

Travel Writer Sophy Roberts: On The Road Less Traveled

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Melissa Biggs Bradley Hi, and welcome to Indagare's Global Conversations, a podcast about how traveling the world shapes our lives and perspectives. I'm Melissa Biggs Bradley of Indagare, a company I founded on the belief that how you travel matters. I'm sitting down with some of the most inspiring and innovative people I've met while on the road. They're activists and conservationists, designers and filmmakers, writers, chefs, and entrepreneurs. They will share stories about their travels and how they lead lives of passion and purpose. They inspire me, as I hope they will you. Welcome to the Conversation!

This week's guest on our podcast is travel journalist and author Sophy Roberts, who in my mind is best described as a global nomad or adventure or an off the beaten path seeker. I've known Sophy and followed her impressive career for 20 some years, and I was extremely happy to talk to her from her home in Dorset, England, where she admits that before our world went on pause during COVID 19, she's never spent as much time. Sophy is an old school journalist with an impressive lineup of schools under her belt. Her B.A. in English comes from Oxford University. Her Masters from the Columbia School of Journalism. And she also holds a postgraduate diploma in photojournalism from the London School of Printing. On paper, she's traveled the high-end road. She's been a longtime correspondent for such glossy publications as Conde Taste Traveler and Departures, and she launched the Financial Times "How to Spend It" travel column as the travelista. But with her refreshing frankness and a lot of humor, she'll tell you that none of the glitz and glamor of travel that she's experienced has ever really mattered that much to her; that what has always fueled and inspired her was to get out there to the far corners. Like so many of the world's best travel writers, she's really an explorer at heart. Someone who is compelled to get away from the flow and into new territory, very often outside of her own comfort zone. On her many journeys, she's ventured to some of the world's most remote and really wild destinations, from Uzbekistan and Senegal and Chad to Mongolia and Siberia. The latter two in particular are places, as you will hear, that immediately resonated with her for many reasons, but most of all, because they are both so decidedly off the tourist grid, off any kind of grid in fact. Suffices to say that she has drunk vodka out of a carved cup made of the ice covering Lake Baikal, successfully tracked the wild Siberian tiger, of which there are only some 500 left in the wild, and criss crossed Siberia, a territory that covers an 11th of the world's land surface to research her marvelous new book, *The Lost Pianos of Siberia*, in which she chronicles her three year search for antique pianos. While huge swaths of Sophy's story of self discovery and exploration play in Central Asia, there's also a special place in her heart that I can imagine is shaped like Africa, for she has journeyed far and wide into the African continent and cannot get enough of it. You will hear her speak with passion and knowledge about conservation and the critical part that tourism plays in eastern and southern Africa, as well as about her exploration of lesser visited countries in West Africa, including West Ghana, Senegal and Congo. I hope you enjoy the wide, sweeping conversation I got to have with Sophy and that it will inspire you to pick up her just released lyrical tale of discovery and adventure, *The Lost Pianos of Siberia*.

So let's start with how you ended up as a travel writer, because as we both know, while it's an amazing career, it's not something that most Oxford graduates would aspire to.

Sophy Roberts Yeah, it's a good question. I actually wanted to work in conflict journalism at the beginning. I was a student at the Columbia School of Journalism, but I also wanted to be a mama and I wanted to have a home that I could enjoy and feel settled. And that's what I have. I live in West Dorset on a farm with two young boys, and Condé Nast Traveler was launching in the U.K. a good 10 years after the US had blazed the trail. And I got a job making tea when I came back from Columbia University in New York and I started making tea. And I realized that I could still travel without having to go into a conflict environment and still be exposed to extraordinary places, remarkable people, issues, while not putting myself at the kind of personal risk that modern conflict journalism requires. So it was an opportunity; I had a lot of learning to do. I didn't come from a family that had traveled a great deal. I came from a family who were nomadic and had ended up living in Scotland where my childhood was. But they weren't travelers after they had children. So, you know, I was very lucky. I got my break with Condé Nast Traveler. And then I did two years to the day on that magazine. And my wonderful editors said to me at the time, she goes, Why are you handing in your notice? And I said, I always said I'd do two years. And then I left because I wanted to be on the road. I didn't want to be in the office. I needed to feel it and breathe it and taste it and smell it and write about it. So I'm much more of a writer than an editor.

MBB Now, I know that at one point you worked for one of the Mitford sisters. Was that before or after the Conde Nast Traveler stint?

SR Yeah, that was incredible. I studied at Oxford and then I did a year in London doing a photojournalism, actually, because I was kind of unsure, again, around this whole idea of conflict. And to finance it, I was Jessica Mitford's researcher for her book that she was doing about the American way of death. It was she was revising that 1963 book and she was totally wonderful. I have a series of letters, which is somewhere in this office, that she where I was corresponding with her and her sister, the Duchess of Devonshire, Debo, and everything was done on fax machines. And incredibly, I mean, they were they were famous letter writers that talking about the American film industry and Debo doing searches up in the north of England and Darbyshire, me doing searches in London and all this correspondence by fax with these very eccentric tons of English phrase. It was fantastic. It was a real treasure. And she taught me how to be brave, actually.

MBB What do you mean she taught you how to be brave?

SR To be profoundly curious and be brave about that curiosity. There is a wonderful license that you get as a journalist as long as you use that license respectfully, which is instead of having to always spend two days finding someone's trust and confidence, you can go in pretty quick and people open up if you approach it in the right way. And she taught me how to do that very efficiently and she taught me that journalism gives you magnificent license to be curious, actually, in a way we don't have in other kinds of lives. You know that from your own career; it's an amazing thing. It's a gift.

MBB It is a gift. And it opens a lot of doors. But since you and I have been in the industry, being a journalist has changed a lot. I mean, you mentioned fax machines, but in so many other ways, it's changed, too, since you entered it and where we sit today, you know, with social media and the Internet. Can you talk a little bit about how those changes have served you for the better, but maybe also for the worse?

SR That's a really nuanced question. When I first entered it, it was very well-paid job. It was well-paid. It was good enough. You were assigned. You worked with photographers in the field, which was an incredibly dynamic and exciting process, because to do what I do well, you have to concentrate 24/7 and you have to

really work. It's not just a holiday; and a photographer has to do exactly the same with very rare hours of light that they get. You can't do both and you certainly can't do both well. A great photographer is a great photographer. A good writer is a good writer. But it's extremely rare to have a writer that can take pictures or a photographer that can write. And what has happened with the erosion of the media and the replacement of that media with other content producers is that we are now expected to do everything. So I now shoot and write stories. I would much rather write stories and work, wherever possible, with photographers who bring a completely different art and talent to the game. I'm lucky I do have a few key collaborations that I just hold on to.

MBB Yes! Like Michael Tarek, who's the fabulous photographer whose work is featured in your new book. And I actually want to ask you about him because I find your collaboration's really inspiring. How did you meet and what do you think it is that connects your styles?

SR Michael's like a brother to me. He's a very, very close friend and we're very different. I'm quite forthright and he's very subtle. And when we go into an environment, we can kind of read each other's thinking and finish each other's sentences. And that matters because when you're interviewing and trying to get somebody's trust — and this is especially true when I was working Siberia on a much longer project — I have to be allowed to get that energy and sometimes it can take two hours, sometimes it can take 10 minutes. And in so doing, I kind of warm the situation so he can start to take a photograph. And when he takes a photograph, he's doing, as I said, on a film camera. It's really considered. So instead of going in with a digital camera going *makes camera shutter noise*, he might have two hours to think about the fall of light and also the way that that person's face has now dropped into being...their faces relaxed. It's got into the space where they truly belong. He therefore takes very, very authentic pictures. So it's a yin and the yang, and sometimes the male-female thing works to our advantage. I don't know how to explain it other like it's like a sort of brother sister thing. We're quite different, but it's very, very complementary and it's fun. You know, he's very funny, man.

MBB So how did you meet him?

SR Michael, he was put on a job with me by Departures up in Canada. I mean, Michael's great because... take the Siberia project is...I kind of came back. He wasn't with me that first time I heard that piano and I said, I want to write a book looking for pianos in Siberia. Only Mike will go: Yeah, let's do it. Only Michael would do that because it cost him a phenomenal amount of money. He spent weeks and weeks away from his partner. He's a kind of a poet and a renegade. I love him. You know, you need a certain type. It's not logical.

MBB Well, I love that. A poet and a renegade. That's obviously an ideal partnership. OK, but getting back to the kind of storytelling you're now doing while on the road. I want to know what role social media and the kind of more immediate storytelling plays in your work now.

SR I have to be my own storyteller. I have to be my own platform. And because right now, print lags behind the digital storytelling. And if I'm in the field in Siberia or in Tanzania, I can create authentic and immediate storytelling through Instagram in a way that you cannot do any more in print. It's much more considered, thoughtful kind of storytelling. So, yeah, it's kind of...it's a revolution. It's still finding its feet. But I hope that great travel writing and great travel photography is not lost in that revolution completely because it's really important.

MBB Yeah. And I found I'm sure you agree; I mean, it sounds cliché to say you're looking at the same story through different lenses, but when you get to go out in the world and collaborate with wonderful photographers, even though the subject is the same, I always felt that the photographers that I worked with brought such different angles to how you then also would start to think about a story as a writer. So it truly was a collaborative art that is sadly, I think in many ways lost.

SR Yes. And it's a bit like...as a single traveler, you lose something by not having a person with you with whom you can bounce off that impression or that shock or that surprise or indeed the nuances of interpreting some kind of cultural encounter. I need to be able to talk it through when it's complex. And I value that in Mike and in my photographer colleagues enormously. They see what I don't see. That's why they're photographers. And I hear what they don't hear. That's why I'm a writer. And those two things come together, it's double the power as opposed to just being solo. So that's the thing I most worry about as a writer — is that the economics of magazine and newspaper writing will remove that collaboration from the space. I hope not.

MBB And to me, that's really...that was the definition of journalism, as you said. We can be storytellers in the moment. But journalism was this combination of those two things coming together in a way that produced something powerful and unique that is different from than just someone telling a story or just someone taking a photograph. It's the combined effect of them.

SR And something that was also...that is and should be questioning...you ask the question, how has travel changed? Twenty years ago, there was a huge boom in luxury. A huge boom. Everything was glorious. Everything was impressive. We're now saturated with high end and not everything is fabulous. There are lines we have to draw between the truly great and the pseudo-great. And that means you have to ask more questions as a journalist and you can only ask those questions with space and time and the opportunity to question. And that is something that, again, this kind of compression of resources, kind of is cutting that process off. I've always felt quite strongly that a great travel article shows both the dark and the light, the good and the bad. If you only write a piece that says everything is perfect, I don't trust that storyteller. Just as anybody that's come back from the most spectacular safari will say, oh, my God, it was beyond except for...there will always be something that is a tiny little caveat. It's a concession of imperfection. We are human beings. Imperfection, we believe. Perfection, we don't. So that space to be real, we need to hold onto that. That's journalism as opposed to marketing. And I sometimes feel I fight for that more and more than I did when I started off 15, 20 years ago.

MBB I think you're right, and I think that's going to be even more important, actually, in the new travel landscape that's taking shape now. And it makes me wonder when you're asked to cover a story, what are you looking for me? When do you say yes to an assignment?

SR That's a very good question. So because for many years I said yes to everything because I was trying to get ahead and make my name and and make a living. And then I realized that I was feeling quite lonely, actually, to be brutally honest. When you sit in a very smart hotel and you're in that room on your own, there is no beauty in it. To be honest, there is no...it's about...that's what I mean; travel is an act of empathy. It's not just consumption and consumption you can do solo. I can shop through England when I'm on my own, but I can't travel like that. So I went to see the equivalent of a therapist and we boiled down for two days the thing that really mattered to me and I have — the original is on my computer screen as I talk to you. I have three values that matter to me. One is a story has to be enigmatic; it has to be unfinished. There has to be something that is a little bit magical, enigmatic. The other thing is it has to be humane. It has to affect the way we live as human

beings in a positive way. It has to be humane. And the third thing is, am I capable with my ability as a woman, as a white woman and as a Western woman, able to do it better than somebody else in my pursuit of being a perfectionist? And if those three things come up when I'm given that story, I always do it. If two of them come up, I do it if I need to earn the money. If one of them come up, I don't touch it. Those are my principles.

MBB I love the rigor of that process. And while it's tempting to be attracted to discovering anything new, I think that it's really important to have a strong personal compass. And that's a great guide to be following it. So speaking of finding stories, Sophy, I want to talk about your book because it sounds like the entire journey that led you to the story — the research, the writing — was full of magic and sort of mystery. So let's start at the beginning. How did you find this topic or how did it find you?

SR Okay. Well, yeah, no, that's a big one. So it's a book called *The Lost Pianos of Siberia*. And it started strangely in Mongolia. Mongolia is a place I've been going to for many years. I first went about 15 years ago for the *Financial Times* on a story about a cashmere dealer who was making some of the best cashmere in the world for Hermes and various brands. And I went out into the middle of nowhere from Ulaanbaatar to this place above the Orkhon River in western Siberia; very, very, very beautiful part of the country, totally fenceless, this snaking silver, silver river beneath us. Mongolia has more horses than people. It's like stepping into a different time. And I made great friends with this cashmere dealer; he was a German and he'd married a Mongolian woman and they were bringing up their children in Mongolia in the summertime and in Nepal in winter. And I ended up returning again and again with my own children. We went there every summer for our kind of holidays. I loved it because it was one place where I was never being challenged by digital. It's just total cutoff and it's beautiful. And in 2015, I was there and we all stay in these Mongolian tents, the round felted tents.

MBB Yurts.

SR Exactly! In one of those tents, there was a young woman who had trained in classical music in Italy for eight years. She was a Mongolian concert pianist called Odgerel Sampilnorov. And she was playing on a small grand piano Bach. She was playing Bach in the most remote place you can imagine; the music coming out of the middle of this, rolling around, the felt of that is the most perfect acoustics in the middle of nowhere with the stars above. And my German friend leant over to me and said, I remarked, I've never heard anything so beautiful. And he said, no, no, no, there's something wrong with that piano. It was a modern Yamaha that had been slightly damaged by the extreme climate. He said, we must go and find her one of the lost pianos of Siberia. And he was referring to a very particular moment in time in 19th century Russia when Russia was completely obsessed by this European instrument, the piano. And it infiltrated into the far reaches of that empire, which covers...Siberia, covers an 11th of the world's land surface. But it was just over the border from where I was in Mongolia. And so that started a hunt for a piano that had a sort of better sound and an interesting history. And it's a really kind of...it's a bit Mitford. It's a bit eccentric. I spent three years looking for a piano. And that's what the book's about. But it started. inMongolia. And it finishes in Mongolia. And it's a place that is really precious to me.

MBB In your travels around Siberia, what were some of the things that surprised you the most?

SR What surprised me was that, you know how much — we share this, I think, Melissa — a deep passion for Africa. Africa takes me to a place where I feel that I'm living in a different time. It's it's the fencelessness of it. It's as far as the eye can see with nothing but nature in between. And Siberia has that on an extraordinary scale.

So, of course, I approached it — I'm English — you know, I remember Perestroika. I approach it through all the clichés of James Bond baddies, you know, repression, gulag, prison, exile, industrials, carnage, all of these things. And, yes, all of those things exist. But there is also another story to tell. And that other story is what I became so gripped by — this really profoundly beautiful landscape, unbelievably beautiful landscape with wild nature that makes the hairs go on up on the back of your neck. And people who are so humane, you know, they're so...you knock on the door and say, I'm looking for a piano in some remote village in the Russian Arctic. And they're like, come on in and they will give you time and space that we don't give people in the West. We just don't give it. It's all yours when you're in Russia and in Siberia. So that was what I loved. And I just can't tell you how special the place is once you start to get into some of that back country. The Altai Mountains, Kamchatka. I mean, it's crazy. It's really beautiful.

MBB And what is it like to...I mean, what are the logistics of traveling there like, Sophy? Were you there through every kind of season? How did you get around? What kind of places did you stay?

SR Siberia starts near Ural Mountains and finishes at the Pacific. It was Chekhov that said, you know, "Begins in Ekaterinburg and ends goodness knows where." So it's a completely amorphous, huge thing that only has one real solid archery running through it, which is the Trans-Siberian, and that's four thousand five hundred miles of track. At one time before the revolution, it was incredibly glamorous. You know, there's wonderful descriptions of of early travelers to saying, you know, there's diamonds that made one's eyes ache and carriages, the restaurant car was like a music hall with a Bechstein piano that they used to stuff the dirty dishes in. Now it's really, really utilitarian. It's utterly unglamorous, but it's fantastically exciting to sit on that. I got on and off that train on lots and lots of short journeys all the time. Sometimes I was four weeks in the field and I would use it. Hop on, hop off. I used a lot of helicopters. Helicopters there are used like busses for some of the indigenous communities whose children come to and from a boarding school. So I would pop on those busses, not all of them, to be honest, busses that would pass an American aviation check. But, you know, I used hovercraft to cross the frozen Lake Baikal. I was very opportunistic and I was traveling very much as a writer and not as a tourist. So I was opportunistic. I took one Uber ride. It was called Blabla cars for eight hundred miles. So lots of different mechanisms.

MBB So where were you staying for the most part?

SR A mix. Lots of home stays, which were a delight because it's a very natural way for them to host, the homestay, and really quite delightful, you know, sort of Russian folkish, good natural food, fish, berries, mushrooms. I also stayed in modern, grim apartment blocks. I also stayed in AirBnBs or the equivalent thereof. I stayed in tents, which they called "chung," which belonged to the nomadic reindeer people in the far north, the Nenets. So all sorts.

MBB And did you have a favorite time to be there?

SR Siberia and winter is without doubt my preference. One: it's it's much more poetic. The landscape, when it's covered in a sort of virgin white does something that...it gives it romance, to be honest, and I liked it. And as a rather brilliant woman said to me early on near Lake Baikal, I was saying Siberia is such a tough place to be. And she goes, No, no, no. You got to understand, Siberia is just a wardrobe problem. It's too cold of winter and it's too hot in summer; dress properly! And it isn't very fair comment. It was like you can dress properly and then you forget about it.

MBB Well, she's got a point, I guess. Did you find the culture there to be quite different from that in Russia overall?

SR I found Siberian culture markedly different from urban western Russia. Yes, because of their relationship with space and time. There it is no hurry. And that is a completely different thing, which completely affects how a culture works, how they cook, how they eat, how they bring up their children. It's a really different relationship with space and time. Obviously, there are other differences like the way people eat. I loved...the further and deeper I went into Siberia, the more I could taste the earth. You know, by which I mean the berries and the mushrooms and the fish. You know, it's a very self-reliant culture. You can't rely on much when you're so far from anyone else. Musically, I was really interested. Obviously, my books about pianos. It has a very, very rich, surprisingly so, classical culture as well. And that is, of course, because of the Soviet period where culture, unlike our own — my country anyway — the grand piano belongs to the hallowed halls of the aristocracy and also the great concert halls of London. In Siberia because of the Soviet experience, the piano belongs to everyone so that democratization of something like music is across the board, whether you're in Kamchatka where I found pianos or in Moscow.

MBB Is there a moment or a memory from one of your first journeys there that really stands out?

SR The first time I went to Siberia, I came out of a town called Khabarovsk, drove a few hours north with a tiger conservationist, and we turned a truck in the road and there was a wild Siberian tiger sitting in the track. And just put this in context, there are only 500 Siberian tigers left in the world to this day. Imagine the size of that territory I discussed at the beginning — 11th of the world's land surface. And even more remarkably, a professional conservationist only sees a tiger in the wild once or twice in their career. I saw one in the first two hours. I thought, if I can encounter a wild tiger in Siberia, I can pretty much I must be able to find a piano. The whole thing was a little bit mad!

MBB I wanted to ask you — because this is a question I get asked a lot, too — of all the places that you've traveled to over the years, what was the most challenging?

SR I think Russia is pretty challenging, but I would say I traveled to Chad about five years ago working on a piece about the conservation agency that I know that you're very involved with as well, African Parks, who've done a remarkable job of bringing elephants back into the south of the country, into the Zakouma National Park. And this was a trip to the north, to the Ennedi Desert, which is a part of the Sahara that is just spectacular; huge rock arches, a very rich human history, some of the oldest rock art in Africa. I found that really challenging because I had to overcome fear. I had to overcome the fact that Chad, on Trump's red no go list, on my own for British Foreign Office no go list. You know, there are issues with all the kind of Saharan militias and the rest of it. And I was very nervous about it. But as always, when you travel, you discover that it's more layered and that the world is much bigger than it sometimes appears and how it's brought back to us.

MBB This is something we've talked about before. And I know you've written about this — the idea of demythologizing fear and how travel can do that. Why is that so important, do you think?

SR Well, I think that I'm anti cliché and anti stereotype. I think they're dangerous. And I think they usually a result of rumor and they're often a result of laziness on the part of the journalistic community as much as anything else. I think that there's always another side, like we're talking about — light and dark. There's always another side to a story. Sometimes I get that wrong. You know, I've worked in Papua New Guinea. Papua

New Guinea is really edgy. There's so much that I've...I mean, I took my six year old kid down there, so there's much that I can find that I'm safe about or safe enough. But there is a proper edge to traveling in Papua New Guinea that is not for everybody. So it's a question of...demythologizing is incredibly important. If we were to create a greater empathy and community across nations, and that to me is a sort of an ethical point of view that I hold front and center. You know, I believe that travel is an act of empathy and not just an act of consumption. And we've sort of forgotten about that somewhere along the line. So demythologizing is very important, but it's up to an individual where their level of risk might lie. And I totally respect that. But it's not going to stop me from trying to see another side to the narrative than the one that we've been led to believe is the only one.

MBB I think the idea of going outside of your comfort zone for lot of people — obviously, we all have different comfort zones — but just the idea of pushing the boundaries around what is comfortable is often one of the biggest benefits of travel, I think. What are some of the ways that you have pushed past your own fear or anxiety in going to places other than traveling with a professional?

SR I think wildlife; I've had to work around my trepidation with wildlife and slow down a bit. So, for instance, when you're in Africa and doing a walking safari as opposed to one in a vehicle, my heart is in my mouth every second of that journey. But I can't let my heart go into my mouth to become a loud noise that will scare that wildlife. So it creates a discipline in me to control adrenaline and fear. Does that make sense? That's on me. I've been told to be quiet around the lion or the sleeping elephant. But can I control myself and contribute to my own discipline in that environment? I find that much harder than just standing behind a guy, you know, a safari guide professional that's walking with a gun.

MBB Yeah, well, and unfortunately, having been in a walking safari situation, this is where knowledge can actually make you more afraid. I mean, I've been with people who don't know anything about how dangerous the situation really is. And they're kind of blissfully unaware. And in some ways, I wish I was them. Because once you know enough about the real realities of risk, sometimes, especially in a walking safari, can make you much more afraid.

SR Totally nailed it. And I think we both share that knowledge. And that's, you know, it is wildlife is wildlife. And if you don't respect the wild in that, then you shouldn't be in that environment because it's not a zoo. And yet a lot of the experiences that are available to tourists in Africa start to give people a full sense of that wilderness that they have just entered. I think it's a really fine line. But, you know, I like the feeling of fear in so much as it reminds me I'm a human being. You know, travel is about taste, smell, touch, sight. It's about the senses. It's a deeply sensory thing. And fear is not a negative emotion. It can be a very powerful one. It can fill you with sort of an adrenaline that makes you feel you're glad to be alive. So I don't think...I think it's wrong to sort of demonize fear, as much as it's wrong to demonize someone on the basis and reputation as opposed to experience.

MBB Now, on the topic of travel and conservation, which we both are passionate about, responsible travel has really made enormous headways over the last 20 years. Can you talk a little bit about the influence on conservation initiatives that responsible travel has actually been able to have?

SR Well, this is where the interface really matters. The people like yourself that are advising customers and clients where to go, because there is so much greenwash out there and there is so many false claims and it's so easy to say any profit will go back into community and conservation, when it's very easy to rewrite what your

profit margin is going to be before you have to hand back. So I think it's a really bleak game of smoke and mirrors. And I find it hard to penetrate. I do my best to make sure that I sort the wheat from the chaff and I give good press to those who deserve it. But a lot of people get a lot of airtime and they're not doing very much at all. So the interface of people, like yourselves, who are on the ground to a checking out the claims, are they really contributing to community here? Are they really contributing to conservation here? You have to guide customers in it because on the Internet, you can't tell. You just can't tell. So I think there are some people that are doing remarkable things in the Africa space. I think it belongs at the moment more to philanthropy than to sustainable business models. If I'm brutally honest.

MBB So how, Sophy, in Africa, is it going to unfold? Because philanthropy is not going to be able to support, you know, the needs that conservation has. And is it a bridge between philanthropy and some sustainable business model that eventually leads to the sustainable survival of conservation? Or what do you think?

SR Yeah, I think it is a bridge. Singita Grumeti is a very good example. It's underpinned by sheer big scale philanthropy. But it has to become self-sustaining. And they are a very good example of trying to achieve that in a way that is genuinely custodial towards communities and the environment. But it's on a scale that can have impact. It's incredibly difficult for more of a kind of mama and papa operation, a single lodge of twelve rooms to have impact on an ecosystem and Africa conservation is based on ecosystems, not just single patches of farmland. So it's an impossible question and it requires, in my opinion, the best examples I'm seeing is when a national government is aligned with a big conservation agency that is aligned with a major tourism player. And when you get that triangle working together, you can have impact on a scale that is real.

MBB Now, you and I both love Rwanda as well and have lots of friends who've done some amazing things there. Would you look at Rwanda as a model where African national parks and private tourism and the government have managed to really create inroads?

SR Oh, totally, totally. But Rwanda is also the smallest country in Africa. I think it's a small country in Africa. Rwanda also benefited from huge post-genocide funding. Rwanda has this incredible icon species of the mountain gorilla, which can command very high dollar for a single hour. So it's got a unique set of circumstances that give it a head start in what we're talking about. But it's done it brilliantly. I think that the hotel partners have been respectful. It's very intelligently done. I feel quite strongly that it's a very good example of success. But I don't think it is repeatable because as soon as you go over the border into the DRC, into the Congo, you've got you've got Virunga National Park, same icon species, but a completely dysfunctional national government in a place where you've got the effects of the genocide however many years later being played out by local militias. You know, Rwanda is a very secure little jewel. It is the jewel of Africa, but it doesn't repeat its model so easily.

MBB It's a very special place for sure. Okay. Is there a charitable organization that you're connected with that you think people can donate to if they want to help make a positive impact?

SR I have two. The Nkataka Trust is one that I really like, which is on the shores of Lake Tanganyika, north of Mahale National Park, where they're working with...on a really small but highly impactful scale, where the community of forest people and they need to stay in their forest and not be pushed out for national parks or tourism. And they have a religious relationship with their trees. And in that forest, you still hear the pant hoots of wild chimpanzees with elephants, which is unusual to have that wildness. And this is a small charity where we help support the Rangers, who are the forest people. They do all their conservation work on the back of

mountain bikes. There's no guns. It's all mountain bikes. So it's kind of really gentle but effective conservation in a very important area. On a bigger scale, I'll do anything I can to support the Grumeti Fund. I think they set a gold standard for community conservation in Africa right now.

MBB So after COVID 19, do you think that we may see a change in attitude? Well, for all sorts of reasons, to something that is more considered and less consumptive?

SR I think there's going to be an economic reckoning anyway. I think that this thing that happened was, was that everybody was trapped. Everybody with the good fortune to have a passport and a small amount of disposable income could benefit from this thing called travel. And that swamped the world. It swamped Angkor Wat. It swamped Venice. I think what you're going to see with the economic fallout of what we're going through is a much smaller demand. I also am hoping that what we'll see is a slowing down of speed of travel. The American market is quite different from the European market, and I've worked for both, as you know, and the American market that tends to travel quite quickly through a destination. So I will in Africa, often encounter American families who are going one night, one night, one night through a safaris. And I really hope that changes because we need to stay still for longer.

MBB Definitely. I also predict that out of COVID 19, we are going to see people perhaps traveling less, but for longer periods of time and with that, wanting to stay still in one place and really explore from there and be more immersive.

SR It's hard because Americans have less holiday time, literally less holiday time by law than we do in England and France and all the rest of it. So I do feel really strongly that I hope we will stay still once we've gone over that ocean and be in a place and feel the benefit of being rather than always moving. And that is maybe a benefit that comes out of lockdown. And our ability to be more comfortable sitting still in a spectacular place and constantly moving, that has to change. I hope it does anyway. And I hope that there is a rise — I think there is anyway — I think there has been for a while, and this is just reaffirmed a rising consciousness of, you know, we're a lot of very privileged people in the room talking today. And there's only so many shiny things that privilege people want to consume, I believe. I do anyway. And I count myself a very privileged person is I want meaning. I want memory. I want texture. I want real. And that to me will become the zeitgeist in travel rather than just a tick list of I have been everywhere.

MBB So what would you say has been the greatest gift of travel to your life?

SR The comfort of strangers. I've made the best friends on the road very, very quickly because of a shared passion and curiosity and affection for the next horizon. You know, I have friends here where I live who say to me — good friends — who say I should see a therapist because I must be running away from something because I'm always traveling. And I find it hard to explain that I'm running towards it. It's a real deep thing in me; I'm running towards. It's not I'm not trying to skip something at home. I miss my kids. I love my farm with all my animals. But travel is a real...it's a towards thing. It's a real connector. It's really powerful.

MBB You mentioned your children, who I believe are 12 and 14 now. Do you take them on the road with you or do they influence the types of assignments that you accept or pass on?

SR I take them with me quite a lot. I don't think it has. I mean, I suppose I was meant to be doing a job in Socotra, which is an island off Yemen and having children, that was one I decided the risk was not worth the

return. So I did not do that job. That was quite recent. So my children affect the decisions I make as a traveler. But anywhere I go, I would take my children. And indeed, they do come. You know, my children have both traveled in Siberia. They've done two weeks camping around Lake Baikal. They come to Mongolia. We spend a long lots of time in Africa. I love my children traveling. I think they're amazing because they see things with such fresh eyes. And I love the energy and excitement. And, you know, when you're jaded and you're around jaded people when you're traveling, it's a really sad environment to be in. I want to just feel the kind of like, you know, the excitement of it all. And children give you that. It's a gift to travel with children. I think I'd take them everywhere if I could.

MBB I've taken my kids with me on a lot of trips, and I completely agree with you that seeing a destination through their eyes is always so rewarding and interesting. I'm actually curious, considering what we talked about earlier in terms of how our industry has changed, what would you say to a young person who's aspiring to become a travel writer?

SR Keep going and write and write and write and read. It's a profession. A lot of people think it's a holiday and it's not. It's a profession. Train, work, read, graft. Be brave. Try and work out the spaces in between, because that's where the footfall doesn't stand. You've got a better chance. I mean, one of the reasons and to be clear, you know, my three principals, enigmatic, the perfectionist, the humane. The other one is I take the list of there is a big event that takes place in the travel industry called Pure. And it's a very important event where all the hoteliers get together and all the travel agents get together and we all talk about all the new things that going on; it is incredibly valuable to the industry. But to me, as a journalist, I take that list and it's my no go list for the next year because every other journalist will be doing it. So you have to find your space between. You have to find your opportunity where you're not competing with people. It's hard to get that step in the door and do not mistake the fact there's a lot of luck and good luck with that luck. But you can also make your own opportunities if you look for those little gaps of light.

MBB It's also it's also going back to what you said about Jessica Mitford. You have to pay attention to get something out of the experience.

SR Yeah, you do. And I wrote; I did not have any connection with Jessica Mitford, but I wrote to her. I just wrote to her out of the blue and she said, you know, how hungry are you? I was like, I'll do anything. She goes, we go into a bunch of funeral parlors and find out how they're burying the dead in England. And I was like, Okay. That's how I got my gig. So, you know, you've got to want it and you've got to take a few risks, I think. That's my personal opinion. You know, obviously, there were lots of other ways to do it and lots more formal ways to do it. But understanding that writing is a profession and a profession requires work and accuracy and respect for the rules is the first thing.

MBB So I want to end on a question that I'm sure you're getting a lot right now. But what is the place that you're most interested in getting back to or discovering for the first time once the world opens up and full again?

SR I really want to go to Norway. I really want to spend time in Norway. I really like Norwegian people. I've been up there once and my husband spends quite a lot of time there. He's a big hiker, an expedition type and he loves it and I want to spend time in Norway. I want to be somewhere empty that isn't going to kill me, that is kind of gentle. But you're asking a complete travel addict. So, you know, you're basically ask me to sort of, you know, renumerate world because I would give you

everywhere. I'd give you everywhere. I'd like to do much more in the Sahara. I love the Sahara. Yeah. Have you done the pyramids in Sudan?

MBB No, I was hoping to do that this year, actually.

SR Well, put me in your luggage when you go.

MBB Let's go together!

Sophy's sense of adventure and great love of discovery always leaves me with a desire to ditch any kind of routine and jump into the next unknown destination. But for now, following her own Siberian adventure is going to have to do. In the next episode, I'll be catching up with another friend and global nomad designer, Rodman Primack. We first met when he was appointed creative director of the art fair Design Miami, and we teamed up to create special art and design focused trips to places like Mexico City, where he and his longtime partner have recently moved. Rodman's worked for the world's best auction houses, architecture firms and art dealers over the past 20 years. And in those places, he gained deep expertise, but he's managed to keep his own very singular perspective on design, collecting and travel. I hope you'll join us.

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