see it. And that is really the first time that that's been done in that way. And so, I think what we're seeing now is a level of global solidarity with the Palestinians that we haven't seen at this level and solidarity within the United States with the Palestinians at a level that we haven't seen before. And I think all of that has been just building on all of the work that folks have been doing for decades on this. And now we're at a very different place than we were 25 years ago.

Yulia Denisyuk: I'm so, so hopeful to hear that. And so glad to hear that because honestly, it's hard, you know? What's been really hard for me these past few months all the amount of screaming and action and things that we're doing, and it still hasn't stopped, right? The killing hasn't stopped. The bombing hasn't stopped. And so, if you look at it in the context of the past few months, it can be very demoralizing. But if you look at it in the context of 25 years, as you just have, it's hopeful, right?

Matt Bowles: I agree. And I will also say, demoralization is something that I have felt in a lot of different moments. I mean, certainly with the Palestine stuff, but also with other stuff. I was part of the people in the United States that were on the streets protesting that the United States should not invade Afghanistan before they invaded Afghanistan, right? So, September 11th happened, I was actually in Washington, DC at the time, and before the invasion of Afghanistan, we were on the streets protesting, saying, do not invade Afghanistan.

Then, the United States was planning to invade Iraq. And we were on the streets before they invaded, saying, do not invade Iraq! And they went ahead and did both and then had lasting occupations and just horrific levels of civilian casualties and everything else. And you put your heart, and you put your soul, and you put your time, and you put your energy and you put your commitment into trying to stop these things from happening. And then they continue to happen, right? And so, it can be really demoralizing, right?

But I think, to your point, looking now where we are today, just, I mean, thousands of activists are just shutting down airports and train stations and blocking roads and shutting down weapons manufacturer

offices and doing all of this stuff. It is at a level, I think, that it hasn't been before. And I think we are really building. I mean, I've interviewed people on this podcast who are doing amazing Palestine solidarity activist work, and they literally developed their awareness in the last four months, they were unaware of the situation before October 7th.

And based on the genocide as it has unfolded in the last five months, they were so compelled to just start reading books, learning, and then doing activism, getting into the streets, joining protests and all this kind of stuff. And so, I have said that I'm like, this is where the hope lies, how many new people are becoming aware of this stuff, getting out there and just exponentially increasing the number of people that are serious about this and the number of people that are willing to inflict political consequences with regard to this.

I mean, if you look at the recent campaign that just happened in the Democratic primary around the United States, there were organized mobilizations for registered Democrats to vote uncommitted in the primary as a specific protest of the genocide in Palestine. Thirteen percent in North Carolina, uncommitted. Thirteen percent in Michigan uncommitted. Nineteen percent in Minnesota, uncommitted. These are specific votes against the genocide trying to force a change in the policy.

And we've started to see a response to that. We haven't seen a change in the policy, but we have seen political theatrics that have been trying to placate and demobilize these people, right? So, the air dropping of humanitarian aid or the language about all of a sudden being concerned about Palestinian civilians or, you know, any of these number of changes in discourse or changes in what they're trying to do. This is a response for sure to what people are doing in the streets, at the polls. And otherwise, we are inflicting political pressure, and we need to increase the amount of political pressure that we are putting out and they are responding to it and they are hearing it. And we just need to increase that to try to actually force a meaningful policy change, I think.

Yulia Denisyuk: Amen to that. That's beautifully said.

Matt Bowles: So, let's talk about what people in the travel industry can do? Which is the space that you are in? Can you talk about why you decided that it was important for people in the travel industry to stand up, be vocal, take a position against the genocide in Palestine? Why you drafted the Travel Industry for Palestine petition? And what people can do to support, sign on, and get involved?

Yulia Denisyuk: Yeah, for most of the past four or five months, there's been largely complete silence in the travel industry about the genocide that's happening in Palestine. And for me, it was such a double standard that I could not ignore any longer because the travel industry, out of all industries, talks about the power of humanity, the power of travel to go and connect to someone on the other side of the world. The fact that we, all of us who see ourselves as travelers, see people as fundamentally equal, or that's at least what we always talk about in the travel sphere, right?

That all people are equal, that all humanity has a right to live and exist and do fairly, right? But I just saw such a huge disconnect that we hold these beliefs as travelers, and yet we continue to stay silent on this issue. So that was number one. And number two was just having some conversations with peers and my peers seeing my distraught and my just grief over what's happening. And they're telling me, Yulia, you care too much. You care too much. But of course, because you have ties to the region, of course you care, but why should we care? Right. And they were kind of saying, there's conflicts happening everywhere, why should we be caring about this particular conflict?

And for me, one of the biggest reasons why we should care is because we are the biggest supporter of this as a government. And our money, our hard-earned tax dollars are going towards supporting this genocide and this atrocity. So yes, we should care because we are the ones who are making it happen. We're enabling it. When those two things were happening, I just felt so compelled that I needed to say something.

And at first, I wanted to pitch this or wanting to make this be an op-ed in a publication. But honestly, I knew that that would never happen. That publications would never publish something like that. And so, then I took this other approach, which let me do it as an anonymous petition. And let me just share it out in the industry and see what happens. And thanks to the effort of people like you, Matt, you've been also sharing it so much and helping us spread the word with it. We have got some good traction now and it's a stand. I'm just inviting people in the industry to take a stand, to share this sentiment and to also look at all the resources that we've put together, because there's a lot of resources.

There's a lot of organizations that are doing really good work. There's a lot of really simple things that you can do. You can literally click a link and do a letter that self-populates to your member of Congress where you can make your opinion known. Like, there's a lot of things that we can do to make our voices heard. Like you just said, exerting political pressure on the government. And so, if you go to travelindustryforpalestine.org, you can check it out. You can read the language of the petition itself, or you can sign it and join all the wonderful folks who have already signed it as well.

Matt Bowles: We are going to link that up in [the show notes](#), folks. So, you can just go to one place at themaverickshow.com and go to the show notes for this episode. We're going to have the petition there. Yulia, can you just clarify also who is invited to sign this petition? If folks are listening and they're like, oh, I don't know if I fall into that category. How broadly are you defining the travel industry? Who can actually sign this?

Yulia Denisyuk: Anyone who's ever traveled, anyone who's ever set foot on a plane, on a car, on a bus, and has taken a step outside of their home, I consider a traveler. So, if you're a traveler, if you believe in this belief that fundamentally we are all humans and we should all be treated accordingly, then you can sign the petition.

Matt Bowles: Awesome. We're going to link it up in [the show notes](#) so you can sign the petition. Yulia, I want to talk to you a little bit, and I think maybe staying in the Middle East and your passion and commitment to it for a little bit about travel, writing, and representation. Can you talk a little bit about, you mentioned Edward Said and obviously one of his seminal works is called Orientalism, which is a really important book for people that haven't read that, but can you share a little bit about your journey? I guess, becoming a journalist and becoming a photographer and all of that combined with your consciousness and awareness about the importance of unpacking Orientalism and de-exotifying the Middle East? As you've been spending more time there and writing more about it.

Yulia Denisyuk: And I would say not only the Middle East, but basically all of the Global South, right? That is a behavior that is so problematic, and I've seen it so much in the industry in the past seven years. I want to clarify that I often, and I think we even began the conversation there. I often see myself as an outsider in a lot of situations because I don't consider myself to be completely Western, even though I spent a lot of time in the West by now, but my origin and my roots and my, let's say, psyche is very Eastern in a way.

So, I feel like I understand the dynamics of both of those, let's say, worldviews or mindsets. And maybe that is why I am particularly sensitive to all those issues of exoticification and Orientalism and such and such. But I just see that so much as a behavior in my years of working in this industry. I've been on many, many trips with peers and colleagues where we go to a place and where not everyone, but a lot of people walk into a place as if they own it.

And they interact with the people they meet there as if those people owe them something. I am here, this white person who came to write this beautiful article about your country. So, I want you to tell me everything and I want to take all the portraits that I can, and I won't even take your permission. I won't even ask you if you want to be photographed. All of those behaviors, I've just seen them again and again and I think fundamentally it comes from this kind of assumption that we have this privilege, and we do, we have this privilege.

And so, it affects the power dynamic that unfolds when we come into a place like these Western travelers with passports and with privileges, you know? And so, I think we have to be very aware of those dynamics. And if we want to do storytelling that involves these groups of people in places that we visit, we have to involve them to be our partners in that storytelling. That's kind of the approach that I've taken with a lot of my work. I would never take someone's photo without permission. I would at least tell them what I'm photographing them for. I would at least tell them, hey, this is for an article in such and such magazine. Is it okay? Can I do this?

But a lot of people don't do that. They just literally take and snap photos of people and feel like that's okay to do that. But you don't see that on the streets of New York, or you don't see that on the streets of Chicago. People are just randomly coming and taking your photo without any permission. But somehow, we feel that it's okay to do that in a lot of the places in the Global South. Poverty porn is another huge issue as well. So, a lot of the stories and a lot of the narratives that I try to do, I involve people from the beginning. For example, I did a story for National Geographic about the Bedouin community in Jordan. I sat down with them and asked them, hey guys, I want to do the story. How would you feel about that? Would you want to be part of this process? Would you want me to photograph you? Would you want me to tell your story in such and such a way?

And by that time, I've already established trust and relationship with them because I've been coming to their community for years. To me, that is the kind of model that I've tried to follow, which is involve people in storytelling. Let them be represented the way they want to be represented. not to be represented through some sort of idea that you have in your head about who they are and what they stand for. These perceptions that we have about people are so powerful.

All the narratives that we've heard over the years, all the media we've consumed ourselves, they shape our perception of who people are. And I love that you brought Edward Said Orientalism into this. People don't even have to read the whole book. Go check out a video that Al Jazeera produced a couple of years ago on Edward Said's Orientalism. It's literally a two-minute video, so powerful because it talks about all these constructs and all these stereotypes that we have consumed over the years. And we're not even aware that those stereotypes exist within us, you know, so it's really powerful. I'll send you the link to that. Maybe you can link it in [the show notes](#) as well, because it's just excellent, excellent ways to start dismantling. some of those ideas.

Matt Bowles: Absolutely. And I think it's important for people to just be aware of the historical role that travel writing has played in the colonial processes and creating justifications for colonialism. One of the things that you wrote that I really appreciated, you had a quote where you said, it's important to honor and share culture without colonizing it. And I thought that was really important. I know you've also contributed to the thoughtful traveler's guide to indigenous tourism, which I thought was really important and directly related to this. And I'm wondering if you can just expound upon that, maybe share a little bit about that guide as well and any other sort of ethical considerations around travel writing and photography that folks should be aware of wanting to get into this.

Yulia Denisyuk: Yes, it's interesting that you brought up the origins of travel writing because that's exactly right. The roots of it go back to anthropology as well. And anthropology in itself was such a problematic way in which it contributed to colonialism and to Orientalism and all of those issues. But the Ethical Guide to Traveling that you reference is a package that AFAR magazine produced a couple of years ago, and I contributed a couple of stories to that as well.

But the basic premise and the basic idea there is that if you are going to a place and you want to engage with the local community, try to find products, tourism products, that are directly owned and operated by those communities. Because in a lot of places, what ends up happening is that, again, we kind of had this conversation in the beginning, where mass tourism and the expectations of what we want to see may prevail, but if you want to be an ethical and conscious traveler, do a little bit of research. You don't even have to do a lot of research, you know. Google is very powerful these days and AI results may be helpful here as well.

But look at who are the indigenous communities in this area that I'm going to. Look at what are some of the tourism projects that these indigenous communities are participating in. And that's how you can ensure that when you're going there and you're engaging with these communities, you're supporting them directly, rather than staying in this kind of system of global tourism operation, which has no support and no effect on the local communities. And thankfully, I see that in a lot of destinations around the world, a lot more community-based tourism projects are coming up.

So, it's not as difficult as it used to be even like 5, 10, 20 years ago to find those projects and to engage with them directly and to support them directly. Because when you are engaging with a tour, let's say, or a hostel or a hotel or whatever tourism project there is, that is directly owned and operated by local indigenous communities, you are having the experience that they want you to have. You are engaging with their culture in a way that they want you to learn about their culture and to understand their culture. And I think that's super powerful. So, it's very simple, actually, just look up local community projects and engage with those.

Matt Bowles: So for folks that are interested in moving into the travel writing space, perhaps professionally, can you talk a little bit about your company, Travel Media Lab, and what you're up to there, both in terms of helping people to transition into travel writing, whether they want it full time as a career, or maybe they just want to publish some of their travel stories, and how you work with folks one on one about the professional side of that, as well as obviously what you're talking about here and supporting folks in doing that in a thoughtful and ethical way.

Yulia Denisyuk: Yeah, so basically, anybody who has aspirations of seeing their byline and their name in a travel magazine, I help those individuals. And it doesn't have to be just travel writers or people with travel writing aspirations. I work with photographers as well who want to publish their work, and I guide them

through this process. I orient them in the industry, I help them understand how the pitching process works because a lot of, actually most of the work that we do in this industry, it comes from the pitching process, right? We have to be really good at formulating our ideas, tailoring our ideas to specific publications, and then pitching those ideas to publications. That's kind of the bread and butter of how this industry works, is pitching. And so, that's the process that I take people through. I used to have a lot of group-focused projects, but right now I'm mostly doing individual projects. And if folks are interested, they can learn more about it on our website, travelmedialab.com and get our newsletter. I always announce all my upcoming projects there as well.

Matt Bowles: We're definitely going to link that up in the show notes. The other thing I want to ask you about is your company, [Nomad and Jules](#). Can you talk a little bit about what led to the creation of Nomad and Jules? And what does it offer?

Yulia Denisyuk: Yeah, so [Nomad and Jules](#) actually started from my trip to Jordan. So that initial trip that I did in 2017, which was incredible, absolutely incredible trip. And when I was posting about it online, I got so many messages, incredulously asking me, oh my God, were you okay? Were you safe? Isn't it dangerous there? Isn't there conflict there? Isn't there war there? Because people just see the Middle East, not so much anymore, right? Because now I think people are more aware. But in 2017, I got a lot of people asking me if it's safe or if it's dangerous to be there, you know? And so, what I realized at that time is that I can write a hundred articles about Jordan.

But it will still be more powerful for me to bring somebody to Jordan and to show them what I've experienced. And so that's kind of where that stemmed from. I'm still doing a lot of work on Jordan in terms of articles, but it's just, I think the most powerful experience, again, coming back to that idea that just go and see for yourself with your own eyes and form your own opinions. That's the most powerful thing you can do. So that's why I started a company.

Matt Bowles: Well, you have an upcoming trip through [Nomad and Jules](#) to Kazakhstan, where you were born. I have not yet been to Kazakhstan, but I have looked at the webpage where you have detailed the itinerary of this trip, and it looks unbelievably stunning. I'm wondering if you can share for folks that maybe have not even looked into or thought about traveling to Kazakhstan, what will the itinerary of this trip be? And what will the experience be like traveling with [Nomad and Jules](#)?

Yulia Denisyuk: Yeah, so [Nomad and Jules](#) is built on this idea that we take people to places misunderstood in the media. And Kazakhstan is one such place. And like you mentioned, I was born in Kazakhstan, in Almaty. And on this trip, we're going to spend some time in my city of birth, because I want people to kind of see my origins and see where I've gone. And then after that, we're going to go into one of the most remote and extraterrestrial looking provinces in Kazakhstan called Mangistau, which is a province that hasn't really gotten a lot of attention tourism wise.

And it is, like you said, it's absolutely incredible landscapes and beautiful scenery that we're going to see there. The most interesting thing about this trip is that we're going to travel to that province the way original Kazakh nomads used to travel centuries ago. Because Kazakhstan is largely steps, largely these beautiful wide-open areas where nomadic Kazakh people used to go and travel. And so, we're going to kind of replicate that. We have our own chef that's going to be cooking for us the traditional dishes that Kazakh people used to eat, and we're really going to try to catch that nomadic spirit in that province. That's the idea of that trip.

Matt Bowles: That trip sounds so amazing. For any Maverick Show listeners that would like to join you on this trip, is there a way that they can get a special Maverick Show discount?

Yulia Denisyuk: Today is everyone's lucky day because yes, indeed, there is a discount. You guys can use code MAVERICK, all caps, to get \$150 off any booking for any of our upcoming trips. And right now, there is one trip that we're running in mid-May, 21st of May is when the trip is happening. And we're also going to have more trips this fall, possibly back to Kazakhstan, potentially Jordan. I'm working on that right now. So, check this out as well.

Matt Bowles: We are going to link that up in [the show notes](#) as well. So, you can just go to one place at themaverickshow.com, go to the show notes for this episode, and there you will find the direct link as well as the discount code to get your hundred and fifty dollars off.

Yulia, the other thing I want to put people on to for sure, is the Going Places [podcast](#) that you host. I mentioned earlier that I was really impressed with some of the episodes that I have been listening to. Can you share a little bit more about the original story of the [podcast](#)? Why did you start it? And then, what people can expect from the [podcast](#)?

Yulia Denisyuk: So, we talked about pivoting earlier and about entrepreneurship and trying different things and persevering. So, the [podcast](#), which has been around for three years now, has gone through several iterations. I originally started it during the pandemic when all travel, of course, had stopped and I was trying a lot of different things. That's when I also started teaching and doing group classes and workshops and things like that. So, at that time, the [podcast](#) was very focused on helping people break into the travel industry. And we had a lot of interviews with editors, with peers, with journalists.

We did a lot of pitching [podcast](#) episodes and things like that. To be completely frank with you, the last four months have had me rethinking a lot of things. And one of the reasons why I started a petition, and I changed the [podcast](#) into the current situation, which is called Going Places, is that I really started questioning and wondering if there's more that I could be doing because I did not want to do typical travel stories anymore. Because I felt that in the face of this genocide and so many other problems that are happening around the world, why does that even matter?

So, I wanted to do work that was more hard-hitting, that was making more impact. And so, the reason why the [podcast](#) has evolved into its current iteration *Going Places* is that I wanted to build a platform where I could bring stories of some of the people that I've met over the years of traveling that have opened my eyes and that have helped me see things differently. I now wanted to bring them here.

So, it used to be an educational [podcast](#). It used to be very like how to break into the industry kind of podcast, but we switched recently and we're now a purely storytelling [podcast](#) that really delves into stories of people like the Amani artists that we mentioned earlier, and their grief and their stories and their hopes for Gaza and for their art and more stories like that. So that's kind of the backstory behind it. But yeah, it's called *Going Places* with Yulia Denisyuk, and it's bringing you stories of people around the world that I'm meeting as part of my journalistic work.

Matt Bowles: Well, your passion shines through the podcast. You are platforming some really important people with some really fascinating, interesting, and important stories that deserve to be heard. And anywhere that you are listening to this [podcast](#), folks, when this episode is over, just type in *Going Places*, and you will find Yulia's [podcast](#). You can subscribe to it there, check out a couple of the episodes, and

please leave her a rating and review as well. She's doing really incredible stuff. A lot of the most recent episodes have been very Jordan-centric. So, if you're interested in that country and that region in particular, it is really a trove of incredible content.

Yulia, I also want to ask you now, just for some tips for people that you can share. There's a lot of folks that travel that listen to this [podcast](#), and they have a lot of incredible travel experiences. For people that want to transform those experiences into writing, can you give us some tips on how all of us can do that a little bit better and become better writers in taking our travel experiences and turning them into great writing?

Yulia Denisyuk: I would love that. It's one of my passions to be talking about this. And the first thing I want to say is: learn the difference between content and story. We have so much content on our hands, and we're so used to generating content everywhere we go. You know, we snap pictures, we post them on Instagram, whatever, or videos. But that doesn't mean that we have a story because if you want your writing and your work to appear in a magazine, it needs to be a story. It cannot be just content. And the fact that you went somewhere, the fact that you just traveled to Thailand, and you spent some time in Bangkok, that is not a story. I'm sorry, but it's not a story.

Maybe it's a story for your parents and your friends, but it's not a story for a magazine. What did you see there? What actually happened? Who did you meet? What change or transformation has happened, right? These are all kinds of fundamental elements of storytelling. Who are the characters? What is the action? What is the conflict? What is the resolution? What is the arc, right? That's like kind of the basics of storytelling. So that's number one. Number two, once you figure out what story you have, put us in that place. Help us smell it, feel it, see it, hear it, right?

Give us some local perspectives. Give us some local voices. Number three, avoid cliches. There are so many cliches in travel writing and travel journalism, and you should try to avoid it like a plague. The more specific you can be about what you're describing, the better, because vague statements like 'The most incredible beach', 'The must-see experience', 'The secluded areas', 'The hole-in-the-wall place', like all those stereotypes and cliches don't actually tell us anything about the place you're trying to describe. So I would start with those three.

Matt Bowles: Well, I also want to ask for some of your photography tips. You have co led a master class on travel photography for National Geographic traveler. Can you share for folks, as we travel around the world, some tips on how we can take better photographs?

Yulia Denisyuk: The most fundamental principle for me, and I've actually done several different masterclasses with Nat Geo on this topic, but I always talk about the same thing. And that is that the camera does not lie, which means that when you're taking photos of people, which we want to see, right, we want to see people in travel photography, when you're taking photos of people, the camera doesn't lie. So, if you haven't put any effort on establishing a connection with your subject, if you didn't ask permission to be photographed, if you didn't ask their name, or at least some of their story, if you didn't explain what's happening here, why you're taking this photo, we're going to see that in the image, right?

We're going to see that energy when you're stealing a photo of somebody. We're going to see that in the image where you establish the connection with somebody. We're also going to see that in the image, that energy that comes through so that for me, that's not an approach of every travel photographer out there. But for me, that is principle number one: establish a connection, involve that person in your storytelling.

The second principle is light. Light is incredibly important, you know, and as travel photographers, we often travel light. So, we don't have a lot of gear with us. We don't have the light rings that I have right now here, aiding me a little bit, right? We don't have flashes. Oftentimes we travel with a very basic setup. So natural light and seeking out that natural light is your friend. You have to kind of look for opportunities to put somebody by the window, for example, instead of in a dark corner, etc.

And then, finally, I would say, look for an emotion in the image. Look for some kind of action. What is happening? Maybe you're documenting something special that's happening. Maybe it's a prayer ceremony that's happening in Bangkok. Let's say, because we've been talking about Thailand, right? Or maybe it's a moment of shared laughter when people are sharing a meal. Those fundamental emotions that we all react to as people, as audiences, are the ones that you should look for and try to capture those because that's going to make your photography more powerful as a result.

Matt Bowles: Yulia, when you think back on all of your travel experiences, including some of the ones that we've talked about tonight, how do you think all of these travel experiences have impacted you as a person?

Yulia Denisjuk: I love that question. I understand that the way we live here is not the only way to live. I understand that there are many different ways in which we can arrange our life. And I think that is such a powerful way to think about living and life and building a community. I mentioned that a couple of times throughout this interview, but one of the things that I've been kind of struggling with in the past few years in the States is this very self-centered and individual-focused way of living that's continuously proving to us how it is so harmful and detrimental to us. So many ways in which we live here in the States are falling apart and people are feeling that, right.

We can talk about the loneliness epidemic, the mental health epidemic, the fact how many people are getting sick these days, right? So many different things. And the more I travel around the world, the more I see that people who are thriving, sometimes against all odds, in places around the world, are doing so because they're living in community. And they're very much focused on building a community and surviving and thriving together as a community.

And so, I think that's one of the most powerful things that travel has given me is realizing that just the way that, because we have arranged our life in this way in the United States, doesn't mean that that's the only way or the right way or the thriving way to go. And I think that's really the power of travel. It really helps you understand that being in a corporation is not the only way. Being a journalist is not the only way. Being an entrepreneur is not the only way. There are so many ways to arrange your life. And I think that's a really powerful realization.

Matt Bowles: So, I was listening to the most recent episode of your podcast where you were doing your monologue reflection on the most recent season. And one of the points that you had in there really stuck with me. I stopped as I was walking, and I sat down to type it out because I thought it was a really important concept. And I want to read it here for folks and then allow you to expand on it a little bit. You said, *'The power of travel is not in your individual growth, eating, pray, love style. It's not in finding yourself or escaping your problems. When you focus on your own personal transformation and your own individual experience, that is not an impetus for external communal change. The power of travel is in learning about communities, listening to people, hearing their stories, and understanding their plight. That's when we can become advocates and activists working for a better world for everyone.'*

I thought that was so important, Yulia, and I want to just ask if you can share a little bit about how you came to that conclusion and anything else you'd like to share about that.

Yulia Denisjuk: Thank you, Matt. Well, first of all, thank you so much for picking up on that. A lot of thought went into that for me to share that final episode. And it's, I'm so glad to hear that resonated with you. So, thank you. But it came from this observation and this reflection that again, all in the context of the last four to five months where I think a lot of people have been going through a reconsideration, reimagination, rethinking of a lot of things that they're doing. And if you aren't doing that at this time, I don't know what else needs to happen in the world to make you do that.

Because if this, like you said, blatant live-streamed genocide is not going to make you do that, I don't know what will. And so, for me personally, I've been doing a lot of thinking about what I do for a living, how I do it, how I move through the world, and also reflecting on it. The industry that I'm in, which is the travel industry and how it's just been so glamorized to hold that incredible power for self-growth. A lot of people love to have that message of you go out there, you explore, and you come back a better person because you've grown, you've stepped outside of your comfort zone, and all of those things. Which are all valid, absolutely valid things.

But the problem is that it's, again, so focused on yourself and an individual that it doesn't really serve as a container for any kind of communal action or communal growth. In this most recent trip that I did to Jordan, which I just returned from in the last couple of weeks, we spent a lot of time talking to community leaders in Jordan who have been telling us about how affected they have been by what's happening in Gaza. Because actually a lot of people have canceled. Literally, over 90 percent of travelers have canceled their trips to Jordan this year because of what's happening in Gaza.

Even though Jordan is absolutely safe right now, there's nothing happening in Jordan. So, we've been hearing from all these communities who have told us that we are being devastated economically right now because all our livelihoods are gone. Because of what's happening in Gaza, not only are we seeing this, and our hearts are bleeding for our brothers and sisters in Gaza, but we're also affected economically as well. It's just such a complex and messy thing. And so, I was just reflecting on that, how we in the West are so focused on this idea of travel as a tool for individual growth, where I really believe that the power lies in being an inspiration for communal growth. and communal action.

And that comes from, again, sitting down with people, listening to their stories. One of the people I met on this trip was this older man called Abdul Rauf Abu Taha. And he's a tourist driver. That's his profession. He drives tourists around Jordan. And he was driving me one day to Wadi Rum, to my favorite place on earth. And he just mentioned offhandedly about his father coming from Palestine during 1948 and that stuff. And when I heard his story, I said, I have to hear the rest of the story. I have to interview you.

And so, I interviewed him, you know, I actually created a short reel for Instagram about him. And when he told me his story, it touched me in such a profound way. It was so emotional. His family lost everything when they left Palestine, and they're struggling here in Jordan. He had to take out his child from school to help him make a living. His child did not finish his education because they're struggling in Jordan, you know, they lost everything. And so, when you go and you meet people like that, and you come back to your own reality here in the States, if you're a thoughtful, compassionate person, there is no way for you not to take action. There is no way for you not to look for ways to do something to change the status quo.

And so that's what I mean, right? It's when we've changed that focus from internally to externally, that actual real change in community starts to happen. And that's something that I want more people to be aware of. Because again, we're just so focused on that individual power of travel, of self-growth, of self-actualization, which is all great. But that's not how change happens. Change happens through communities. We need each other. To make change happen. And so that's the reflection on that.

Matt Bowles: I think that is so important because I've been thinking about this concept for a while now, because I am immersed in a lot of different travel communities, digital nomad communities. I would say interview people on the podcast every week. And I talked to a lot of people about travel. And so, it strikes me that travel by itself, just going out into the world and getting passport stamps and moving through the planet does not alone have this impact on you and make you a more humane, thoughtful, empathetic, less racist person.

It actually has to do with you as a human being choosing to go out there and have particular types of experiences. Find, seek out and listen to particular types of narratives and stories, and then make a proactive decision to stand in solidarity with marginalized and oppressed groups by choice. And those are all decisions that travel isn't going to magically bestow upon you. You as a human being actually have to use travel as a vehicle to facilitate these types of proactive choices that you as a human being are individually making. And I think that episode that I heard of yours really crystallized some of that for me and helped me to sort of think about it in that way.

Yulia Denisyuk: Yeah, that's exactly it. You know, we have to put ourselves in those situations where we interact with people, and we have some space to hear their stories and to really process that. Because I think, again, for me, that's really the soul of it. You know, it's to recognize how many complex situations there are around the world, recognize your role in it as someone who comes from America, and to also bring that back here and to understand how you can play a role with it, you know, going forward.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, I think that's important. I mean, I talk about that a lot in terms of the travel experiences that we're having and understanding them contextually. So, for folks, let's say that are from the United States, like I am, it's really important for me when I'm traveling to a place to understand the history of that place and the political context of that place, particularly with respect to, let's say, U.S. foreign policy history in that place.

So, if I'm traveling to South and Central America, it's very important for me to understand the role of U.S. foreign policy historically in those countries and shaping them, or if I'm traveling to Southeast Asia, right? Understanding the role of U.S. foreign policy in shaping what the present reality is in countries like Vietnam and Laos and other types of places, or gosh, going to Japan. I mean, I recommend every American should go to Hiroshima and spend a day at the Peace Museum in Hiroshima. Like, I think that's really, really important, but this is the case anywhere that we go.

And it's especially and particularly important with regard to understanding the contemporary U.S. foreign policy, obviously, in places like Palestine and the genocide that's going on now, because it invokes, I think, a particular level of, A, responsibility, but B, an understanding of the influence that we have to affect change. People that pay taxes and vote in the United States are in a more influential position to affect change on the genocide in Palestine than any other human being on this planet, period. And when you understand that you can then get involved in trying to affect that change and trying to make a positive contribution to planet Earth.

And so, for me, traveling around the world is very much about trying to understand these things. How does power work? How do these power structures and these different dynamics operate? Which groups are marginalized in different places as we go around the world? What are their narratives and their stories? And how can I try to understand and support them? And so, for me, that's very much, I think what it's about, but a lot of that has to do with proactively seeking out and making the choice to try to understand those experiences and those narratives, and then making the choice to stand in solidarity with those communities.

Yulia Denisyuk: Absolutely. And I think there's more people who are kind of becoming more aware of this. We still have lots to go. You know, I still see plenty of typical travel reels and stuff on Instagram and elsewhere, but also more people are becoming more thoughtful and more aware. So, it goes back to that hope and that evolution that we're seeing. So hopefully there will be more people like that in the future.

Matt Bowles: Well, Yulia, I think this is a great place to end the main portion of this interview. And at this point, are you ready to move in to the lightning round?

Yulia Denisyuk: Ready as I'll ever be. Let's go.

Matt Bowles: Let's do it. All right, what is one book, maybe that has significantly impacted you that you would most recommend people should read?

Yulia Denisyuk: I was going to say Edward Said Orientalism, but because we already talked about this, and we mentioned that, I'm going to say Neil Gaiman, Neverwhere.

Matt Bowles: We're going to link both of those books up in [the show notes](#), actually, so that people can go and check them out. Yulia, if you could have dinner with any one person who's currently alive today, that you've never met. Just you and that person for an evening of dinner and conversation, who would you choose?

Yulia Denisyuk: Malak Mattar, she's a Palestinian artist from Gaza. She's an incredibly inspiring artist. I have one of her paintings on my shelf and you can check her out on Instagram as well.

Matt Bowles: All right, Yulia, you have traveled now to over 100 countries. What is one travel hack that you use that you can recommend to people?

Yulia Denisyuk: Figure out a way to deal with jet lag because newsflash as you get older, jet lag becomes harder and harder for the stomach. So, for me, I use this thing called the Time Shifter app where you put in your flight information and it tells you kind of instructions or on what you need to do days before the trip in terms of light exposure, in terms of caffeine, and et cetera. And it was developed by a NASA scientist. So, I believe the app and I follow it and maybe it's a placebo effect, but it seems to be working for me.

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

Yulia Denisyuk: Start investing ASAP. Hahaha

Matt Bowles: All right. Out of all the places that you have now traveled to a hundred plus countries, what are three of your favorite places you would most recommend other people should definitely check out?

Yulia Denisyuk: Jordan, Turkey, Vietnam, Kazakhstan, and Greece. Okay. I know I cheated, but those are the top five.

Matt Bowles: You gave a top five. Fair enough. We'll let you have it. All right, Yulia, last question. What are your top three bucket list destinations? These are places you have not yet been. Highest on your list. You'd most love to see.

Yulia Denisyuk: Bhutan, Socotra in Yemen and Patagonia.

Matt Bowles: Amazing. All right, Yulia, I want you to let folks know how they can find you. How they can follow you on social media. Go ahead and let folks know how they should best come into your world.

Yulia Denisyuk: Sure. So, the best way is to follow me on Instagram. I'm in *Search of Perfect* on [Instagram](#). You can also follow our [podcast](#), at Going Places Media on [Instagram](#). And if you want, you can also sign up for my newsletter, it's on [travelmedialab.com](#). It will pop up as you go to the site, so you cannot miss it. And that's where I announce all the upcoming projects, trips, everything that I'm doing. So, you can stay connected that way.

Matt Bowles: All right. We are going to link everything up in [the show notes](#). So just go to one place at [themaverickshow.com](#). Go to the show notes for this episode. You're going to find direct links to everything that Yulia and I have discussed all of the ways to contact her and come into her world, as well as the direct link and your special MAVERICK discount code to get 150 off [her upcoming trip to Kazakhstan](#) or other destinations, if you prefer. Yulia, this was amazing. Thank you so much for being on the show.

Yulia Denisyuk: Matt. Thank you. It was my pleasure. We've been going for what? Two hours now, and it feels like we're just getting started. So that's always a good sign for me. And next time you're in Chicago, you have to let me know.

Matt Bowles: Absolutely. We have got to hang out in person sometime soon. I will do that for sure. And good night, everybody.