

**Matt Bowles:** My guest today is Ric Gazarian, better known as Global Gaz. He is an Armenian - American travel content creator who has spent time in 180 countries on all seven continents. He is an author, photographer and award-winning documentary filmmaker who has produced two films that follow his adventures, racing a Tuk Tuk across both India and Cambodia. Born and raised in Boston, Ric now maintains a base in Bangkok, Thailand, but travels most of the year on his quest to visit all 193 unrecognized countries. He is the Bangkok chapter leader as well as the Asia coordinator for [Travel Massive](#), a 60,000-person travel industry network. Ric is also the host of the [Counting Countries](#) podcast where he publishes long form interviews with the world's most traveled people, and he is the founder of the [Extraordinary Travel Festival](#), the largest gathering of avid, accomplished and adventurous travelers in the world. The first event was held in Armenia in 2022, and the second event is coming up in Bangkok in November of 2024.

Gaz, welcome to the show.

**Ric Gazarian:** Matt, I don't know how I'm going to live up to that introduction, but that was a giant ego stroke and excited to be with you on the podcast and speak with you today.

**Matt Bowles:** Brother, I am so excited to have you here. I have been listening to your podcast for years and you and I have a number of friends in common. We have interviewed a number of the same people over the years, Harry Mitsidis, Orest Zub, Palle Bo, Gary Arndt, and a number of those folks that Maverick Show listeners will know have also been on your podcast.

But I have been a fan of what you have been doing for many, many years now. So, the pleasure is all mine to have you on the show. But let's just start off and set the scene and talking about where we are recording from today. We are in very different time zones. I am actually in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Asheville, North Carolina today. And where are you, my friend Matt?

**Ric Gazarian:** I am in Krung Tep, the city of Angels, better known to many as Bangkok.

**Matt Bowles:** What an amazing city Bangkok is. I think I actually want to start this off by asking you about some of the differences that you have found by being a resident of Bangkok and, at this point, a long-term resident of Bangkok (I know that process started over a decade ago), and how that is fundamentally different from just being a tourist or passing through Bangkok for a short period of time. What have you found over the years?

**Ric Gazarian:** Well, I found that I really love the city, and I feel pretty comfortable here and it's really a great solution as a place to live. And I always say it's kind of a big mix, Bangkok, you have a mix of east and west. You have a mix of old and new. And I live in a modern high-rise building, and I have a Dunkin Donuts in my lobby. I'm from Boston originally, that's the home of Dunkin Donuts. So, you can go down there and get a cruller, like, I'm back home in Boston, or I can go out 5 meters more onto the street and start eating street food. So, I think it's this whole amazing, giant metropolis which offers really simply everything, and, let's be honest, at a lower cost point and never a cold day.

**Matt Bowles:** You know, I found that when I have lived in places for really extended periods of time, like, I was in Cairo for about a year, as you know, and I found that the longer I stayed there, the more layers and the more nuance that I was noticing. You know, when you get to Cairo for the first time, it can be a little bit overwhelming, and it seems very chaotic and all this kind of stuff. But then when you get there, you sort of

start to realize as you live there, and you start to see how it works, like, oh, there's actually a really high level of organization to this chaos.

And then once you realize that, then you start to see different layers of nuance and other things, and it becomes much more interesting, I think, when you can go really deep in a city, and I want to ask just your experience in Bangkok and maybe some recommendations for folks that you would put people onto and some of your favorite things that you have found over the years in Bangkok. And if somebody wanted to come and maybe experience the city at a little bit deeper level, what you would put them onto.

**Ric Gazarian:** Yeah, and I agree with you on that, because I hear the same thing. Someone will say, oh, I just went to Bangkok for two days. That was enough. It's too crazy. It's too chaotic. It is. I mean, one of the big negatives of the city is the awful traffic, which is somewhat balanced out by the pretty excellent public transportation system, which is continually growing. And I feel the same way about Cairo because a lot of people are like, oh, you know, I got to get to Aswan. I got to get to Luxor. My first visit to Egypt, I spent one week in Cairo. I didn't go anywhere else. And there's so many layers of that onion, so many things to do. And, yeah, I agree, Matt. This is no different than what Bangkok offers. So, if I want Peruvian fusion food on a rooftop, I can have that if I want to sit with ten Tuk Tuk drivers and drink an iced coffee. I can do that as well. So, this city really does offer everything.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, Ric, I want to do a little bit of your background now. And before we even talk about your story and your experience coming up in Boston, can you share a little bit about your family history? And for people that are not familiar with the history of Armenia and they're not familiar with the genocide of 1915, can you share a little bit about that history and then the Armenian diaspora and then how your family got to Boston?

**Ric Gazarian:** Sure. In a nutshell, the ethnic group Armenians have literally been around for thousands of years. So, you can trace the history a couple thousand years before BC. We at times have had a country and not had a country, and we are located in the Caucasus or Anatolia, and that's the region. We'll say Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, that region.

So, at times, the empire was humongous. It touched the Caspian Sea, it touched the Mediterranean, it touched the Black Sea. So, it's waxed and waned over the years. One big milestone, 301 AD Armenia was the first country in the world to adopt Christianity. We developed our own Alphabet. And then let's fast forward.

In 1915, there was no Armenian nation. We were simply citizens of the Ottoman Empire. So, Ottoman Empire, this giant landmass, tons of religions, tons of ethnic groups, etc, and Armenians were simply one group of citizens within the Ottoman Empire. Unfortunately, that might be an understatement. A genocide began of the Armenian population starting in 1915. It was started on April 24 as the ottoman government executed, imprisoned the top 2300 most prestigious people within Istanbul.

And then through killings, through forced deportations, desert marches, roughly 1.5 million people lost their lives during that time period. My grandparents were swept up in all of this. And they, in short, took a path through Turkey, present day into Syria, Aleppo, Damascus, Beirut, boat to Marseille, Marseille to New York, and eventually Boston. So, I am 100% Armenian. All of my grandparents escaped during the Armenian genocide, set up camp in Boston, and began their new lives as Armenian -Americans in the U.S.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I think that's really important context for the Armenian diaspora because I run into Armenians all over the place. I mean, all over the Middle East, I run into Armenians. I lived in LA for like seven years. And as you know, we have little Armenia and then there's places like Burbank that have these huge Armenian communities, and then you might just walk into like a Lebanese restaurant or something, and it's all Armenians running the Lebanese restaurant and so forth. And so, I think that the history and political context of the diaspora is really important. So, for your family, Gaz, can you share a little bit about your experience coming up in Boston and what the Armenian culture was like there and what your identity was like as an Armenian-American growing up in Boston as a kid?

**Ric Gazarian:** Yeah, my identity is Armenian-American, but not at a very deep level. So, growing up, my parents were both, as I noted, 100% Armenian. All my relatives were Armenian. My parents had a ton of Armenian friends. But I'll be honest, don't hold this against me. I was an Armenian language school dropout. So as an eight-year-old, I went once a week to Armenian school. I dropped out after a year because it coincided with soccer games the same day, and soccer won out, and we only went to church a couple times a year. So, it was this kind of ephemeral connection with Armenia. I knew I was Armenian. I knew everybody around me was Armenian, but beyond that, I was really kind of a traditional, generic American. Playing sports, going to school, hanging out with my friends.

**Matt Bowles:** So, I want to ask you a little bit also, during that period, how did your initial early interest in travel start to develop and what were some of your earliest international travel experiences?

**Ric Gazarian:** Yeah, it was fits and starts my whole life, with travel, until I really made this big commitment. But I will say growing up, I had two really amazing opportunities, which were not very normal for my peer set growing up. At school, I had a classmate from the Philippines, and my mother and his mother ended up being really good friends twice, maybe 13 years old, 16 years old. I went to Asia with my family to visit this other family for Christmas in the Philippines. And again, no one I knew growing up was really doing a trip like that.

And my parents also had the foresight on one of the trips, we added on Hong Kong and the other trip we added on Japan. So, this definitely planted a seed. I mean, it was dormant in many ways, but when you're a kid and you end up in Kowloon, in Hong Kong, and you stand, and you look at Hong Kong island across the harbor. It's at night. The neon star ferry going across made an impact on me as a kid, and I'm like, this city is alive. It's electric. It's amazing.

**Matt Bowles:** Hong Kong makes an impact on you at any age. I went for the first time in 2016 to Hong Kong, and it just blew me away. I was not there nearly long enough. I was there less than a week, but it made a profound impact. I have been thinking about it and wanting to go back ever since then. It is an extraordinary place. So, after you had those experiences, what impact did that have in terms of shaping your trajectory and your interest in travel and what was next?

**Ric Gazarian:** Yeah, as I said, I'm using the word fits and start. So I went to college, Boston College, which was, in essence, sort of down the street from where I grew up. And I look back, I was so stupid. I didn't do a semester abroad. My whole life was kind of on campus, and I worked in a bar. So, I was spending a lot of time at the bar, either working or drinking, making good money, having fun. And travel was not a big part of my life.

But, Matt, when I did graduate, a little spark lit up again, and I remembered Hong Kong. So, after graduation, I moved to Hong Kong and lived there for three months. And my whole plan was to get a job living in Hong Kong. In short, I sort of ran out of money. I didn't really get a viable job, and I ended up going home after three months, having a pretty interesting and fascinating experience, but from a job perspective, not that successful. Got back to Boston, my tail between my legs a little bit.

**Matt Bowles:** So, what was your life and career trajectory like from there? And then how did international travel come back into it as such a central part?

**Ric Gazarian:** I think it was back to Boston, started sending out the old resumes, and I'll be honest, I graduated with a political science degree, which, I mean, we both obviously have an interest in politics and history and geography, but political science is not a great gateway to a great job. I really didn't know what to do or what I wanted to do. I ended up in financial services in Boston, which is a giant hub for those types of jobs. And I started my career at the bottom rung in financial services. And after I got a couple of promotions, I started to do a ton of travel, but it was all domestic. I mean, I probably ended up going to 45 different states via work over, like, a 15 to 20-year time period.

But international travel was not part of it until, we'll say, 2002. And I'm hanging out with a bunch of my college friends, Randall and Sully. A shout out if they listen. And Randall and Sully were planning a two-week trip to Brazil and Argentina. And I'm like, oh, that sounds pretty awesome. I'm like, guys, can I join? Next thing I know, I churned in some airline points, some hotel points, and just joined them for an awesome, awesome trip to two awesome countries. And then I'm like, holy cow. The last 12 to 15 years, I haven't really been overseas. Look at what I've been missing. This is so much fun.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I know it was also around that 2002 period where you decided to make your first ever trip back to Armenia. Can you share a little bit about that trip and what that experience was like for you to be in Armenia for the very first time?

**Ric Gazarian:** That was a very pivotal trip for me. So, I just returned with this awesome, movie fun trip with my buddies. My mother had passed away around this time, and during these years, tourism began to become more popular or open up more in Armenia. And I heard friends or friends of friends going to the old country, so to speak, and I thought maybe this would be a great experience for me, my dad, to do. So, we planned a two-week trip back to Armenia, my first visit ever, my first real connection to the ethnic homeland.

This was a very traditional tourist trip, meaning we stayed in the same hotel for two weeks every day. The bus rolls up at 9:30 a.m. and drives you around for the day to visit this monastery in this church. Fantastic time. And tourism 03 was really, I mean, Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, was a very dark and soviet place. In 03, tons of places were not operating. They were shut down, unrenovated, unfixed up. It wasn't a very attractive place compared to today, where it's this unbelievable, cosmopolitan, lively, European-like city.

But during that trip, I met a woman staying at my hotel, and she was working for USAID, which is an arm of the us government, which does development work in other countries around the world. And I'm talking to her, I'm like, what are you doing in Armenia? She's like, oh, I'm here for six months as a consultant. And I'm like, wow. I'm like, that would be an amazing experience if I could ever live here. And then I'm like, I can't do that. I get four weeks' vacation a year. I got to get back to the grind and sell some 401K plans and make some bank. But a couple months after that, I got laid off. And I'm like, wait a minute, this sucks, but this is

really opening up a door. And in 2004, I planned a multi month trip, including four months in Armenia as a volunteer.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I know you have subsequently gone back to Armenia just about every year over the last two decades, and I want to ask you about that from your Armenian identity that you described as a kid growing up in Boston and what it was like at that time, and then how your connection with Armenia and your Armenian identity developed, strengthened and evolved over the years as you spent more time in the country.

**Ric Gazarian:** Yeah, there really was quite a big change. It was pivotal when I went back in 04 and volunteered for four months. As you know very well, when you start living there versus visiting there, you develop your routine, you start making genuine friendships. And this was a real learning process of my first experience, spending extended time in another country, learning about how things operate differently and what you expect is normal is not necessarily the case.

So, I was volunteering at a couple of different organizations. I was building my routine. I'm meeting the other volunteers; I'm making friends with the people where I'm volunteering at. We'll call it the falafel effect. When you end up going to the same falafel place every day at twelve and you start talking to the owner in Cairo and you're talking in Arabic, it's the same thing in Armenia. You end up at the same lunch place where I'm getting the chicken shawarma every single day. They start recognizing, smiling, then you start talking, then you meet the owner, and you feel like you're a genuine person of the community. So that was a really big growth and connection to my homeland.

**Matt Bowles:** How do you think that your Armenian heritage and background and just being of a people that have that history of persecution and genocide and all of that, how do you think that that has shaped your worldview and your empathy and solidarity with other marginalized or oppressed people? As you learn about the world and travel through it?

**Ric Gazarian:** You know, you have to think of your forefathers and have this incredible admiration for their resilience. My mother's father was twelve years old when he came to the U.S. by himself. So, think of what you need to do as a twelve-year-old to make it through the deserts of Anatolia, to get to Aleppo, to Damascus, to Beirut, and to figure out how to do that.

So, these people have demonstrated just this immense amount of resolve and resilience and adaptation and desire for survivability. There's so much credit to these people versus myself. Arguably, he's had this incredibly easy and soft life in comparison to the generations that came before me. So, everything is in perspective. You have to realize, understand and respect what others around the world are going through compared to your surroundings and your environment.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I also want to ask you about your experience in the Republic of Artsakh, which some people may know as Nagorno-Karabakh. And if you can share a little bit about what your experience traveling there was. And then for people that are not at all familiar with the contemporary politics of that region and what has been going on as recently as the ethnic cleansing in 2023, if you can share a little bit about that political context also.

**Ric Gazarian:** So, after the Armenian genocide, there was a country of Armenia. For two years, from 1918 to 20, there was a republic of Armenia. 1920 Armenia became part of the Soviet Union until 1991. During

that time period, when it was annexed by the Soviet Union, there was an autonomous region called Nagorno-Karabakh. Stalin, from my understanding, liked to play the ethnic groups against each other.

So, even though Nagorno-Karabakh was 90% ethnically Armenian, Stalin placed Nagorno-Karabakh region in the Republic of Azerbaijan. And for 89 years, everybody went on their merry way, lived their lives. Azeris were friends with Georgians, Georgians were friends with Armenians, vice versa. When the Soviet Union started falling apart, there was a referendum, and the people of Nagorno-Karabakh voted to become independent of Azerbaijan. This started, in essence, a war.

And I might not have all the dates exact, but let's call it from 1989 to 1994, 1994 was a ceasefire. And by that time, Armenia, 'had won' and Azerbaijan had lost. And the 10% of Azeris who were living in Nagorno-Karabakh moved over to Azerbaijan. All of the Armenians, and there were tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of Armenians living in Azerbaijan proper, they were all displaced and ended up in Armenia. So, in other words, there was a two-way changing of the populations from one country to the other. 94 was the de Facto peace in Nagorno-Karabakh, and that held mostly strong.

Well, 2022 September, there was a larger size conflict of several days. Then, I think the following year, Azerbaijan attacked. They took over half of Nagorno-Karabakh. And then after that, Azerbaijan came back and took over the remaining 50%. So, from 1994, where Armenia was in complete control, to 2023, Azerbaijan is now 100% in complete control. The 120,000 Armenians that were living in Nagorno-Karabakh have all been expelled from that country.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, man. I was in Azerbaijan in 2019, so I was in Baku for about a month, and I was going through the Caucasus, and I went to Georgia and went to Tbilisi and so forth. I have not yet made it to Armenia. It is so high on my list, as you know, I have so many Armenian friends, and I have been meaning to go. And I'm curious about your experience in Nagorno-Karabakh also, when you went there and what year that was. Because I was in Azerbaijan 2019, and as you just mentioned in your timeline, that was before a lot of this stuff in the last four years started happening.

**Ric Gazarian:** Yeah. And this is a great lesson. You can't always assume everything remains constant. Right. And now I look back and I was fortunate enough that I went to Artsakh, Nagorno-Karabakh, three different times. But you always assume it's 'going to be there' and you can always visit. So, in other words, maybe I would have visited more.

My first visit was again this really meaningful trip when I was volunteering in 04. The volunteer group arranged a trip for all of us to spend several days in Artsakh, which also coincided with Victory Day. So got to see this part of the country, met a lot of people, saw some of the historical monuments, got to participate in this day of remembrance for the soldiers who were felled during that time period. That was visit one, definitely a meaningful trip.

Second visit, at one time I participated in what was called the Caucasian Challenge, which was a road race from Budapest to Yerevan. And part of that trip we drove through Artsakh. So that was my second visit in 2010. I was driving with a couple of friends. There were other competing teams. Yeah, very fun, a little bit more lighthearted visit and drove around there for a couple of days, revisiting the country. A third time I went with my wife probably in 2018, 2019, rented a car in Armenia and also just spent a couple days revisiting some of my favorite places in Artsakh.



**Matt Bowles:** So, for people that would like to visit Armenia, do you recommend that now is a good time to go to Armenia? And if so, what would you put people onto in terms of experiencing Armenia?

**Ric Gazarian:** Well, it's always a great time to visit Armenia. More specifically, I would say late spring, early summer and fall. Winter is winter. Summer can be pretty hot, July and August. I love Yerevan. It has changed and developed so much over the last 20 years that I've been going. It is a city full of cafes and restaurants and parks, and it is one of the most walkable capitals that I've encountered. I can easily, me personally, go there for two or four weeks and never leave the Capital. And whether it's live music, whether it's a museum, whether it's a festival, meeting friends in the cafe, at the bars, I can keep very busy. But I would encourage everybody to rent a car, and you can sort of chop the country into north and south.

As I mentioned before, Armenia was the first country in the world to adopt Christianity, 301 AD. At some point you might get a little overstimulated, but there's amazing monasteries and churches dating back 500 years or a thousand years if you like dark tourism. There are some awesome sights in Armenia. One is called Orgov. Orgov is this giant soviet satellite installation, which is abandoned and I'm talking like satellite dish, 400ft across, built into the ground, two of them. That is a great place to visit it.

Another really cool place I went to is a young Pioneer camp. So young pioneer camps were all across the Soviet Union. Basically, all children during the summer would go to these young pioneer camps where they would learn the Soviet way, so to speak. There's an amazing abandoned young pioneer camp with this abandoned indoor swimming pool map with the most amazing mosaics, still 100% in perfect condition. So, you get a couple of these types of sites in the south, you can go to Lake Sevan, which is the biggest body of water. There's Tatev monastery on top of a mountain. There's a cable car which brings you up there. It's got some Guinness World Record of the double cable, longest in the world.

Jermuk which is another soviet type city where people used to go to take the waters. So, there's all these natural springs there. You can easily spend a month there.

**Matt Bowles:** All right, I got to ask you more about this road rally through the caucuses that you did. Can you share a little bit about the context for that? What exactly was it? And then what was it like on a day today going through that journey? And what did you see and experience?

**Ric Gazarian:** And this also ties to Armenia because I think it was 2009, and I'm walking around Yerevan, and in front of this cafe, I see this banner and it says Caucasian challenge. And it has a graphic of a guy wearing an old furry soviet hat with the red Star holding an eight k 47, three old Ladas. And I'm like, what is this Caucasian challenge? I go to an Internet cafe, so that tells you what year it is. And I started typing Caucasian challenge. And I'm like, holy shit. This is probably the coolest thing I've ever seen.

And it was this road rally where you would start in Budapest, drive through nine countries over 17 days, 7000 finish the event in Yerevan. So as soon as I saw that, I'm like, holy cow, I got to find someone to do this with because there's no way I'm missing out on it. So, I was lucky enough to convince two friends of mine from the U.S. this is an organized event. So, there's a company which runs the event. There are multiple teams. I started talking to the organizers, but we didn't have anything to drive. We started talking with the organizers. Send us some money, we'll buy you something. They ended up buying us an old Chevy, but it's 600,000 km on there.

We fly into Budapest and we're getting ready to start the race, and we go to visit the organizers. Like, we can't wait to see the car. Like, oh, it's not ready the next day. Can we see it now? No, it's not ready the next day. Not ready. The next day is the race. We go to the starting line and there's ten different teams there. And we're like, where's our truck? They're like, oh, it's not ready yet. So, the starting gun goes off, everybody drives, and now it's me, my two buddies and the organizer. Five hours later, some guy zips into the parking lot, makes a donut, and it was a scene out of the movie. The guy that pops out is wearing mechanical overalls without a shirt. So just bare chested, he says something in Hungarian, throws the keys and then just walks off. And that was the beginning of our 17-day adventure.

**Matt Bowles:** So, what was the adventure like? Like on a day to day, what was the experience like? What types of people did you encounter on that journey?

**Ric Gazarian:** The funniest time, but also a grind. Meaning you weren't driving 2 hours a day. It'd be eight to 10 to 12 hours a day sometimes. So, the roads were difficult, the truck was breaking down. You were being tested somewhat, yeah. Like any adventure, you're meeting great people or people who are suspect. I remember our first night in Batumi. So, you crossed the border from Turkey.

Batumi is maybe the second biggest city in Georgia. It's on the Black Sea. It's sort of a resort town. We're staying in some small guest house, and we end up talking to the Georgians next to us. And it's like, they say it, but they don't say it. They're being truthful, or maybe they're biasing us.

This group is like, yes, we are ex special forces, we're now working for the mafia. And it's like, I don't know, you end up having a couple of drinks with them. You chalk it up as another story. You didn't get shot. It's all good. You are meeting great people, whether from Albania to Serbia to Georgia. Yeah, it was an awesome rewarding adventure.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I know a couple years later you did a Tuk Tuk or Ricshaw challenge across India. This time you decided to produce a documentary film about that journey. So, I want to ask you both about the experience. And the film, by the way, has unbelievable cinematography. I mean, it is a gorgeously shot film. And so, I also want to ask you about the quality of the film production and how you put all that together.

**Ric Gazarian:** Matt, this is another kind of crazy small world travel story of how things just work out. I end my journey in Yerevan, 2010, at the end of the Caucasian challenge. And remember, I lived there for four months. I was a volunteer, so I started meeting some of my old relationships. And one place I volunteered at was an after-school group. And I became good friends with the family who organized and managed that school. So, I call her up and she shows up with her son Gore. Now, when I knew Gore originally, he was like 14 years old when I saw him then, he was like 21 years old. And his profession? Filmmaker.

So, I'm talking to the mother, I'm talking to Gore. I'm like, guys, I just did this amazing venture. And the son's getting excited and getting engaged. I don't know who said it first, but at the end of that coffee, it was decided we were going to find another rally where we can drive. Except Gore and his brother were going to join us and we were going to film and create a documentary. So that's how that was born. It was pretty amazing.

**Matt Bowles:** So, explain to folks what it is like driving a Tuk Tuk across India and what your journey and experience were like. Some of the highlights are in the film, obviously, if people can and get a chance to see the film. But can you share just a little bit about for you what some of the experience was like?



**Ric Gazarian:** Yeah, I'm sure many of us are familiar with the Tuk Tuk. So, this is an auto Tuk Tuk. This has 7 hp. If you buy a riding lawnmower in the U.S., those will have like 15, 20, 25 hp. This is the most impractical vehicle that you can utilize to drive long distances in India. I would say it's nightmarish.

So, a semi open, three wheeled vehicles with 7hp. I hate to use superlatives all the time because the Caucasian Challenge was the best, but so was the Ricshaw Adventure. This was the best, most insane two weeks. I drove from Mumbai down southeast all the way across Chennai, and it was nonstop madness for two weeks as me and my buddy Keith drove the Ricshaw. And behind us in the film vehicle was our driver, Satish, the filmmaker, Gore, and his brother Moosh.

And again, competing against all these other teams, meeting awesome people throughout the country, driving through monsoons. Tuk Tuk breaking down, tipping over. We won the bonkers award, which was kind of like the moron award. We ran out of gas, like, 16 times. It was just awesome, Matt.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I know that that then subsequently inspired you to do yet another Tuk Tuk challenge, this time in Cambodia a few years later, and to make yet another documentary film about that. So, can you share a little bit about the context for the Cambodian rally that you participated in?

**Ric Gazarian:** Yeah. So, I think our vision was we're going to create a series of these. The film was called Hit the Road India. The second one, not that clever. Hit the road Cambodia. So, the idea was, oh, we'll make a series of these. So, we found a second one in Cambodia. There's a great company called Large Minority, which runs events in India, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Philippines. Check them out. Yeah, it's the same exact concept.

And we drove from Siem Reap, Angkor Wat all the way down. I can't pronounce it. Sihanoukville on the coast. And then you would drive back a different way back to Siem Reap. So, another awesome, fun adventure relatively substantially much more low key, of course, compared to India. But Angkor Wat is one of those must-see places. I think it's one of the most spectacular places in the world. But Cambodia in general, outside of Angkor Wat, is this really just underrated, fabulous country. And there's just so much to see to do. The people are cool and relaxed. It really is a great, substantial country.

**Matt Bowles:** I want to ask about that as a mechanism for seeing and experiencing a country because I've been to Cambodia. I've spent about a month there. I was based in Phnom Penh. I lived in Phnom Penh for a month, and I was just working remotely and living there. And then, of course, I made the trip to Siem Reap, on which I agree with you. I recommend to people, do whatever you can do to spend at least a few days in Siem Reap and get the three-day temple pass and go through all of Angkor Wat, because it is unlike anything I've ever seen anywhere in the world. So totally agreed about that.

But, you know, when I think back on my Cambodia experience, I experienced Phnom Penh, and then I experienced Siem Reap, and then that's all I've seen of Cambodia. And I'm wondering for you, when you do something like this, how does that allow you to experience the country? What is that like, experiencing the country that way?

**Ric Gazarian:** Let's say there is a spectrum visiting a country. You can rent a car, pretend it's like a hundred-thousand-dollar Range Rover. And you're doing a road trip. You're in these plush leather seats, the windows are rolled up, the AC is cranking, you've got this great stereo. You're probably having an awesome time. Now lower that down to motorcycle or Tuk Tuk. Now you're traveling at a lower speed. It's open air,

meaning you're talking to the guy next to you at the intersection or the pedestrian walking by you. And then you can go down below that to ride a bike and then simply walking.

So, I think the further down you go, the spectrum, the slower moving, the more open, the more interactions you're going to have. And I kind of look at all these things as a genuine catalyst, so not fake, not manufactured. But again, when you're in that Tuk Tuk and you're puttering around, it's 20 km, it's open air. First of all, any local, whether it's Cambodian or India, can be somewhat surprised to see this foreigner driving it. And again, you're going to be breaking down. You're going to need gas in India.

I mean, one of my takeaways from driving the Ricshaw in India, or my most memorable interactions were at gas stations. I still don't know why this is, but every gas station had either 20 workers or 20 workers in hangar honors. So, it's not like there's one technician. There'd be about 25 people there. So, we would pull in and get fuel, and next thing you know, we would spend an hour at the gas station. We're eating some samosas, we're taking selfies, we're driving around. So, yeah, the Tuk Tuk is a great catalyst or mechanism to meet more people, go out of the way places, have great interactions.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I know the entire region of Southeast Asia is extremely special and important to you, and I think I want to just start off by asking about your history with Thailand. How did you initially start going to Thailand? How did you end up in Thailand? How did you fall in love with Thailand?

**Ric Gazarian:** So, my first trip was in 2005 for four weeks. And this would be a very stereotypical trip, meaning I kind of was on Khaosan Road for a lot of it, going out a lot, having fun, nothing wrong with that. But one tiny seed was planted. The big sport or martial art in Thailand is Muay Thai. Pretty well known these days with MMA. And throughout Thailand, you'll see tons of Muay Thai gems. And when you're in a bigger area, touristic area, you'll see foreigners at the gym. So, I'm like, hmm. I had done a little bit of taekwondo before, and I'm like, wow. I'm like, that would be a pretty cool experience just to hang out and go to this gym.

Fast forward to 2009, I lived on the island of Ko Samui and on that island, again, I wasn't training to fight, so it was more just for fun, for casual, get in shape. I would just have lessons there five times a week and go to that gym. And that was part, you know, back to the falafel routine. That was part of my routine. Every day at 10:30 a.m. I would go to my gym workout. That'd be my routine.

Then I was living in Chicago. I had a remote job, and it was winter, and Matt, winter's in Chicago, as everybody knows, was not a great place to be. And I just finished this book. The book was called Gospel of Father Joe, and it was a non-fiction story of a man, a priest, who leaves Seattle in the 1970s and moves to Bangkok. And he gets there, Father Joe gets there, and he moves into the residence, and it's a bunch of priests drinking red wine and eating steak. He's like, I didn't become a priest to do this.

There's a well-known slum in Bangkok ghetto called Khlong Toei. Father Joe moves into Khlong Toei, and this is the seventies, so it's open sewers. It's literally, he's living in a shack. He got dysentery, he got tuberculosis. So, I mean, it's the real deal. He's talking the talk and walking the walk, and he's not there converting people. He's simply there helping fast forward. He's now got this giant facility and center. He runs 30 schools. He has an HIV warden. He puts kids through scholarships. He fed 20,000 people during the big tsunami in zero four.

So, he's this amazing guy, and I'm like, reading this book. I'm like, screw it. I'm going to go move to Bangkok and volunteer for this guy. And that started, I guess, my third wave in Thailand and the permanent wave in Thailand.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I want to ask you for some of your favorite places or experiences in Thailand outside of Bangkok that you have had over the years. You've traveled the country extremely extensively. What are some things that you might put people onto or that have been really special for you to experience?

**Ric Gazarian:** I'll start off with a couple of festivals. One festival that, I mean, blew my mind. I'd heard about it for years. It's called the Phuket Vegetarian Festival, it's like twelve days. And Phuket is an ethnic group. There's a lot of ethnic Thai, Chinese, and there's Chinese temples in Phuket. So, it's a little bit different than what you might be seeing in Bangkok, for instance. And this event, which really doesn't have anything to do with vegetarianism, is a multi-day event at multi temples throughout Phuket. And if you google Phuket vegetarian festival, you'll get thrown off because a lot of it is piercings and body modification and scarification. So, it really blew my mind. My hope is to get back there soon again.

One of my all-time favorites, which I went to maybe seven years in a row, there is an ancient tribal tattoo custom in Burma, Cambodia, Thailand, it's called a Sak Yant tattoo. And there's hundreds or thousands of different designs. And a person who wants a second will go meet in Arjun. And Arjun is the word teacher. And it's almost like a consultation. They'll be like, Matt, what's going on in your life? Oh, I'm having a lot of trouble in business and blah, blah, blah. The Arjan will prescribe a tattoo to you, and he will place it on your body, and he'll say, Matt, you're going to have great success in this business, but from now on, you can never smoke a cigarette. And you have to be kind to your parents. If you follow the rules, then the tattoo will work and give you magical powers.

Outside of Bangkok is a temple, Wat Bang Phra, about an hour away. Once a year, they have this amazing festival. 10,000 people come here; they're getting tattoos. There's 30 Arjans giving tattoos for 24 hours straight. And then on Saturday morning, 10,000 people sit in this giant expanse with their legs crossed. The monks come out on the stage, they start chanting, Matt. And the people with the Sak Yant tattoos become possessed in the form of their tattoo. So, animals or an old man, they become possessed. They rush to the stage where there's a group of 100 volunteers who catch them, blow in their ear, which calms them down, and then they walk back. I've been to this Sak Yant, Wat Bang Phra Wai Kru seven years in a row. It's an amazing, amazing event.

**Matt Bowles:** Wow. Well, you are also the Bangkok chapter leader and the Asia coordinator for [Travel Massive](#). Can you explain what that community is all about for people that have never heard of it and why that is so meaningful for you?

**Ric Gazarian:** [Travel Massive](#) is like LinkedIn if you got rid of every professional person on LinkedIn who doesn't work in travel. So, in other words, it's this great platform for travel networking. In addition, there's 100 plus chapters around the globe, including one in Bangkok. So, I had a fortuitous meeting back in 2015, right before I rode the Tuk Tuk across Cambodia, and I met Ian Cumming. Ian is an Aussie who's the founder of [Travel Massive](#). And this guy is extremely passionate about connecting people, networking people, I mean, because that's what builds rewarding relationships and business careers, and [Travel Massive](#) is just something so important to him. And we actually partnered together. [Travel Massive](#) was my media partner on the Cambodia race. But in short, I've been organizing meetups and events in Bangkok for

Travel Massive since 2015. And [Travel Massive](#) is simply that same concept or idea of networking and bringing together like-minded people who work and travel or are very avid travelers.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I've got to ask you about one more place in Southeast Asia that I have not yet been that I know is very special to you, which is Myanmar. For me and other people that have not yet been, can you describe why Myanmar is so special to you, what you love about it?

**Ric Gazarian:** I would argue Burma (Myanmar) is one of the best countries to visit. Obviously, I'm not reflecting on the politics, the Rohingya, the civil war, which is a separate category and totally incredibly awful for all these people involved. Simply from a touristic perspective, it's one of those things that's sort of like, oh, I'm going back 50 years in time. And my first visit was to Burma was in 05. And I'll be honest, I knew very little about Burma. I had a lonely planet, which I had gone through a couple of times, and it impacted me when I went there because it's different, it's unique, it's untouched, it's more raw than its other peers in Southeast Asia.

I remember one thing, it kind of threw me off, and I'm probably pronouncing it wrong, it's Thanaka. So, most women, or many women in Burma, there's this tree bark which they make into a paste, and they rub on their face for two reasons. One, to protect their skin from the sun, but also, secondly, it's like a decorative art on their faces as well. And I remember I get to Yangon, the former capital, and I'm walking around, I'm giving like double and triple takes. It was throwing me off a little bit. Looking at these women, I'm like, what are they doing? Blah, blah, blah. But beyond that, one of the most stunning, beautiful temples in the world is Shwedagon pagoda, right in the heart of Yangon. To me, this place is magic. My two cents, you go there an hour before sunset. There'll be a handful of tours, but there's hundreds and hundreds of Burmese going on with their regular life, socializing, praying, meditating. And you watch the sunset over this. And when I say pagoda, I mean it's 50 meters high or 200ft high. I mean it's humongous, it's sheathed in gold. And you sit there through sunset. By 9 p.m. the place is cleared out. There's just a handful of people up on top. And these chimes on the Shwedagon Pagoda, you hear the chimes jingling. It's so peaceful. It's magical. It's one of those things like, oh, I went to Shwedagon Pagoda for 30 minutes, no, I would go there multiple nights, it's special.

**Matt Bowles:** All right, we're going to pause here and call it the end of part one. Everything we have discussed in this episode is going to be linked up in [the show notes](#), so you can just go to one place at [themaverickshow.com](#), go to [the show notes](#) for this episode. There you're going to find all the ways to find, follow and connect with Gaz, as well as direct links to everything that we have discussed. And if you want to hang out with me and Gaz in person, you can do so. November 15 to 17th at the [Extraordinary Travel Festival](#) in Bangkok, Thailand.

Gaz is the founder of this event and is putting it on. I am going to be there as a keynote speaker, and you can get a special discount for attending. All you have to do is go to [themaverickshow.com/ETF](#). That stands for [Extraordinary Travel Fest](#). Go there and you're going to be able to just type in the discount code **Maverick** at checkout when you buy your ticket and get a special Maverick Show discount. Once again, go to [themaverickshow.com/ETF](#) and then use the code **Maverick** to get a discount on your ticket to the [Extraordinary Travel Fest](#). You can hang out with me and Gaz, and a bunch of other Maverick Show guests are also going to be there. All of this is going to be linked up in [the show notes](#), so you can also just go to one place at [themaverickshow.com](#), go to [the show notes](#) for this episode and there you're going to find links to the [Extraordinary Travel Fest](#), the discount code and everything we have discussed on this episode.

And be sure to tune in to [the next episode](#) to hear the conclusion of my interview with Ric Gazarian. Good night, everybody.