

**Matt Bowles:** My guest today is Sibiu Szymanowska. She is a global citizen that has been living and traveling around the world since 2005. She is a full-time digital nomad and the creator behind [Go Global](#) with Sibiu, a brand focused on travel tips, breaking stereotypes and showing the world through a different lens. She is also the co-founder of the [Hybrid Tours](#), a travel company dedicated to combining recreation and human rights. For those interested in leaving a positive mark as a tourist, she has a bachelor's degree in economics and a master's degree in international Conflict and Human Rights. Originally from Costa Rica, she now speaks five languages and has been to almost 100 countries.

Sibiu, welcome to the show.

**Sibiu Szymanowska:** Thank you so much for having me. Very excited to be here, especially because I've been a fan of your podcast for a very long time now.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I am such a huge fan of what you are up to and I'm so excited to get into that tonight. But let's just start off by setting the scene, talking about where we are recording from and the fact that we have agreed to make this a virtual wine night. Sibiu, I am actually in the blue ridge mountains of Asheville, North Carolina, and I have just opened a red blend from Bordeaux that I'm going to be drinking through this evening. But where are you, Sibiu? And what are you drinking?

**Sibiu Szymanowska:** I'm in a little village in the outskirts of Geneva in Switzerland, and I'm having some Prosecco tonight.

**Matt Bowles:** Amazing. I want to start off just asking you. I mean, you've been to more countries than I have. Do you sometimes feature wine experiences in your travels? And if so, what have been some of the most memorable wine experiences that you have had?

**Sibiu Szymanowska:** Off the top of my head, I could think about two that people don't normally think about or places that people would normally not visit. Lebanon in the Middle east has so much wine, vineyards, everything. And we don't normally think about the Middle east as a place that offers wine. But the one place that I would really like to highlight is Moldova, the least visited country in Europe.

I was there two summers ago, and I had an amazing time. The wine experiences there are absolutely to die for. It's so affordable. It's very off the beaten path. And surprisingly, I got really sick when I was in Moldova. Like, really, really sick, out of nowhere. And I was alone, feeling helpless. I don't speak the local language. I don't speak Romanian. I didn't really know what to do.

And people just came out of nowhere to take care of me for two weeks. And once I got better, I went off to the wine experience, of course, but it restored my faith in humanity, and I had no idea what to expect. And I was completely by myself, and I just had so many people look after me and take care of me and bring me meds and bring me food. It was incredible. An incredible experience. I'd highly recommend Moldova, not just because people are kind, but because of the wine experiences.

**Matt Bowles:** That's amazing. Well, first of all, I mean, shout out to Lebanon, because if people don't know about Lebanese wines, I will put them on to a Chateau Musar, which is one of the best wines I have ever had anywhere in the world. And if you go to a wine store, you can ask for a Chateau Musar from Lebanon. It is an extraordinary experience. But, yeah, the whole Beqaa valley is a wine country. I mean, what an incredible, incredible place.

So, I appreciate you shouting out Lebanon. I've never been to Moldova, though. Lebanon, I've been to Moldova, I have not. What is the wine experience like in Moldova? What makes it unique?

**Sibu Szymanowska:** Well, they have the largest wine cellar in the world, couple million bottles. You have to take a golf cart to go in. It's huge. It's massive. They even have a waterfall made of wine. And so, you can just go for the wine tasting experience. You could simply go for the tour. But of course, I went for the full experience, I think was at a five, six meal courses with maybe seven different wines. I couldn't make it past the third one because I got really tipsy. But I did have to prioritize food or wine. Unfortunately, as a foodie, I did prioritize the food, but I still got kind of tipsy. So, great experience, though. I'd highly recommend it.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I can very much remember people recommending the Moldova wine experience to me back when I was sitting in Mendoza, Argentina, in the wine country, drinking Malbec's on a wine tour with other travelers. And people said, you have to go to Moldova. It's a really unique, really extraordinary wine experience. And so, it has been on my list for quite some time. So, you've just bumped it back up there, Sib. So, I appreciate that from you.

I think I would love to start this conversation tonight by going all the way back, talking a little bit about your background and maybe just starting with your name, your first and your last name, where your name is from. And maybe by way of doing that, share a little bit about your parents' story and where they're from.

**Sibu Szymanowska:** Sure. So, my mom is from Costa Rica. My dad's originally from Poland. He's Polish American. And my name is a very unique name. I've never met anybody with my name. Sib, S-I-B-U. And turns out that my parents just wanted something extremely unique. And they spent about six months looking for something that nobody else had. And they found it in a local library, in the national library in Costa Rica and San Jose. And they came across this book about indigenous tribes in Costa Rica. And the one name that really stood out to them was Sib, which is God that has no gender. And Sib is the God of all the good and beautiful, and it's the name of a God of an indigenous tribe in Costa Rica.

**Matt Bowles:** So, can you talk, then, about your experience growing up? I know you grew up mostly in Costa Rica, but you also did spend some time in the United States. Can you share a little bit about your childhood and coming of age experience and what that was like for you?

**Sibu Szymanowska:** So, my dad, he moved to the U.S. as an asylum seeker. He was a refugee from Poland, from communist Poland, and he moved to the U.S. in the seventies. And in the eighties, he met my mom, who went to the U.S. to study English in California. So, they just met, went back to Costa Rica. They had me. And then when I was six months old, we moved back to California.

So, I was born in Costa Rica, but we moved to California when I was six months old, and we stayed there until I was five. And then when I was five, I went back to Costa Rica. But when people ask me where I'm from, I think that's a very loaded question. But to make things easier, I'm originally Costa Rica, but I do think of myself as a global citizen. But if I had to give an answer, it would be Costa Rican, Polish American. That's how I see myself.

**Matt Bowles:** Can you share a little bit, then, about after you went back to Costa Rica at age five or so, you went back to the United States, then later on for a short period for middle school, and you were in the United States during the September 11 attacks. And I'm curious if you can just think all the way back to that age. Can you share maybe a little bit of why you went to the United States for middle school and then

what your experience was like being in the U.S. at that age where you were, and then when that event happened, what you remember and what it was like to be in the United States during that time?

**Sibu Szymanowska:** The way I see it now, obviously, it's been a really long time. It's been more than 20 years. But thinking back, I see a lot of paranoia. That's the way I see it. And so, for me to be 12, 13 and all of a sudden have to be going into school drills, attacks, and mind you, I was in the suburbs of Chicago. It's not like I was on the east coast or anything like that. So that was quite an experience in terms of the amount of islamophobia that was going on. I did not know back then that it was islamophobia. I mean, I was really young.

But the general narrative behind everything that was happening in the war on terror and how this all started, it was interesting to deal with. I did not feel discriminated against or targeted in any way. Maybe that simply had to do with the fact that I was Polish and Latina. But I cannot imagine what it must have been like for any of my classmates who were actually of Middle eastern descent.

**Matt Bowles:** And can you talk a little bit? Also, when you reflect back now coming of age between Costa Rica and the United States, how did your interest in world travel and other cultures initially start to develop when you were younger, when you think back?

**Sibu Szymanowska:** So, it's really interesting because people put Costa Rica up on a pedestal, and I completely understand. I do think it's a country that's worth visiting. It's absolutely stunning. And I know that many people are moving there now, whether it's for retirement purposes or as digital nomads. But personally, I never felt like I fit in, and that's because it's very religious, and there's no freedom of religion.

And by freedom of religion, I mean that I am not religious per se. I was raised in a very secular environment, and so many people, my classmates, even neighbors, were pretty much against our family because of the way that we were raised. So even as a young girl, even before the age of ten, I already knew that I didn't really fit in Costa Rica. So, I was always interested in the world and learning about it.

Instead of going out to play, I just stay at home and browse over encyclopedias and learn capital city names and rivers, not even knowing that one day I'd be able to visit all of the places that I was looking at on the map. And so, as the years went on, I feel like that desire to see the world just started building up. And once I was a teenager, I realized that it was going to be possible, but I needed to make certain moves in order for it to happen.

**Matt Bowles:** What changes have you seen in Costa Rica from the time that you were growing up there to now? Just with regard to the evolution of the tourism industry and everything else.

**Sibu Szymanowska:** I am a big supporter of the tourism industry, I really am. In terms of sustainable ecological tourism, Costa Rica is doing it right. I really think they are. Kudos to them. I absolutely love that. And I love being Costa Rican. I'm super proud of being Costa Rican and I love what they're doing.

However, there's so much gentrification going on. Inflation rates are over the roof, and my family personally, they have not been to the beach in years. They cannot afford to go to the beach. That's how bad prices are. And maybe, maybe potentially you can go to the beach for a day, for a little day trip, you can take the bus, etcetera. But to actually stay there overnight, it's become inaccessible for many low to middle class families in Costa Rica.

So, it's heartbreaking to see, to be honest, and I'm saying this from my own personal perspective, from my family's perspective.

**Matt Bowles:** What needs to happen in response to that, in your opinion, Sibiu, what can be done?

**Sibu Szymanowska:** So national parks actually have a really good initiative in place. And if you're listening to this, this is an initiative, this is something, a policy that's been implemented in many different places around the world where nationals pay a certain price to go into an attraction or to go to a national park while foreigners pay a much higher price. And that is something that I completely agree with. However, I do think there could be more initiatives in place to make sure that locals are getting discounted rates.

Maybe the government, instead of giving out tax cuts to foreigners investing in the countries, they could instead give it to businesses who are allowing locals to stay with them for a discounted price, certain subsidies. I do think that it is possible. And of course, I mean, we are Costa Ricans, we know how beautiful our country is, and there's 5 million of us and many people, I'm sure, are dying to be able to connect with the country and be able to visit it. But unfortunately, that's not the case for most people.

**Matt Bowles:** So, for people that would like to spend time in your amazingly beautiful country and experience Costa Rica, I want to ask you, I guess, a twofold question. One is, what would you recommend about your country? What would you put people on to? How should people experience Costa Rica? And then number two, how can we as travelers be as thoughtful and ethical as possible to leave a positive impact on Costa Rica when visiting?

**Sibu Szymanowska:** First of all, anywhere and this doesn't just apply for Costa Rica, this applies to every single place out there. If you really, truly want your money to be well invested for your dollars to be going to the right places, then I think you should go out of your way. And it does take a little bit of research for you to be able to do local accommodation, local companies, instead of staying in international chains. And it's all about reviews. At the end of the day, I don't necessarily need to stay at a Hilton or a Marriott.

I mean, the way things are set up right now, you can just go by reviews. Airbnb's, unfortunately, are not helping locals in any way, fueling gentrification. It's basically pushing people out of their cities, towns, wherever it is that they live. So, I would basically say do research, avoid Airbnb's and try to travel during shoulder or low season so that you don't have such a big impact on the resources that are in the country. Because don't forget that resources have to be split up not only among the tourists, but also among the people that actually live there. That's one thing.

And another thing, if possible, maybe perhaps go a little bit off the beaten path. I understand that there's certain places in the country that everybody wants to see. I know I want to see them too, but I don't know, make a little bit of an effort to go to a place I mean, maybe many people don't go to. There's still quite a lot of places in Costa Rica that people haven't really reached in such a massive scale. So, I think that'd be interesting to see, and I'm sure it'll become popular in a few years like everything else does. But for now, yeah.

**Matt Bowles:** Are there any particular places or experiences in that spirit that you might put people on to? Let's say some folks are listening to this episode and they're planning a trip to Costa Rica. What direction might you point them in?

**Sibu Szymanowska:** Costa Rica is a very small country, and at this point I would say that a lot of the country has been pretty well covered. The only part that doesn't have as much tourist infrastructure and where there's no airport, they're thinking about building one. Who knows? I would say the southern pacific side of the country. That's the most off the beaten path place in Costa Rica.

And if you're into hiking and trekking, Cerro de los Chivos, which is the highest mountain in the whole of Costa Rica, 3800 meters. Because Costa Rica is so thin, if you manage to get permits, which usually takes about a year, there are only two places in Central America, in Panama and in Costa Rica, where if you hike all the way up and you're lucky and it's not cloudy or overcast, you can actually see both the Caribbean, in this case the Atlantic and the Pacific at the same time. If you make it all the way to the summit, that is wild.

**Matt Bowles:** Amazing. Well, Sibu, I want to talk about your travel journey. You have been traveling the world and living in very different places around the world since 2005. Can you share a little bit about your experience leaving Costa Rica then when you were 17 years old and talk about where you went and why you went there?

**Sibu Szymanowska:** So, I had the opportunity to go to China to do my bachelor's degree. And the reason this happened was because my father, who my parents are divorced, and so the agreement that they had was my father pays for our education and my mother pays for everything else. And my father did not want us to study anywhere in Latin America. So, the obvious choice would have been the U.S.

However, he couldn't afford the U.S., and I completely understand why. He had been doing business in China for a while and he said, why don't you go to China? And so I went, and the idea was only to go for maybe a year, study the language, and then figure out what to do potentially from there, go to Europe. But instead of staying one year, I ended up enrolling in university. This was my choice. And I ended up staying seven years in China from the ages of 17 to 24.

**Matt Bowles:** Can you talk first of all about the university experience? You arriving from Costa Rica to China? What were some of your first impressions about China? And then what was that university experience like?

**Sibu Szymanowska:** So, it was crazy because I was just dropped off. I had no phone on me, no computer, no dictionary, no nothing. I was just dropped off in my dorm. Okay, here you go, let's hope for the best. And that was it. And on the way there, I remember clearly that I'd seen either a KFC or a McDonald's, and it was maybe about 2 km away. And I was like, okay, well, I see something I recognize. And so, I thought to myself, okay, I'm just going to walk 2 kilometers to have meals, something that I could potentially understand because we're talking 2005, 2006, no smartphones.

I wasn't even given a dictionary. I did not speak the language in any way. It was a wild, wild west. I had no idea how to even get started. I couldn't go anywhere, order anything without even knowing what I was ordering. Yeah, it was rough. And before I moved to China, I was pretty useless. I did not know how to do laundry or even boil water. That's how minimal my life exposure had been, because obviously I'd been at home and my parents had been taking care of me. And so, I was basically forced to grow up at a very quick rate once I moved to China.

**Matt Bowles:** And what was the university experience like? When you got there and you met your other classmates, where were the people from? What was that experience like?

**Sibu Szymanowska:** It was fascinating. I like to think that my school in Costa Rica and the middle school that I went to in the U.S. before I went to China, I thought they were diverse. But once I got to China, I realized that that did not in any way compare to that diversity that was in China. The funny thing is that many people go and study in China for the same reason that I did, basically because there are people who want to study abroad, they cannot afford to study in Europe or in the U.S., so they basically end up going to China.

And if you do your research, there are plenty of prestigious universities where you can get degrees that are 100% recognized all over the world. So, I got my degree in economics, and not once have I ever had any problems with that degree. So, it's definitely possible. And all I was doing was paying \$3,000 per year for that experience. And people were from all over the world, truly all over the world. Countries that I never even heard of.

In Africa, one of my best friends is from Djibouti. I was like, what is Djibouti? Every corner of Asia, Europe, Latin America, as well. It was extremely, extremely diverse, and I'm very, very grateful for that. But not only diverse in terms of nationalities, but also diverse in terms of religion, which is not something I've been exposed to before.

**Matt Bowles:** Can you also talk about the dynamics of technological isolation that you started to observe there as well? Because it seems like, on the one hand, you had people from all over the world that were from all different cultures and had all different perspectives to share. So, you were exposed to a lot of new and different things. And at the same time, I'm curious about how the isolation from the rest of the world also came into play and dovetailed with your experience.

**Sibu Szymanowska:** So, we were caught off from the world. We were basically caught up in the world. We lived in a bubble, so things were kind of accessible at the beginning. And then once protests started in Tibet and then the following year in Xinjiang, that's when they basically put up a bunch of firewalls and just cut everything off.

So, Facebook, Skype, which is what we used, me and every single one of my classmates, obviously, we needed to stay in touch with our families. Skype was our main way of reaching out to them. So, once they caught up Skype, that was pretty difficult. And we'd go months without speaking to any of our family members. So, for my mother, it was quite disconcerting to not know if I was alright or not. And this was before Gmail emails every now and then, but, yeah, we were completely cut off from the world. It was rough.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, you ended up learning fluent Mandarin. Can you talk a little bit about that process and the overall sort of cultural acclimation and immersion and the way that you approached that?

**Sibu Szymanowska:** We have smartphones now, and that means that we've become lazy when it comes to languages. But back then, I mean, 2005, 2006, if I wanted to be able to survive, I needed to learn the language. It was that simple. I don't know if it's due to maybe my brain, maybe the situation I was in, maybe a combination of both. But within three months of me starting to learn Chinese, I was already able to communicate in Chinese.

And right around that time, there were lots of trade fairs in the city I was in, in Guangzhou, because it's one of the biggest cities in the world that holds trade fairs. So, if you see anything that's made in China, chances are it comes from the province that I was living in, tons of trade fairs. And so, I was invited to one

of the trade fairs, and there were a lot of Latino entrepreneurs, businessmen, who wanted to start buying their products from China and start manufacturing them themselves instead of actually going through third parties. And I just got hired as an interpreter.

So basically, me, with my level of Chinese, which was just communicating, right, I couldn't even speak it fluently. Then I was hired to work as an English Spanish Chinese interpreter, and, of course, that completely catapulted my Chinese and made it a lot better. Think it would have been that good had it not been for the fact that I was basically skipping class to be able to go and work as an interpreter. And that was absolutely fascinating because every single client that I worked for was a whole different world.

**Matt Bowles:** Can you also talk about your experiences traveling around China, where you went and what some of those experiences were like and the impact it had on you?

**Sibu Szymanowska:** China, even now, it's still quite a difficult country to navigate, but obviously, once you speak the language, it becomes easier, and there's so much to see and do, and it can be quite a bit of a cultural shock. But I think whether or not you are interested in China or not, I do think that it's a country that is worth visiting at least once in your life. If you don't want to go back again, I completely understand, but I do think it's fascinating.

It's just completely out of this world, and you will never see anything like it. And I do think that it's worth visiting, but through my work. So, I was working quite a lot. I do like to think of myself as a hustler. I was traveling around the country, and then I started traveling abroad to different countries. But it was interesting to see the way that people would perceive me, because sometimes they would just think that I was a foreigner, while other times I was actually regarded as a Muslim Chinese, so a Chinese of Turkic descent.

So basically, someone from western China. And that was pretty harsh, because that's when I truly, I mean, I had been discriminated against before because people thought I was Roma back when I was maybe ten or twelve, traveling around Europe with my parents. But this was a whole different level of discrimination that I'd never faced before. And I think a lot of it is due to ignorance.

**Matt Bowles:** Can you provide some context just for people that may not be familiar with the human rights abuses targeted against the Uyghurs Muslim community in China? Just share a little bit of that context, and then how that spillover ended up affecting you in the way that you're describing.

**Sibu Szymanowska:** Of course, there are more than 50 ethnic groups in China. And basically, if you meet a Chinese person, chances are that they're from the Han ethnic group. So, the main ethnic group, which comprises, I think, around 90% of the whole country, there are. However, the other 10% is comprised of smaller ethnic groups who have their own religion, their own language.

In some cases, they look different, and that's why people thought I was actually one of them. Because if you go to western China or if you meet an of course., they do look quite different from the rest of what the population and from what we perceive as the typical Chinese looking person. But China, unfortunately, the communist party in itself, if you want to belong to the Communist Party, you cannot have any religious affiliation, which means that you are, obviously, if you're a Uyghur, for example, or you're a Tibetan, you're in no way represented from a government level.

And China has been trying to shut down Uyghurs for years. Over a decade now, if I'm not mistaken, that's been actively happening for about 15 years now. And we do not hear a lot about this on mainstream media.

But if you look up products that are made by Uyghurs slaves, you'll find that many of our laptops, phones, etcetera, actually have slave labor from the Uyghurs. There's no way of escaping this, unfortunately as a consumer.

**Matt Bowles:** Sibü, I'm curious if you can talk about the experiences that you had working in China as well as your entrepreneurial journey starting businesses in China. Can you share a little bit about that part of your life over those seven years that you were there?

**Sibü Szymanowska:** China, I would say, was a love hate relationship. And hate because of the experiences I just mentioned. Love because I don't think I would have had as many opportunities anywhere else in the world as I had in China. I mean, the fact that I was 17 and I was already working as an interpreter without any kind of qualification was absolutely wild.

So, through these clients that I started getting when I was 17, by the time I was 19, the demand was so high that people were approaching me and they were like, look, we don't want to go to China anymore. We'd rather have you. We know you; we trust you. We'd rather have you on the ground, do everything for us. And so that's how it came. So, with no money whatsoever, no startup Capital, with someone that I knew, I just decided to start an Exporting company.

So basically, people could approach us with different products that they wanted to buy in China. Ideally a container worth of products, and we'd be able to ship it to them. And we never dealt with any food products or chemicals because that's just too risky.

**Matt Bowles:** Can you share your recommendations for people that would like to visit mainland China, for example, I have been only to Hong Kong and Macau. I have not yet been to mainland China, which I feel like is pretty insane because almost 20% of the population of earth lives in Mainland China and I haven't been there, which is crazy.

So, it's super high on my list. I feel like China deserves a lot of my time. I really would like to go for an extended period of time and experience different parts of China. So, for people like me that haven't been and would like to go, what would you put people onto? How would you recommend experiencing China?

**Sibü Szymanowska:** So, Hong Kong and Macau, seeing as they were colonized, they're completely different from the rest of mainland China. And so, when I think of Hong Kong and Macau, for me, they're two completely different nations. I do not regard them as China at all. It's quite different. People think that they are not, but they really are.

But China, I mean, it's just so big, so incredibly big. I mean, you could start off with the easy stuff, Shanghai, Xi'An, the terracotta soldiers and Beijing. But you could easily spend a week going around Beijing with all the different things that there are to do, even me, I spent seven years there, and there's still places that I haven't had the chance to visit. If you had a little bit more time, I'd go to Guilin, which is in the southern part of China.

And one of the bells features some of the mountains there, then Tibet. You need a special permit form, which is a little bit more difficult. However, if you do not want to get the permit, you could also go to Yunnan, which has a lot of Tibetan influence that I would highly recommend. And if anybody's listening to this, I'll live vicariously through you. Because there's an ice city in the northern part of China in Heilongjiang, that I've been dying to go to for years, and I never went.



And I want to hit myself so hard for not going. So please, somebody go for me. Take pictures, tag me because I am dying to go. I need to go back just to do that. Tibet, of course. And if you have a little bit more time, if you cannot go to Mongolia proper, I suggest going to inner Mongolia.

**Matt Bowles:** Is that the Harbin Ice Festival, Sibiu. I have seen pictures of this. For people that have never heard of this, just do a Google image search. Just type in Harbin Ice Festival and do the image search. It is one of the most unbelievable things I have ever seen pictures of. And that is one of the many things that is super high on my list about mainland China.

**Sibiu Szymanowska:** I mean, I think one of the reasons I never went is because I was not courageous enough to go out of my way to buy all the necessary clothing to be able to make it up there because it is cold. We're talking -30, -40 Celsius.

**Matt Bowles:** So, Sibiu, reflecting back on that seven-year period of your life being based in China, what impact do you think that that had on you and how did that experience shape your future trajectory?

**Sibiu Szymanowska:** I feel like I became an adult in China. That's where I feel like I really grew up. Because up until the point where we're still in our parents' home, like, we're guarded by our parents, right? But once you leave your parents' home, you're forced to grow up.

And when I think about China, it's the place where I grew up. I grew up to become the adult that I am today. I feel like it really fueled my entrepreneurial hustle side of me that I kind of knew was there, but I hadn't really explored. I mean, how could I? I was a child, but I was forced to explore it because I didn't have the resources to be able to make a living, right? So, unfortunately, I moved to China, and within the first year of me moving there, father couldn't afford for me to be there anymore. And that's why I had to work so hard to be able to cover all of my expenses.

So, I was doing a lot to be able to just sustain myself. So that was a lot from such a young perspective. But I am incredibly, incredibly grateful for the experience. And I think part of it also fueled and slowly started awakening that passion that I have for human rights right now because of the negative experiences that I went through, but also because I was in such a diverse community, it made me realize, okay, sure, different background, different upbringing, different language, different culture, but so what? Like, doesn't that make our lives that much richer to be able to share that with each other?

And so, my three best friends' girlfriends, one was Buddhist, the other one was Catholic, and one was Muslim. And then there was me, the Atheist. And we got along just fine. Nobody was attacking each other. Nobody was lashing at each other. We just got along long. We understood that we had our differences. Did we agree with everything? No, we did not. But as long as we share the same morals and values, I mean, why not? We could all respect each other and get along.

**Matt Bowles:** You also mentioned that during that period, you got to travel outside of China to other places in Asia. Can you share a little bit about some of those experiences where you went and the impact that that had on you as well?

**Sibiu Szymanowska:** So, it was fascinating to be able to travel then, because, God, that there was no resources. You were just winging it most of the time. And maybe you could book something online, but you just had to figure things out as you went. And that meant that you were more exposed to locals than you are now. But one experience that really does come to mind was going to Cambodia, and I spent a few

weeks there. So, I was traveling by land. So, I just landed in Bangkok and made my way through Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, all the way back into China by land in time for my semester to start.

And being in Cambodia, I was learning so much about what happened there in the seventies, the genocide, the Khmer Rouge. And I remember buying so many books and taking them back because I just wanted to learn more about what happened, but also because I had never heard about it before. Nobody had ever taught me this part of history. And as the history geography geek that I was, I was actually finally able to learn about countries from the ground instead of reading from encyclopedias like I did when I was a little girl.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I also want to ask you about your next move after China. I know that you chose to move to Poland, and as you mentioned, your dad, of course, is Polish. And I'm curious about that choice and then about the experience moving there and reconnecting with your polish heritage and what that experience was like for you.

**Sibu Szymanowska:** So, after six years, I decided that it was time for me to move on. I had a pretty great life, you know, great job. I was earning so well, partner, dog, great apartment, the whole thing. But I just felt like something was missing. And I did feel like my time in China had come to an end. So, I just saved up for a year. And by the end of the 7th year, I was like, okay, I'm done. Time to move on. And I wanted to go to Europe, but also a part of me wanted to just explore the polish side of my family that I never had a chance to explore before.

Interestingly enough, I was raised in a polish environment with polish food and polish tradition, culture. But I think my dad, from the trauma that he experienced living in Poland, he never spoke to us in Polish. So, I did not speak any Polish whatsoever. And when I moved to Poland, I didn't even know how to say, how are you in Polish? So, I was basically starting from scratch.

Curiously enough, my last name is extremely polish, and yet I couldn't speak a word of it. Despite the fact the diaspora in other parts of the world, like Polish, are very proud. They're very patriotic, so they will go out of their way to teach their kids. But my dad did not do that. So, I moved to Poland without knowing. Yeah, sure, I was familiar with the culture and everything else, and I visited as a child, but I was not familiar with the language at all in Polish, let me tell you, is one of the most difficult languages in the world. And now that I speak Polish, I think it was even harder to learn than Chinese. I'm not joking.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, Sibu, I will tell you this, my business partner is from Poland, as is his wife, who is a very good friend of mine. I have many polish friends, and I have not yet been to Poland, and so it is super high on my list also. And I'm wondering if you can share for me and others who are listening who may not yet have been to Poland, what would you put people onto and recommend in terms of experiencing Poland?

**Sibu Szymanowska:** Honestly, Poland is stunning, and I would highly, highly recommend it. I think it even has a desert. People don't know about these things, you know, and it's much more affordable than Western Europe. I mean, prices are starting to go up, but I think it's an incredible experience. And let me tell you, polish food, because people just assume it's all pork and potatoes. There is so much more than that. But you need to know. You need to know where to go and what to eat.

But if there's one city, it's one of my favorite cities in the world. A completely unpronounceable city called Wrocław in German 'Breslau'. If you try to read it, it looks like W-R-O-C-L-A-W. That city, I would highly,

highly recommend. It's like walking into a postcard. It is so freakishly beautiful. It was voted European capital of culture back in 2016.

So even though it's quite small and nowhere near as well-known as Gdansk, Warsaw, or Krakow, I would highly recommend you visit. I'm actually going back in a few weeks. I travel full time, but there are always two stops that I make every single year if I'm in Europe, Berlin and Wroclaw, because it just feels like home. Would I live there again? I would not. I lived there for a year, but I loved it. And I still go back every single year because it holds a really dear place in my heart.

**Matt Bowles:** So, after spending two years in Poland, learning the language, reconnecting with your Polish heritage, can you talk about the impact of all of that that it had on you, that it had on your identity and so forth?

**Sibu Szymanowska:** My dad's family is all still in Poland. It's just him. He was the only one that was left. So, yes. Did I know them? I did. But I was never actually able to speak to any of them growing up. And it's not like Polish is an easy language that's easy to pick up or that it's popular and you can just pick up from a tv show or something like that. Did I know my family? Yes. But I felt completely disconnected from them.

So, for me to be able to actually speak to them and get to know them, like, really get to know them and actually engage in conversations without having my father be there to translate everything for me, it was great. And I feel like, like I said before, would I live in Poland? I would not. But I am so happy I made a decision to connect with that part of my family. I'm really, really grateful for it. And like I said, Poland holds a really dear place in my heart, and I go back every single year to visit, to hang out with friends, family, and to eat.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I know another significant part of your journey was when you ended up spending time in Nicaragua, and I'm wondering if you can take us just on your journey from Poland. What eventually led you to Nicaragua? What were you doing there, and what was your path to getting there?

**Sibu Szymanowska:** So, after living two years in Poland, I decided on a whim that I was going to go to London and move there. This was before Brexit, so it was quite easy being a Polish passport holder. It was quite easy for me to just move there. And so, I did. And I was there for almost two years, but it was not satisfying in any way. I love the world. I love traveling. I love moving to different places. But I do think it's important to be realistic about the hardships that we face.

And even compared to China, I don't think I've ever lived anywhere where I felt so discriminated against. And a lot of it had to do with my last name, because my last name is Polish, and being Polish is basically frowned upon in the UK. So, despite the fact that I speak almost native level English, I have a university degree, I was able to live legally in the UK. It was quite difficult for me to be there. And so, while I was there, I was feeling very lost. But part of feeling lost also led me to actually realize that I could actually pursue a career in human rights, which is something that I had not been aware of before until I moved to the UK.

And in 2015, I found this program. At the moment, they were looking for people to lead projects in Tanzania and Nicaragua. And I applied thinking that I wanted to go to Tanzania because I'd never been to Tanzania. But instead, of course, because I speak native level Spanish, I was chosen to go to Nicaragua, and I was there for almost nine months. It was a life-changing experience. And the funny thing about Nicaragua is that a lot of people don't know this. It's the second poorest country after Haiti in the western hemisphere.

And so, a lot of people from Nicaragua migrate illegally to Costa Rica. So, the same situation that Mexico and the US have, we also have it with Nicaragua. And so, Nicaraguans are very disliked by Costa Rican society. And so for me to be able to be there and see everything from the other side of the border was absolutely fascinating as a Costa Rican, because we've been fed all these stereotypes and lies about how Nicaraguans are, when in reality, once you go there, you realize that people are just going through hardships and they're trying to make the most of the situation that they're in.

**Matt Bowles:** Can you talk a little bit about the project that you were working on in Nicaragua, how long you were there and what that experience was like for you.

**Sibu Szymanowska:** So, I was working for a nonprofit in a small village in a very remote part of Nicaragua, population 404 churches, because that's the main source of entertainment in the village. Four churches spread around the village. We call it the community. And I was there with two different groups, actually, of around 15 volunteers each. And we were working in water, sanitation, and health projects. Now, when it comes to volunteering, I don't think there's any type of volunteering that's 100% ethical, unfortunately.

However, I do have to say that the project that we were working on in terms of sustainability and long-term impact was really, really good. Because instead of focusing on infrastructure, which is what most projects focus on, when it comes to volunteering, you know, building schools and bridges and whatnot, I mean, I'm not qualified. I don't work in construction. I'm not an architect, and I'm not an engineer. Why should I be sent all the way to the Nicaragua from the UK to work on that when locals could just be hired to do that?

But instead, we were doing awareness raising, which is working on behavioral changes, which is not really something that you can measure. And that's what made it so difficult, because the people that I was working with wanted results. You know, they wanted quantifiable results. How do you measure how many people you're impacting when it comes to behavioral changes? You simply cannot. These are long-term changes that are going to be happening over a matter of years. So, it was an incredible project. It was sustainable in a way, because we were working with different parts of the community.

We were working with the mothers, the heads of each household. We were working together with the children, and we were working together with the teachers. So, we were impacting the community from three different ways. And I had the opportunity to go back to Nicaragua in 2018 on my own, completely on my own. And I teared up when I went back, because you could see the changes. You could actually see the behavioral changes. Like, you couldn't see them then, but you could see them a few years later.

And this was really visible, especially among the kids, because the kids are the future, right? And if we work together with the kids, they're actually going to be pushing their parents to change the way that they behave, too, when it comes to hygiene. So that was a mind-blowing experience. And that's when I realized that I truly wanted to work in this field, in development, in the humanitarian sector.

**Matt Bowles:** Sibiu, you sort of alluded to a little bit when you were talking about that, that there are sometimes some pitfalls associated with the broader volunteerism space. And I'm curious if you can just share maybe some reflections on that for people that are well meaning and would like to contribute positively, what are some of the problems that exist in the volunteerism space that people would want to be attentive to navigate around?

**Sibu Szymanowska:** Not only can I give you the problems, but I can actually give you the solutions if you wanted to get involved. Because I've thought about it so much, so much in the western world, especially

among wealthy nations, we have the white savior complex where we need to step in and try to fix everything. And a lot of the time, not only are we not needed, but our solutions are perhaps not ideal because we're not thinking about the community that we're serving.

How can I think about the community that I'm serving if I don't live there, if I'm not a local? If anything, you work together with locals to come up with solutions because this is what we do from wealthy nations. We're just pouring all of this money in without taking into account what they actually need. And I've seen this in so many, so many different places. My co-founder, who I'll be talking about later, we saw it on one of our, we did a field trip to Jordan where we could see that people were living in tents and they were suffering from second degree burns by living in those tents. Why? Because they were bringing people in from all over the world, UN staff, to build tents, different types of tents that people could live in.

And the locals were like, oh, well, you know, this is what we know works because, you know, we live in the desert. This is the environment that we were raised in. And they were completely dismissed, and people would say, oh, no, all the good ones are gone. The people that are left have no brains, no future, no nothing. So, we need to bring in UN staff from wealthy nations to be able to come up with a solution, and they couldn't. And so, we have this tendency to come in and try to bring in what we think and impose the way that we think things should be done. In reality, that's not the way it should be.

We need to involve locals in order to make things sustainable and for them to stop depending on aid, because this shouldn't be going on forever. They should be building up their own resources for them to stop depending on us when it comes to solutions. If you ever wanted to get involved, you're going to go build a school. Again, like I said, if you have any experience in construction, by all means, please do. You can work with the locals, teaching them how to do it. It's not about you taking over the project, but I think if there's any work that involves refugees or children, we should not in any way get involved in any way whatsoever.

Especially, I see all these, like, different programs for orphanages. We are not equipped to deal. We are not psychologists, we're not therapists, and even if we are, we're probably not trained to deal with kids that are in this specific environment. And if you wanted to help, for example, if you're a web developer, if you work in social media, any skills that you think you could pass on to other people, that's how you're going to make it sustainable, pass on your skills. It's not just about you are going somewhere and feeling good about yourself. You want to make a proper impact. Go and teach your skills to others. You know how to make websites, by all means, go somewhere, volunteer, teach them how to make websites, and then leave so they can make their websites on their own. This is just an example, but this is what I mean.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, after you spent those nine months in Nicaragua, I know that you then ended up moving to Berlin. And I'm curious if you can share a little bit about that transition from Nicaragua to Berlin and what that experience was like.

**Sibu Szymanowska:** I experienced culture shock. Sorry, reverse culture shock. I had been living in a village where I didn't really need much, and I felt so content, and I was so happy doing something that felt worthwhile. And so, for me to go back to Europe and be in this shallow, superficial environment where all the people cared about Washington money and how they looked and where they were going to go that weekend, that was pretty intense to me.

And that's the reason why I decided not to go back to London after my experience in Nicaragua. But I'm fascinated by languages and German. I know many people do not like it, but I think it's an amazing language

and I think it's sexy. I know, kill me. But I always wanted to learn German. Always. I was like, you know what? It's time. So, I left London, and again, passport privilege. I just moved to Berlin with a little ten-kilogram suitcase, and I was like, you know what? I'm going to rent a place for a month, figure things out, and if I don't like it, I'll just go back to London. And I ended up staying for four years.

**Matt Bowles:** Can you talk a little bit more about the development of your minimalist lifestyle. And through some of these experiences, how that ultimately came about and impacted and shaped the priorities that you have in your life now.

**Sibu Szymanowska:** I would say that started from the time I was in Costa Rica. And I think anybody who's Latino could potentially agree with me that we have a tendency to be very shallow, superficial. It's all about showing off. And my parents are both from working class backgrounds, so we were taught to spend our money wisely, basically. And of course, all the different moves I've done over the years, I was not in any position to be able to accumulate things, right? At least not too much moving around here and there to realize that I really didn't need much to live.

And as the years went on, and obviously, the more I moved, the more I was like, oh, my God, what a hassle. Having to pack everything, figuring out what I want, what I don't, I end up giving a lot of stuff away. And I've probably had over 25, 30 permanent. I mean, actual permanent addresses. God knows how many, like, temporary ones over the years. And it's such a hassle. It's such a hassle. And so, by the time I made it to Berlin, that just completely solidified my minimalism. Because Berlin is very ecofriendly. It's all about recycling and reusing stuff.

So, I felt like I was in the space I needed to be in. So, all of a sudden, I'm attending clothing swap events, and I no longer need to buy clothes. All I'm buying are shoes and underwear, of course, because we have to buy our own underwear, of course. But it is just really that living in Berlin completely changed the way that I saw things in terms of minimalism and how much I didn't need, basically, because we don't need much.

And now that I'm a full-time traveler, I mean, I travel out of two backpacks, basically a carry on and a smaller backpack and a personal item. And I don't need much. Of course, that means I need to stick to one specific climate because I cannot carry much with me. But being a minimalist is basically choosing your favorite items, the things you love, the items you love, the clothing items you love, and sticking to those and wearing them over and over again until you get tired of them.

**Matt Bowles:** I too, am on team carry on Sibu. I have been traveling the world full time without checking luggage for many years now. So, I appreciate that very much about you. You know, Sibu, one of the things that I love talking to you about is the fact that you've been to so many places that I have nothing yet been. One of them is Berlin. It is incredibly high on my list. I have not yet been to Berlin, and I know you have spent many years there and it now has a really important place in your heart. And I'm curious if you can recommend for me and others that would like to go to Berlin, what would you put people on to there? How would you recommend experiencing Berlin?

**Sibu Szymanowska:** Berlin is not a pretty city. It's just not. But the history, the history in Berlin, God, I mean, if you're a history fan, it's just fascinating. You're just walking through Brandenburg Gate and all of a sudden this is the same gate in which Napoleon and Hitler walk through. You know, I mean, not that that's a good thing, but it's just so historically significant. So, for any history buffs out there, highly recommend it.

If it's summer, go to the lakes. They're extremely clean. You can go to the lakes, go for a swim, and it's all reachable with public transportation.

So, I'm actually going to Berlin soon. You'll find me at the lakes for sure. If not, grab a drink at one of the Spätis, which are the little grocery shops that are all around the city. Get yourself a drink and go sit by the river because you're allowed to drink outdoors, especially during summer, and just go and chill with your friends. Chill out at the park, if you're there on a Sunday, there's karaoke that happens around four or five months of the year, during the warmer months.

And you can just go sit. You don't have to sing. It's just the environment is amazing. You just sit down with a drink because there are people selling drinks and you just sit down and sing with the crowd and everybody, people from all backgrounds, ages, ethnicities, it doesn't matter. Everybody gets together and sings in the middle of a park. And of course there's the typical touristy things, but those are the more off the beaten path, more local things that I would highly recommend.

And if you're listening to this and you want to go to Berlin, I have a map that you can find on my website where I have pinned more than 50 or 60 restaurants that I would highly recommend you go to. Because all I did in Berlin, instead of going out partying and doing techno clubs, I was eating. So please. Berlin is the best foodie city in the world in my opinion.

**Matt Bowles:** That is amazing. I am for sure going to use your map when I go to Berlin. Sibü, I know another thing that happened while you were based in Berlin is that you decided that you were going to get a master's degree, which is incredibly similar sounding to the master's degree that I hold, which is one of the things that you and I initially connected on. I have a master's degree in international peace and conflict resolution. You have a master's degree in international conflict and human rights, which sounds like it was probably covering a lot of the very same things. Can you share a little bit? Maybe just rewind the tape a little bit and reflect on what led up to your consciousness and your passion for human rights and geopolitics and ultimately your decision to move forward and do that master's degree.

**Sibü Szymanowska:** So, by the time I decided to do the master's degree, I'd already been out of school for seven years. So, for anybody listening to this, it's hard. You have a full-time job, you're earning a certain amount of money, and then all of a sudden to decrease your earnings to go back to school, it's a big choice you need to make. But it was something that I felt that I needed to do because despite the fact that I was so passionate about human rights and geopolitics, I felt like I needed something that had a little bit more substance.

So, I wanted to learn from researchers, academics, people actually working on the ground. And that's why I decided to do a master's degree. And the funny thing is, I did it in the UK, even though I was living in Germany. I found a hybrid program and it was really beneficial to me because I was not willing to move back to the UK. But I also couldn't find any degrees that I liked in Berlin. And so, this was the perfect solution for me. And the people that I met were fascinating. But not only that, it was very encouraging to see that the youngest person joining our program was maybe 22, 23, and the most mature one was probably in their sixties. So, it was a very diverse crowd.

**Matt Bowles:** Can you talk about your experience meeting your amazing business partner, Hira, who is also doing incredible work? She and I have been in touch, and she is really an extraordinary person. Can

you talk about meeting her in that context and then how both of your travels and passions for human rights ultimately led to this business partnership?

**Sibu Szymanowska:** So here was one of my classmates, and I remember feeling intimidated by her. And turns out she was also intimidated by me. So that that's the correct way to connect. But Hira, we didn't really speak much at first, and then we went to Jordan together as part of a university trip. And this is where we actually visited Azraq, which is the second largest Syrian refugee camp. And this is where we actually were able to encounter these different prototypes of tents that people were trying to come up with, trying to cater to the local population, and they couldn't come up with a proper solution.

And so, Hira was furious. I remember that clearly, because she was like, you're not including refugees as part of your solutions. I mean, you're making all the decisions for them. Why aren't they being included in the solution making process? So, we visited that Syrian refugee camp. We also visited a Palestinian refugee camp. And to be able to see everything from the ground and to see people that had been basically displaced for decades, for generations at a time, you know about it, but you don't really understand how serious this is until you're actually there on the ground experiencing it yourself.

So that was the first time we actually were able to properly interact with each other. And then a couple of months later, this was in 2019. Hira had a lot of connections in Bosnia, and she decided to organize a group trip through her nonprofit. By then, she'd already set up her nonprofit, which is called our world two. And it is a nonprofit dedicated to changing and reshaping the narratives behind refugees, which I believe is incredibly important. And she was organizing a trip to Bosnia. And even though I wasn't particularly close to her, I was invited, and I decided to come along. And people were in shock because, like I said, I wasn't part of that circle, per se, but I decided to go along anyway. Hey, it was an open invitation. If not, they wouldn't have invited me.

And I went, and it was truly a life changing trip because thanks to the way Hira organized everything, sure, we were sightseeing and visiting all of the beautiful sights that Bosnia and Herzegovina has to offer, but we were also meeting with different characters, different people, day to day, people that had lived through history, people that had been previously displaced, genocide survivors, activists, former refugees. People who were actually able to tell us about what was happening on the ground, and so to be able to learn from people from the ground about what was happening and their experiences, that was life changing to me, because it wasn't just us getting shown around by a guy who was telling us about a history.

No, we were talking to people who had lived through this history, who were telling us about their perspectives and their narratives, and that was completely life changing for me. And as someone who's, again, extremely passionate about learning around the world, for me to be able to learn from people and no longer learn from books. I knew that that needed to be replicated somehow, so I reached out to Hira to see if she wanted to cooperate, collaborate with me, because I've already been hosting group trips as a content creator. And she said that she was all up for it.

But then, of course, the pandemic struck, and we had to wait for a while. And then officially, in 2022, we officially got together and hosted our first trip together to Boston, Herzegovina through all of the contacts that she had.

**Matt Bowles:** Can you talk a little bit about the way that your company, [Hybrid Tours](#), that you co-founded with Hira, has developed and evolved over the years since that first trip?



**Sibu Szymanowska:** When we first hosted that first trip, I'm not going to lie, we thought it was going to be like a little side hustle slash passion project, something that we were going to run occasionally. But the more we were thinking about it, the more we realized that it was something that needed to happen. And we did our market research to kind of see what the environment was like, what other travel companies were offering, and we realized that there aren't really any companies offering what we're offering.

But not only that, if companies think about sustainability, if they think about impact, if they think about ethics, normally you do the founding of the company first, and then within two, three years, you start thinking about how to make it more sustainable, more ethical. Right. We were thinking about ethics and sustainability from day Zero. And so, by partnering permanently with Hira's nonprofit, we're able to deliver that right from the start. And that is the main target, that is the main purpose of our trips. I've been actually told by people to just focus on trips. I know I'm very well-traveled. I could easily run trips. They could easily sell out.

Why do I need to focus on trips from a humanitarian aspect? And it's because what are we going to offer if we don't do it that way? You know, there's so many other travel companies out there, it's not even about competing with them. How am I going to niche down? How are our products and our services any different from what other companies are offering? And honestly, as someone who has been involved in the humanitarian field since 2014, 2015, I'm not going to lie. It's been incredibly difficult for me to gain employment in this field.

Despite the fact that I speak so many languages and I have a couple of degree certificates, etcetera. I realized that I wasn't going to be making a proper impact that way. And even if I did, okay, I get hired by a company, so what? So, I get to work in an office, and if potentially, like, maybe. Maybe I'll make some kind of impact in the future. And I realized that if I really, truly wanted to make an impact, that I needed to, first of all, partner up with someone who knew about the field more than I did and to work on it independently.

So, we went from being a little side hustle to being a full-fledged company. And this basically happened in 2023, when we actually got to be part of a business incubator that lasted five months, held in the U.S. It was all online. This was basically what catapulted our business from being a little side hustle to being a full-fledged company. It was through their support and their mentorship that we realized that we had something incredibly unique to offer.

**Matt Bowles:** Can you talk a little bit more about the uniqueness? For example, your website talks about the way that the tours center. Cultural immersion, supporting local economies, off the beaten path experiences, amplifying displaced voices. And I'm wondering if you can share a little bit about what these tours are actually like, including particularly how you work with refugees and displaced people.

**Sibu Szymanowska:** So, what we wanted to do, I think it can be very intense to go to a country and just learn about displacement, about refugees, about genocides. It's let's face it, we're all human beings. It's too much. And realistically speaking, a lot of people, when they think about Bosnia-Herzegovina, all they think about is war. But there's so much more to the country than that. And so, we wanted to highlight the best of both worlds. We wanted people to be able to go and learn from people on the ground, but we also wanted to include tourism and the cultural aspect and sightseeing.

And so, we came up with this concept of [Hybrid Tours](#). Right? So, a mix of fun, recreation, but also education to be able to learn about people from people on the ground. So obviously, every destination is

going to be completely different. So, it. In Boston, Herzegovina, for example, the people that we meet are no longer refugees. They have lived experience of displacement, but they're no longer refugees. Many of the people have actually come back to raise awareness, to become activists, because what is happening right now in Boston-Herzegovina is that the UN, basically, it was a wound, and they just put a little band aid over it, and they did not solve things properly.

And we can see this happening in different places around the world. And the fact that they allowed the war to continue, the genocide to continue for three years, from 92 to 95, that speaks volumes about the geopolitical interests of the world that we live in. And you can see that in different places around the world right now. And you can see it right now. Of course, as we all know, in Palestine. In Jordan, for example, we have had people ask us if it's possible to cross into Palestine to be able to support people on the ground. We do not believe that that ethical in any way because it is a war zone after all. And even if we don't hear a lot about the West bank, that doesn't mean that there isn't stuff happening there. It's just not as covered by the media.

Because the main area that the media is focusing on is Gaza. They're not focusing on the rest of the country. Right. But in Jordan it's different from Bosnia-Herzegovina because in Jordan we'll be meeting with people who are Palestinian, Jordanian, whose families were displaced. And so, we will be talking about people who are two, three generations down. We'll also be meeting with Iraqi refugees, people that have been displaced in the past, and Yemenis as well.

And this is all to highlight how crucial Jordan has been when it comes to displaced communities. Because what we don't realize, and we normally think, and we assume, and this is all things to the media, that most of the people that are displaced, that most refugees end up going to Europe, taking job benefits, et cetera, right? This is the general narrative, when in reality more than 80% of people who are displaced usually only end up making it to neighboring countries. And this is a statistic that most governments and media will not tell you about.

So, the chances of someone in Syria, in Palestine actually making it to Europe are pretty much nonexistent. They will most probably end up in a place like Jordan, for example, that has taken in so many refugees over the decades. So, we'll be able to learn about Jordan on the ground and also understand how important Jordan is as a player when it comes to geopolitics.

**Matt Bowles:** One of the many things that really warmed my heart about going through your [Hybrid Tours](#) website and reading the itineraries of the trips is that on the description of the Jordan itinerary, it says you'll be learning about history from people who have lived it. If you do not believe in the liberation of Palestine, this tour is not suitable for you. That warmed my heart so much that you put that out front, and you are so clear about that upfront. And I'm curious, since you obviously do that very intentionally, what kind of people are you attracting onto these trips? Can you share a little bit about who comes on these trips to Jordan, for example, and then a little bit more about the itinerary about what that experience is like in Jordan.

**Sibu Szymanowska:** The interesting thing is that when we first started, we actually had an application form in place, but we realized that that was turning a lot of people away because they thought that maybe the requirements were really high. We had to come up with a different strategy to be able to attract more clients. But we also needed to filter people because, I'm sorry, but we don't want any Zionists on our group. You know what I mean? That would be extremely disrespectful.

And actually, if you were to read through our terms and conditions of the [Hybrid Tours](#), you realize that there's a specific clause that says you agree to be respectful to every single person that we're going to be encountering. Do you have questions? Please, by all means, ask them in a respectful, ethical manner. But if you're going to be attacking people that we're working with, and these are very vulnerable people, you're getting kicked out.

And if we're losing money in the process, we do not care. They're our priority. You're here to learn with us, but the important thing is for them to be respected. It was interesting because we've had a lot of people go through our website and they're like, oh, well, this is interesting, but I don't really want to do that much learning on a trip. That's completely fine. That means that you're not our target audience. I completely respect that. If you're looking for a trip in which all you'll do is take Instagram shots and, you know, go around the country, by all means, be my guest, that's completely fine. But if you're looking to learn a lot more about a country in a way that you've never done before, then yes, choosing a [Hybrid Tour](#) would be an excellent thing to do because you'll be learning from people on the ground. It's not just that we're helping you gain exposure to the typical, oh, you're going to Egypt, you're going to be meeting up with one guide.

That one guide is the one person you're going to get to interact with and get to know everything about the country with. No, you'll be meeting different people throughout the trip, people that you'll be able to ask questions to and people that you'll get to hear more about the country from. And you've been to the Arab world as well. And I think there are so many misconceptions behind the Arab world. And I know this because I'm a content creator and I see it on my content all the time. Terrorists, murderers, pedophiles, people who don't respect women rights, all of that could not be further away from the truth.

By going to Jordan, I feel like Jordan is the perfect gateway into the Middle East, not the UAE, because Dubai, Abu Dhabi, that's like a little playground. Right? But if you really, really want to learn more about the Middle East, Jordan is the best way to start. And we will be expanding to other places in the future, but for now, we're focusing specifically on Jordan.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I also want to ask you a little bit more about the Bosnia trip. I have spent a couple months in the Balkans, and I've been to Mostar, and I have a sense of that history. But like, I was reading through your itinerary and I was just completely blown away. One of the things that you do in Mostar is actually meet with the president of the association of former prison camp inmates.

And I want to ask you maybe if you can share a little bit about that as an example about that particular experience. But the other thing that your website says on this trip, itinerary, it says, "With fascism and right-wing parties once again gaining ground in Europe, it is now more important than ever to learn about the Bosnian genocide". So, I'm wondering if you can share a little bit about those experiences. And then also what lessons we can take from the Bosnian genocide for today.

**Sibu Szymanowska:** The interesting thing about the [Hybrid Tours](#) is that every time you come on a tour, we'll be meeting different people. We'll be meeting with completely different people every single time. So, every time we go to Bosnia, we do not know who we're meeting up with. It all depends on availability, and we also want to make it as diverse as possible, and we want to use our trips as a platform. It's not that these people in Bosnia-Herzegovina don't have a voice. It's that these are voices that are rarely heard.

So, by using our trips, we're giving them an additional platform for them to reach travelers that they would otherwise never, ever in their wildest dreams reach. So, you were talking about this man that we met. He

was actually in a concentration camp for more than a year. We're talking about the nineties. Nineties. This was nothing 30 years ago. Imagine meeting someone who was in a concentration camp in the nineties. He was in his early twenties when this happened. He's now in his fifties. So, for us to be able to meet with him, and he was telling us about his experience and how he was imprisoned and then working in labor camps and the hardships that he went through.

I mean, these are stories that I rarely heard in the western world, in the western media, that is predominantly what we are used to hearing. This time around, we met with someone new, for example, and this man had served in the army from the ages of 19 to 22. He was now in his fifties. We went to a bar over Shisha, had tea, coffee, beer, wine, what people ordered whatever they wanted. And we were just basically talking to another person about his experiences on the ground and how it was like for him to be living through the Bosnian war in the nineties as a 19-year-old.

And we just want to be able to highlight those stories, you know, because they're rarely heard. They're truly, truly rarely heard. And that's the beauty of what Hero's organization, the organization that I've partnered up with, or worldtwo dust. She brings these narratives to light. But when it comes to the Bosnian genocide, you talk to people, and sometimes I'll have people ask me on social media, why do you keep bringing this up? It happened 30 years ago. Like, what does it matter? It matters because we continue to make the same mistakes as humanity over and over again. Haven't we learned anything?

We're allowing our governments to continue to perpetrate these horrible, horrible acts against innocent people. We haven't learned a thing. And the problem is, if you just brush it under the rug, which is what basically happened in Bosnia-Herzegovina, they were just, you know, put a little band aid. It happened. It's okay. Let's move on. No, that's not the way things should have been dealt with. And we're seeing it now again. It's been, what, 910 months already? Are we going to be learning about this in history books 2030 years from now and think, oh, well, oh, we should have done something about it? We didn't. Didn't the world do something? Wasn't the world outraged?

And we've seen, I wasn't alive then, but I've seen pictures of people protesting against the war in Vietnam. I've seen pictures of people protesting. Of course, I was alive then against the war in Iraq. It's just a vicious circle that we continue to get involved in, where these powerful countries come and take everything away from more vulnerable people. So, we need to learn about history in order to not repeat history again.

Sometimes we think that we're helpless and that we don't have a voice or a say, but we do. We can ask a collective, because one person doesn't mean it, anything, you know? But if you get together with a bunch of other people who have the same values and morals as you do, then you can make a difference. That's why it's so important to learn about the Bosnian genocide.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, I appreciate that so much about both you and Hira and what you're doing and how prominently you center the genocide of the Palestinians contemporarily and how you build all of these historical connections and everything else and all of the work that you do. I think it's so important. So, I appreciate you both so much for doing that.

All right, we're going to pause here and call that the end of part one. For direct links to everything we have discussed in this interview, just head over to [the show notes](#) at themaverickshow.com. Go to [the show notes](#) for this episode. There you're going to find all of the ways to find and follow Sibū. You are going to find the link to check out the other upcoming [Hybrid Tours](#) and a special discount code so that you can get a

discount for going on a Hybrid Tour. All of that is in the show notes at [themaverickshow.com](http://themaverickshow.com) and go to the show notes for this episode. And remember to tune into the next episode to hear the conclusion of my interview with Siby Szymanowska. Goodnight, everybody.