

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

Matt Bowles: So, in the midst of all of these travel experiences that we have been talking about, at what point in your travel journey did you decide that you wanted to travel to all 193 UN recognized countries and that that was going to become a huge priority in your life?

Ric Gazarian: Yeah, in '08, I was still in financial services and '08 was the big year of the financial crisis, and I was on a business trip in New York. I was based in Chicago. I'm in New York and I got a call from my assistant. She's like, oh, the CEO wants to talk to you. I'm like, really? I sit 30ft from him and in the eleven months that I've worked here, I've never spoken to him.

So, I knew I was in trouble. I remember I'm in a little Korean grocery on the corner in New York City. I found a table, I picked up the phone, it's the director of HR and the CEO. And they're like, "Hey, we're so sorry. We're laying off 30%". And I feigned sorrow. The reality was I was happy. I hated my boss; I didn't like that job. And basically, as soon as that call ended, I'm like, great, I'm going to take a trip starting next year first thing.

And I don't know the rationale or the logic, but I randomly said to myself, you know what? At some point I'm going to go to every country in the world. And when I took out this Excel spreadsheet and started planning, I started in South Korea and just started writing down countries that were west of South Korea that I'd never been to. And I wrote down like 2025 countries. And over those twelve months, that's what I did. Just went to new countries over that time period.

Matt Bowles: Well, you've now been to 180 and I definitely want to ask you about some that I have not yet been to. I think the one that I want to start with is Afghanistan. Can you share a little bit about the context in which you went to Afghanistan and what some of the highlights of your experiences were in Afghanistan?

Ric Gazarian: Well, in recent times there's a big division point. There is pre-Taliban and post-Taliban. I went in 2019. So, the reality is in many levels it's safer to visit Afghanistan now as a foreigner under the Taliban, versus when I went in 2019, which it was the Afghan national government supported by U.S. and NATO. When I went, you had to be fearful of the Taliban plus ISIS-K, plus Al-Qaeda plus, plus, plus.

Now, when you go as a foreigner, the Taliban are happy to see Americans or British or Canadians. So, despite all the awfulness that went on, you are now under the protection of the Taliban. Now you only have to worry about ISIS-K and Al-Qaeda. So back to 2019, I spent two weeks; I went with this great company called Untamed Borders. We went to four places, four well-known places; Kabul, Bamyan, which is well known or famous for the giant buddhas that used to be there, which were carved into the cliff, which were blown up by the Taliban. So that's a beautiful town/city in the mountains up north, near the Uzbek border is Mazar-I-Sharif. And on the far west, I went to Herat, which is near the Iranian border. All amazing places, amazing culture, history, people, food. Awesome trip, Matt.

Matt Bowles: I want to ask you about Buzkashi. If I'm pronouncing that correctly, for people that have never heard of that, can you describe what it is and what your experience was like as a spectator?

Ric Gazarian: Yeah, Matt, this was one of my bucket lists for a long time because I was just intrigued by and I'm not pronouncing it right, either Buzkashi or Kupkari. So, this is a sport that's been played in Central Asia for centuries, and some say it's the forerunner of polo. So, it's a game, two teams. The men are on horses. There's a ball. The only difference, the ball is a goat carcass, which they go around on their horses, bend over, pick up, and like a football, they try and get to the other side of the field.

So Mazi Sharif is this big city up in the north. So, the big prayers every week, you know, there's multiple five prayers a day, but the big one is the noon prayer on Friday for the Muslims. After this service, all the men congregate on this giant field to play Buzkashi. So, this was this incredibly awesome and surreal experience. There are a couple people on my tour, so there's six of us, 500 Afghans, and then another 50 guys playing a gloomy Friday afternoon. And we're just chilling here, talking with everybody and watching everybody going crazy and running around on the horses. Awesome experience. Awesome.

Matt Bowles: Well, you also went to the children's circus in Kabul. Can you explain what that is and then what the experience was?

Ric Gazarian: Yeah, I mean, this is the understatement of the year. I mean, Afghanistan has been through so much, and there's also this giant pull and fight right between these conservative forces of Afghanistan versus those who want to modernize and give people opportunity and provide education for women, et cetera.

In short, we go to this area, this house, semi fortified, like almost everything there, and there were, like 50 kids there. And this is a safe space for kids to go to after school and learn this incredibly fun skill of acrobatic skills, juggling, et cetera, et cetera. So, we hung out with them. They did some demonstrations, and these kids, at times, travel around Afghanistan and go into perform for a village or town. And I think there's multiple schools in Afghanistan. And, yeah, I mean, you're just giving these kids education, confidence, a safe place, something fun to do. You want to see these places all around the world. You want to see these kids all have the opportunity to do something like this.

Matt Bowles: Well, as you know, Gaz, I have spent about two and a half years on the continent of Africa, but you have been to a lot more countries on the continent of Africa than I have. And I want to ask you about some places that I have not yet been to. Can you share, first of all, about your experience in Burundi? And as you and I have discussed, we have both seen a performance by the royal drummers of Burundi. I saw them perform when I was in Kampala, Uganda. I had the unbelievable privilege, didn't even understand what I was walking into, and, boy, was I blown away. You actually saw them perform in Burundi.

So, for people that have never heard of the drummers of Burundi and have never been to Burundi, what was your experience like in the country? And then at that performance in particular.

Ric Gazarian: It's such an awesome experience that you and me, we're so lucky to have seen them. Yeah. So, I was traveling in East Africa, so Burundi is an even smaller, tinier country, which is next to Rwanda. And, matt, I'll be honest, I wasn't overly excited to visit Burundi. I had a four-day trip scheduled. I hooked up with this guide. He said, we're going to go visit this church and this field and this. I'm like, okay, it'll be fine. It's a short trip. The reality is, I didn't know what the royal drummers at Burundi were.

So, we leave the big city, we drive to Gitega, the capital. It's a towny village area. I walk up this little hill, and there's 100, 150 locals' villagers just standing around, and I'm the only foreigner. And then I hear this

cascade of drums, and 20 plus guys dressed up in red and green with these giant drums come out onto this field on top of this hill, and it's like you can't believe it that this is your life. These guys performed for me for over an hour, and it was this top-level, world-class percussion performance, and I was just wowed and so thankful that I got to be there. And the little argument of like, oh, you're. You're going to every country in the world. That's stupid, or what's the point? Blah, blah, blah. I always use this as an anecdote. This is the point; One, I'd never heard of them. Two, I would have never seen them. And three, here I am by myself for this private performance. You can't get this back home.

Matt Bowles: It is unbelievable. I was speechless as well after the performance that I saw in Uganda. I also want to ask you, Gaz, about your experience going to Chad, which is a country I have never been to. And the festival that you attended in Chad.

Ric Gazarian: Matt, the same argument here. I mean, very few people dream about going to Chad, so Chad, Northeast Africa, near Sudan. It's a developing country. There are security issues. Yeah, it's a tough place. But due to my little community, I know many other people going to every country in the world, you start seeing their IG feeds and you're like, huh? What are these photos? X years ago, I started clicking on the photos and learning about the Gerewol Festival. Gerewol Festival is an annual festival at the end of the rainy season that takes place in both Chad and Niger.

And it's the Wodaabe people, the Wodaabe people are nomadic herdsman. And at the end of the year, they all come together. All the tribes or groups come together in this empty field bush expanse in Chad, and they celebrate with the Gerewol Festival. And the Gerewol Festival is a match making ceremony. And for the ladies, the men put on makeup, they put on outfits, they put on jewelry, and they dance and sing, sometimes from three to four in the afternoon, all the way into the next morning. And the woman gets to choose who they would like to partner with. Again, talk about lucky, talk about being fortunate to see this tradition as genuine and real as it gets in the middle of nowhere with just hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of these people celebrating the end of their year, relaxing, enjoying, community, coming together, and you, as a spectator and participant, get to hang out with them for five days. Awesome!

Matt Bowles: Well, I also want to ask you about a country that's very high on my list, which is Eritrea. First of all, some of my favorite food on the planet. So, I'm really excited to go there just for that reason. But I want you to share a little bit about some of your experiences there, including traveling by train.

Ric Gazarian: Yeah. So, Eritrea is a former colony of Italy and there's a very similar feel to Ethiopia. So, some of the same ethnic groups are in Eritrea as they are in Ethiopia. That's a whole other story with the brutal war between the two countries, etc. Eritrea, there's so many pros. There's a couple cons. Once again, the economic development is quite low. They have a very authoritative government. It's actually ranked lower in press freedoms than North Korea. That's a little hard to get your arms around.

So, it's a challenging place to actually live. As a visitor who's there for two weeks, the reality is you don't feel it, you don't touch it. The people were great, warm, and friendly. The capital, Asmara, is quite unique and beautiful. It's a lot of Italian art deco. So, you're walking back in time 50, 60, 70 years ago to this great period of architecture. There's a very famous gas station, a fuel station, where all the tourists take a photo of its art deco design. There's a strong orthodox church there. So, to visit these churches, see the people praying there. Yeah, I loved it.

And then adding on, the Italians were there. So, give or take, let's say 100 years ago, they built a train system or train track, and they still have the old steam train from like 100 years ago. The organizer I went with, young pioneer tours, thankfully did a great job because this train is no longer actively running. But they were able, in essence, to charter the train for several hours where we literally had our own little private carriage and one locomotive, and we drove around on the train tracks for an afternoon. Such a cool, unique experience. So memorable.

Matt Bowles: Another train experience in Africa that I have not done that I want to ask you about is the iron ore train in Mauritania. Can you share a little bit about your experience in Mauritania? And just for people that have no context about that train experience, what was that like?

Ric Gazarian: Yeah. So, Mauritania is this giant country in West Africa. It's something like 90% desert in the interior of the country. They have a lot of iron ore. So, they've built this train track to bring the iron ore out of the center of the country to the west side of the coast on the Atlantic Ocean. I'm not pronouncing it right, Nouadhibou. So, this train makes multiple trips to bring the iron ore. They say this is the longest train in the world. So not the longest train track, but the actual physical train is said to be 3 km long, just full of carriages of iron ore.

Now, what's become quite the little Instagrammy thing to do is you jump on top of this train and you sit in one of the carriages on top of the iron ore. And the idea is, this is an epic journey in the desert. So, you want to be at the back of the train. So, when you're carving through the desert and you make a little churn, you see 3 kilometers of train carriages in front of you cutting into the Sahara. It's epic, except for me. So, there's no schedule, meaning you get to this little town called Choum. I got there at like three, four in the afternoon. You don't know when the train's coming.

My train came at like 01:00 a.m. I mean, there's no train station. You're just sitting in the sand next to the train track. So finally, you see the light coming through the darkness. And there's 20 people there, 30 people, locals waiting for this train. So, the train pulls, and you only have a couple of minutes. And these carriages are high. You know, let's say they're like 6 meters tall. And I'm with a guide, and my guides like, go, go, go, go. And you have to climb up this ladder. So, you just like, pushes me in, and it's pitch dark. I climb up the ladder and I jump in too. Except there's no iron ore in my train. It's empty. I'm like, what am I going on? Then you hear, like, the meh.

The whistle goes, and I'm like, what am I doing here? It's dark, and I'm looking around and I'm like, wait a minute. I'm like, there's 20 people sitting in here. And I'm very confused. I'm like, where's the iron ore? I can't see anything because the wall of the carriage is high up. And in front of me is a locomotive. So, my view is blocked because the locomotive is twice as high as the carriage. So, I go to bed. And one of the things you do is you buy this heavy blanket in this town, because in the desert, it's freezing at night. So, I'm wrapped in this blanket. I'm sleeping on the steel. It's extremely uncomfortable. I'm freezing.

Sunrise comes up 06:00 a.m. and I look around, and it's a little ecosystem there's. A family there on the corner. They lit a fire, they're making coffee. Over there are seven goats. Over next to me are four teenagers who are just waking up. And basically, he put me in the wrong train carriage. And I had no view because this locomotive was in front of me. So, I rode in this empty carriage for about 14 hours until I got to Nouadhibou. So unbelievable, unique adventure. Except it's not the one I signed up for.

Matt Bowles: And that happens quite a bit as we travel around the world, I find. So, I appreciate you sharing that portion of it. Gaz, another experience that you have that you've written about that I want to ask if you can share is the trip that you made to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. And maybe just contextualize this briefly for some people that don't know the history of Chernobyl and what happened there, if you can just explain that and then explain the context of your trip, and then where specifically you were actually able to go when you got there.

Ric Gazarian: Chernobyl is a nuclear reactor. It's considered the worst nuclear accident in the world. And currently they've created the Chernobyl exclusion zone. Let's call it 1000 km, but it's basically off limits. They have checkpoints in this area, so people just drive in there. And in general, as you might imagine, it's an area with higher levels of radiation, which are not good or healthy for people to be living in. Before the awful invasion of Ukraine by Russia. These visits to Chernobyl are a pretty typical thing to do. If you're in Kyiv, it's easy to sign up for these tours, assuming you have the motivation to do it. And I'm making these numbers up a little bit. But 97% of people sign up for the day tour to and from Kyiv in one day.

I was lucky enough or smart enough to have signed up for the two-day, one night tour. And this made, I think, a humongous difference. It was a small group, like five of us. We had this great tour guide and we really, I mean, I felt like we went to every nook and cranny exploring. I mean, you know, this is dark tourism. This is an awful event. I mean, there were something like 60,000 people living there, so you can't lose fact of this. And you would be walking into an apartment building, and you would go into a child's room, their bedroom, you'd see their drawing on the wall. So, the bigger picture, the bigger context is this is an awful event caused by man, which affected tens and tens of thousands of people or hundreds of thousands of people, but, yeah, fascinating experience.

Matt Bowles: And what was it like actually going into the exclusion zone? How dangerous is the radiation proximity and all that kind of stuff, the safety precautions? Because you went into some places that most people do not go to. Right? So, what was the dynamic there?

Ric Gazarian: Walking around the Chernobyl exclusion zone is 100% like any dystopian Sci-Fi movie. I mean, you would walk into the plaza or square of a town and everything was overgrown. The vines are covering this, the concrete's ripped up because a tree popped up in there. So, it's this incredibly surreal type experience. We did have Geiger counters.

These tour guides know what they're doing and obviously they want to survive, but the tour guide will be like, hey, guys, come over here. And there'd be a piece of moss, and he'd hold the Geiger counter, and the radiation level would be like 87 times higher over this piece of moss versus 10 meters over here.

So, I think if you're there for a day or two, it's really no issue. The places with the incredibly higher levels of radiation, the guides are going to know where those levels are. They're not going to want to take you there. People live in the exclusion zone today, but it's something like, I forget the exact number, but it's like 1000 or 2000 people live there compared to 100,000. These people are the people that still maintain the nuclear reactor because there's four reactors, I believe three of them are still operating.

So, they have a fire station, they have a restaurant, they have all these workers. So, people do live in the exclusion zones and give or take, most of them are doing something like two weeks on, two weeks off again because they have to be concerned about the long-term effects of living there on a semi-permanent basis.

Matt Bowles: Well, I also have to ask you about one of your more recent trips that you took to Papua New Guinea, which my understanding is that this is one of the most diverse places in the world, just in terms of how many different languages are spoken and all of that. And so, I'm super curious. Obviously, I've never been there. Can you just contextualize for people the context in which you went, what it is like there, and then what your experience was?

Ric Gazarian: Papua New Guinea, a large island country, half owned by Indonesia, half the sovereign nation of Papua New Guinea in Oceania. It's a country of around 10 million people, but they say over 800 languages and 800 different tribes. And the area which I spent most of my time is called the highlands, and the highlands are in the center of Papua New Guinea in a mountainous, remote, difficult terrain area. And give or take, if my research and reading, I mean, the first foreigner did not go to this region until around the 1930s, and you could have two tribes living within 30 each other and have completely different languages, customs, religions, and dress. Well, there's obviously been development in this region. It's still a remote, isolated slice of our earth, and this was the trip that stands out for me. It was a fantastic trip experience. Yeah, really happy I was able to go.

Matt Bowles: What were your interactions like with local folks there? How much immersion and connection were you able to have, and what were those interactions like?

Ric Gazarian: Matt, I would say in some ways, this was a breath of fresh air. During my two weeks up in the highlands, no one asked me for anything. No one begged me for money. No one asked for a gift, meaning I never had to handicap my decision of whether I was going to talk to somebody in the highlands because there were no expectations or demands that were going to be made upon me. So, you could speak and talk to everybody, interact with everybody, take photos of everybody, sing with everybody, dance with everybody.

Matt Bowles: What were the conversations like with the tribesmen that you met and the people there? What type of conversations did you have, and what was that experience like?

Ric Gazarian: It would run the gamut. So, for instance, these guys didn't speak English, but there were two older gentlemen in their seventies who were like BFF's. So, I mean, my questions would be like, how did you guys meet? How long have you guys been friends for? Et cetera, et cetera. And then I would ask a question like, what was the biggest change of your life? You know, was it seeing a radio? Was it an airplane? And these guys chose seeing the white man as their biggest change over their lifetime. And other ones, it might be. Tell me about your job. Tell me about your school. Tell me about your family. Tell me about your tribe or what you're wearing or what you're singing about. Yeah, everything.

Matt Bowles: I love that, man. I can remember I was in Mongolia, and I got to hang out with a nomadic family in Mongolia. Spoke no English, but we had a translator with us, and we just got to go into their ger, which is like a yurt, which is where they live and hang out and have some tea and chat with them. And it was really interesting because I was here with a bunch of digital nomads, and here we are talking with the OG nomads, and we were basically just like, teach us the ways. How do you meet relationship partners in the nomadic lifestyle. How do you. I mean, like, all the stuff that everybody wants to know about, like, how does this lifestyle work? We're just like, teach us the ways, you know?

So, they found that, I think, kind of amusing, but it was really interesting, and it was just such a cool connection when you're able to connect through translators with folks that have very different types of

lives in some ways. And yet there are these remarkably interesting connections that you can oftentimes find, no matter how different people's cultures or lived experiences happen to be. So, I love that man.

The other thing that you have done, Gaz, is you have gone to some micro nations, and I want to ask you about that. For people that may not be familiar with that term, maybe, can you just start off with explaining about the 193 countries where that number comes from, what constitutes a country, and then from there, sort of extrapolate out and explain what a micro nation is?

Ric Gazarian: Okay, so, again, I come from the community of people who are trying to go to every country in the world, and you just asked a critical question, how many countries are there? And you will get different answers from different people. I am an old school OG. I simply say there's 193 countries, and that is the number of countries recognized by the UN as sovereign countries. But the number can grow dramatically from that point on. People quickly add on Palestine or the Vatican. They are two observer states in the UN. So that can bring you to 195.

The next category I think is seven countries. These countries are recognized by some members, but not all members. So, think of Taiwan. Most of us think of Taiwan as a country. They're not a UN member, but eleven countries recognize them. Kosovo, I think there are over 100 countries recognize them, but not enough. So, there's this category of seven countries which are recognized by some members, and then there's another category of countries which are only recognized by other countries that are not recognized. So, getting to your point here, Transnistria and Abkhazia. So, these are two countries which are de facto countries, meaning they have all the trappings of a country. They have a government, they have a military, they have their own currency, they have a flag, they have a national anthem, et cetera, et cetera, but no UN country recognizes them.

Matt Bowles: Can you explain where Transnistria and Abkhazia are? And I know that you've actually been to both of them. So, can you share a little bit about what that experience was like?

Ric Gazarian: Yeah. Okay. The Soviet Union fell apart. One of the states that became a country after the Soviet Union fell apart is a country called Moldova. Moldova is a tiny nation in the eastern Europe, probably only a couple million people. When the Soviet Union fell apart, there's a civil war within Moldova. There's an area of Moldova called Transnistria which was primarily made up of ethnic Russians. After this civil war ended, a new de facto nation was carved out, a sliver of land called Transnistria. And again, it's not recognized by any country, but you have to get a visa to go there, Matt.

So, it has all the trappings of a nation. I did an awesome three-day trip there, and everybody says this is like going back in time to the Soviet Union. So, you go to the parliament building, there's a giant statue of Lenin. If you go to Russia or a lot of the other Soviet republics that are now independent countries, a lot of those statues have disappeared over time. They've been taken down. But here you see the red Star, their client state of Russia, meaning Russia sends them a lot of money, they support them financially, and there's even a tripwire of like 500 or 1000 Russian soldiers stationed in Transnistria as well. So fantastic visit and easy to visit and cheap to visit.

Matt Bowles: And what about Abkhazia? Where is that? And what was that experience like?

Ric Gazarian: Abkhazia is in northwest Georgia, the country. In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia and cleaved off two parts of the country. Again, both of these areas of Georgia had a lot of ethnic Russians. And with Russia's assistance, these, in essence, again became de facto countries. So, the same thing for Abkhazia,

you need to get a visa to go there. They have their own flag, they have their own government, but again, a client state of Russia.

So, I was in Georgia. I went up to the last Georgian town, like Zugdidi. And basically, you have to exit Georgia. But Georgia, it's not an immigration office, it's a police station, because when you walk into Abkhazia, in Georgia's mind, this is still Georgian territory. So, in other words, you don't get stamped out of Georgia because you're still going to Georgia because they don't recognize Abkhazia. So, it's this whole political vision and standpoint is we can't give you a Georgian exit stamp because that would be an admitting to the world or to Russia that we now consider this not part of Georgian land. So, it's all these interesting nuances.

Matt Bowles: Well, taking the micro nation concept to the next level, the final place that I have got to ask you about, that you have been is the Principality of Sealand. For people, which is probably most people, that have never heard of the Principality of Sealand, can you explain what it is, where it is, the historical context, and how you ended up going there?

Ric Gazarian: So, yeah, we just spoke about Abkhazian and Transnistria, which are countries but not really countries. And then we have another category of 'countries which are even less like a real country' than the two examples we just went over, Abkhazia and Transnistria. Principality of Sealand is really an abandoned military platform for World War two. It's a British fort which is built in the North Sea that used to have weaponry to shoot down Nazi planes coming to attack England.

This platform was built in international waters. And in the late sixties, an enterprising ex British soldier went to this platform and took it over. There was actually a pirate radio station there. He physically kicked them off the platform. And in the late sixties, he named this platform the Principality of Sealand and named himself Prince Paddy Bates. So, he became the first prince of the Principality of Sealand in the late 1960s. They're now onto their third generation.

I was lucky enough to meet Prince Liam and Prince James and even drink tea with them when I visited the principality of Sealand. So same thing here, Matt. Principality of Sealand has their own flag, they've issued passports, they have currency, they have a lot of trappings of what a nation is. But this is a platform in the middle of the sea. It's like 50 meters by 20 meters. That's all it is. And this family for three generations has, in essence, I mean, I would say for them it's serious with a tiny bit of tongue in cheek. But they would argue it's a real country because there's certain rules to be, I think it's called The Montevideo Convention of 1923, and it says you need to have a permanent population, you need to have defined land, and you need to enter into diplomatic relationships with other countries and basically principality of sea lions. Like, you know what we meet the benchmark of what a country is. We're a country.

Matt Bowles: Well, if people are enjoying this conversation and the types of things that we are talking about, I definitely want to put them onto your podcast as well. Gaz, [Counting Countries](#), can you share a little bit of background on the podcast, why you started it, and what people can expect from the show?

Ric Gazarian: You and I share a lot of the same interests, meaning we love to speak to really super cool, fun, interesting people, and those people live and work in the travel world. Our podcasts are similar in that we both share those traits; except I take mine one a little bit further. So, my one rule to be a guest is you have to be in the process of going to every country in the world or to have finished that goal. So that's the first kind of screening I utilize to see if you might be a potential guest.

So, I've been doing this probably since 2015 or 2016. I do super long format interviews, 90 minutes up to like 3 hours plus, where I talk about everything in their lives from growing up, how travel got incorporated, and how they went along that progression of going from traveler to traveling to every country in the world, and et cetera, et cetera. So, it's a pretty deep dive conversation, which I argue are the most traveled people in the world and possibly the most interesting. But as I told you, I binge ten episodes of yours in the last just week. So, I mean, there's a lot of interesting people to go around. You definitely can compete with me on that title, I think.

Matt Bowles: Well, no competition, brother. I want to encourage people to listen to both of the shows. We're definitely going to link yours up in [the show notes](#) so that people can do that, or they can just wherever you're listening to this podcast, as soon as the episode is over, just type in [Counting Countries](#) and there you're going to find Gaz's show and you can check out some of those episodes. Well, I also have to ask you guys about the [Extraordinary Travel Fest](#). Can you share a little bit about why you started it, what type of people you wanted to attract, and then how the first one went?

Ric Gazarian: In short, I came up with the [Extraordinary Travel Festival](#). The first event was in October of 2022, and the whole idea was a gathering of the community, a gathering of the tribe, of the people who all have the same passion. And what I would kind of put it down to is the people who are coming to my event get much more excited about visiting Cambodia, Papua New Guinea, Syria, Paraguay, than they would about visiting the Eiffel Tower.

So more adventurous, more off the beaten path, more passionate travelers. So, it's a simple idea. You and I, we share the same passion. We've been great friends on Instagram for three years, or WhatsApp for five. Well, what about having a beer together in person, having a meal, having a coffee? [Extraordinary Travel Festival](#) was a multi-day event, multiple speakers. It's almost like 2030 TEDx talks, but they're all on travel. At night are parties and dinners and networking events. The next event, November this year, 2024 in Bangkok. So, for the last year and a half, I have been gathering amazing speakers and planning great events just to bring the community together.

Matt Bowles: So, can you share exactly what the dates are, who it is for, who should come to this upcoming event in Bangkok? And if any MaveRic Show listeners would like to attend, can you offer them a special discount?

Ric Gazarian: Yes. So, you would want to be there by November 13, we start early Friday morning. It will be Friday, Saturday, Sunday. You've had [Harry Mitsidis](#) and [Orest Zub](#) on your podcast. Sunday night we end with the Nomad Mania Travel Award Show live in Bangkok, November 17, nighttime. I will call that the Oscars for travel people. It's a fun event. So that's the event.

The people who should be coming, I'm guessing for all of your listeners, all my listeners, a passion for travel. You're avid, you're accomplished, you like off the beaten path. You like adventure, you want to meet similar people, this is the event to go to. And most importantly, Matt, yes, they can save money, but they have to use the code, **MaveRic**. So, "MaveRic" will save you \$100, and you can join me in Bangkok. You can reach out to me on any of my socials and I'll answer any questions.

Matt Bowles: Awesome. We're going to link all of that up in [the show notes](#), folks. You can just go to one place at [themaveRicshow.com](#) and go to [the show notes](#) for this episode. There we're going to have the link as well as your discount code.

Gaz, I want to ask you a few more questions here, just sort of reflective questions before we wrap this up and move into the lightning round. As you travel the world, one of the things I appreciate about you is that you are not just the type of traveler that's trying to step into the country for a day and check a box and get a passport stamp and keep moving. You work really hard to try to create meaningful, culturally immersive experiences, all the places that you go. And I'm wondering if you could share some tips on how we could all do more of that.

Ric Gazarian: Well, even if it's one word, if it's two words at five words, try speaking the language. Don't be embarrassed how badly you speak. Try speaking, try engaging. And then beyond that, communicate with them as much as possible in whatever language you share, whether it's English or French or whatnot. And then beyond that, I view myself as an entertainer a little bit. So, I go to the wedding, well, I start dancing. I started singing. And again, don't be embarrassed. This is just life. These people are having fun. Don't stand on the sidelines. Don't be a bystander, get engaged, be part of the group, be part of the crowd, celebrate with them, engage with them, talk with them.

Matt Bowles: Gaz, how has your personal conception of travel changed over the years, either in terms of your travel goals, your travel style, or how you conceptualize the important aspects of travel?

Ric Gazarian: I'm going to go back to the theme of going everywhere. 20 years ago, going everywhere might have seemed like a foreign or crazy concept. There were certain countries that you would just never go to, you would never visit from a security perspective, from a comfort perspective. And that, of course, has completely been churned on its head. In short, I'm willing to, in essence, go anywhere at any time. And to look at that in a little bit greater detail. I've lived in Chicago, and someone will come to me, maybe someone overseas, like, oh, Chicago is so dangerous. I would never go there. Well, I've lived there for many years. Certain parts of Chicago are extremely dangerous, which I don't go to, but where I live, it's quite safe. So, it's the same thing. When you say, don't go to Syria, it's extremely dangerous. Well, that's not true. Some parts are very dangerous and other parts are life is going on as normal.

Matt Bowles: When you reflect back on your travel journey up to this point, what impact do you think all of this travel has had on you as a person?

Ric Gazarian: I think the biggest is the perception, I'm much more open minded. And wherever you grew up, I don't care if it's the U.S. or Ghana, if you never leave home, you're going to have blinders on and you're just not going to be fully cognizant or fully aware that people around the world think differently than you. They're going to have different perceptions and different perspectives, and you're going to learn firsthand knowledge. The more you get out the more you speak to people.

And I guess the second part of that is the theme which I also spoke about in the same way. Even though these people are different and have different perspectives and different perceptions, they are also very similar to you. So, it's both sides of the Yin and the Yang that these foreign people are foreign and have different perspectives and perceptions. But most of them hold a lot of the same values that you hold as well.

Matt Bowles: There are some people who pursue visiting the 193, every country in the world as a defined quest. And once they accomplish that, travel is no longer a major central part of their lives. And I'm curious about you, since you're getting very close, after you make it to all hundred and 93 countries will you continue to travel? If so, why? What does travel mean to you today?

Ric Gazarian: Matt, I promise and commit to you that I will still be traveling when I visit the 193. And I think so many of us love to travel, and the more you travel, the more you learn about somewhere else that you want to go. So just Papua New Guinea. I spent these amazing two weeks, but during that trip, I've already planned my next three different trips to Papua New Guinea because I learned about this tribe up on the Sepik River, I learned about this other tribe in New Ireland, and I'm like, shit, I'm going to have to come back here for another cumulative month to see all these other amazing things. So, you learn about a festival, you learn about a town you never heard about, or a park, et cetera, et cetera. I don't think it ever ends for the majority of us.

Matt Bowles: Well, I think that is the perfect place to end the main portion of this interview. And at this point, Gaz, are you ready to move into the lightning round?

Ric Gazarian: Matt, I'm a little nervous, but I'm willing to participate.

Matt Bowles: Let's do it.

All right. What is one book that you would recommend that people should read?

Ric Gazarian: One of my favorite books is Shantaram Gregory David Roberts. Have you read that one?

Matt Bowles: I have not, but I have had it recommended many times on this show, so I clearly need to.

Ric Gazarian: Yes, I agree. You need to read that post haste. And two, I guess I'm not very original, since you've had many recommendations. This book is like 900 pages. It's one of the few books I've read twice. So, it's a travel book, it's a philosophy book, but to me, it's really quite moving and impactful, and I love the book. There's even the tv series on it, which was fantastic. But I think anybody going to India has to read this book. I just love it so much.

Matt Bowles: All right, Gaz, what is one travel hack that you use that you can recommend?

Ric Gazarian: Especially when you're going to more remote destinations, you have to reverse engineer how to get there. Meaning if you're flying to Boston, to London, it's not like, oh, how do I get there? It's which one of the 27 flights this day should I take? But for instance, I am trying to get to the country Nauru. Nauru is a small Pacific nation of, like, 10,000 people, and there's not a lot of flights there. So, I use flight radar and flights from to reverse engineer how to get to places. I'm not looking how to fly there, I'm looking how to fly out of there to see what destinations, what gateways even go to this country, and then reverse engineer all the way back.

Matt Bowles: All right, guys, if you could have dinner with any one person currently alive today that you've never met, just you and that person for an evening of dinner and conversation, who would you choose?

Ric Gazarian: Okay, this is very inside baseball, Matt. Very few people will know who this person is. His name is William Baekeland. And six years ago, I interviewed William. He was the great grandson of a billionaire named Leo Baekeland. And Leo Baekeland invented a type of plastic. And his great grandson William was this 23-year-old travel phenomenon. He was so well versed, so knowledgeable, and at 23, he'd already been to 150 countries, but also all of these really difficult and random places. Shortly after that interview, I found out his name wasn't William Baekeland, and his name is Simon Jesse Gordon.

And it's alleged that this individual conned 20 extreme travelers out of 800,000 euro on trips that never came to fruition. William, after he was outed, disappeared until about two months ago. I think it's the most

remote place in the world with a population. It's called Pickering Island. It's located in the Pacific. And the 40 people who live on this island, this British overseas territory, some of them are the direct descendants of the HMS Bounty. And travelers from my group, this is one of the places they like to go to. So, it's so insanely remote, and it has this population. It was discovered through one of my fellow travelers that William Backland was now a government official on the island of Pickering.

So, I have said William traveled to the most remote place on earth that he was most likely to be discovered, because the only people in the world who would know who he is are the tourists, the travelers who go to Pickering who know of William. So, I would love to sit down with them and go to William, we interviewed before. Let's do part two.

Matt Bowles: That is quite a story. All right, Gaz, 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 Gaz?

Ric Gazarian: Start earlier, and don't worry. So, I think so many of us at one point or the other, like, oh, I can't travel solo. I can't go to this country, or work is in the way, or this is in the way. Don't have so many preconceptions, don't have so many concerns, don't have so many worries. Start biting that apple, build up that muscle, that travel muscle, and go out there and experience the world sooner and more often than you're doing.

Matt Bowles: All right. What are three underrated or less well-known destinations that you would most recommend? People should definitely visit.

Ric Gazarian: I'm going to say Papua New Guinea. I've seen some amazing tribes, like the tribes in Gerewol, Chad that we just spoke about. I saw the Mundari in South Sudan. As far as I can tell, as far as I know, there's nowhere in the world where you will have the quantity and diversity of tribes in one single region or country. And to me, Papua New Guinea stands, heads and shoulders above that. If you're interested in culture, ethnic groups, tribes, that's an amazing place. That's number one.

Number two, Tuvalu, another small country in the Pacific. Same thing. Like, 10,000 people live there. It's either the second or least populated country in the world, and this country only has two flights a week from the outside world. So, talk about remote and cut off. And the thing everybody will tell you is the airport. I think this is the only international airport that doesn't have you go through security. So, when I boarded the plane to leave, there was no x-raying my bag, there was no x-raying my body.

The other very interesting note is the largest expanse of land in the country is basically the Runway. There's no security at the Runway, there's no fence, there's no wall. This is the social gathering spot for the country to come out a little bit before dusk and hang out there. The other thing I did, I rented a motorbike, drove from one end of the island to the other. As you can imagine, it's a pretty short ride, but conceptually, this is one of these countries that's at risk of climate, risk of disappearing. It's like you're driving down the road. I mean, there's really only one road, and you're on your motorbike and out of your vision, whether it's left or right, you see the ocean. So, in other words, it's such a small, narrow country that basically, in so many parts of the country, you can see the ocean from your island site. So pretty interesting place.

Number three, I will do Bhutan. Small nation of 500,000 people, very isolated between the two most populous countries in the world, China and India. And Bhutan. I've been lucky. I've been up there three times. I think Bhutan is what Tibet would have been before the Chinese took over. So, Bhutan, they still wear traditional dress. It's just sparsely populated. There are no big cities. It's just bucolic countryside.

Beautiful panoramas. Unbelievable. Beautiful. They're called Dzongs, but they're monasteries. It's just like walking back in time.

Matt Bowles: And, Gaz, what are your top three bucket list destinations that you have not yet been to that are the highest on your list you'd most love to see?

Ric Gazarian: Yeah. So, I am down to twelve countries left out of my 193. I've got twelve left. I'm going to say my bucket list countries are Turkmenistan, my last country in Asia. This is supposed to be an amazing, unique country, also somewhat isolated. So that's definitely high on my bucket list. Nauru. I was supposed to be there a week ago, but by the time I got my visa, the two flights into the country were sold out. So, I'm going to be making a third attempt of going there in late August. And then, Matt, you're invited. My last country in the world, my plan when I hit 193 is Ireland. So that's the very, very top of my bucket list. There'll be a little get together, and I'm hoping you, buddy, will be there to tip back again us.

Matt Bowles: Let me know. That would be a full circle moment because a lot of my travel journey started when I, as an Irish American, went to study abroad at Trinity College in Dublin, as you know. And that has been a major part of my journey. So, I would love to come to that party.

In the meantime, Gaz, I want you to let people know how they can find you, follow you on social media to come along for the rest of your journey. Listen to the [Counting Countries Podcast](#). How do you want people to come into your world?

Ric Gazarian: Yeah, so for a podcast, just type in "Counting Countries" on your favorite podcast player. I have a blog that's "Global Gaz" so just type that in on Google or social media. And the third one is going to [extraordinarytravelfestival.com](#), use the code **MaveRic**, and come hang out in Bangkok in November.

Matt Bowles: We are going to link all of that up in [the show notes](#), folks. So just go to one place at [themaveRicshow.com](#) and go to the show notes for this episode. There you're going to find direct links to everything we have discussed on this episode.

Gaz, this was amazing, brother. Thank you for coming to the show.

Ric Gazarian: Thank you for having me on. This was really fun.

Matt Bowles: All right, good night, everybody.