

Rwanda Activists Josh and Alissa Ruxin: At Home in Africa

INDAGARE GLOBAL CONVERSATIONS | 1.22

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, passionate and with purpose. They inspire me, as I hope they will, you. Welcome to the conversation.

Today we'll travel to Rwanda, which is also called the Land of a Thousand Hills, and is a place that unequivocally absolutely steals your heart. I first traveled there a number of years ago to see the famous mountain gorillas. To see them, you have to trek deep into a national park. And because you're traveling in small groups, you can get within feet of these endangered animals. And it's an incredibly moving experience because they share an amazing 98% of our DNA. So it's really very different from seeing any other wildlife, it's more like encountering your ancestors.

So of course, I came away with what I expected, which was total awe at having gotten to see these gentle giants in the wild, but what I didn't expect was how deeply I would fall in love with the country of Rwanda. It's a country that saw horrific genocide in the early 1990s, and that has been rebuilding ever since. Reading about its history and meeting the people who survived those years, you really can't help but be moved by it. And I now think of it as the beacon of hope in Africa. I've been lucky to visit numerous times now, and it's truly the people who keep pulling me back, including today's guests, Josh, and Alissa Ruxin.

They moved to Rwanda in 2005 with the lofty goals of improving health care and to fight poverty. Since then, their projects have expanded, as has their family. The Ruxins now have six children, three biological ones, and three adopted Rwandans. Alissa's original aim to provide sustainable employment for orphans of the genocide, and to create a gathering place for food lovers, has turned into Kigali's must-visit restaurant, Heaven. They also run the City's best Boutique Hotel. And Josh somehow managed to find time to write a beautiful and moving memoir about their journey called, A Thousand Hills to Heaven. I'm gonna let you hear their story from them, but suffice to say that they did not intend to move there the first time they visited, and now they cannot imagine leaving.

So Josh and Alissa, I'm so excited to talk to you today. Um, why don't you take us back and tell us a bit about your year, and, I mean, you've been in Rwanda since COVID-19 came about, and the lockdowns and everything, and you're there your whole family, correct?

Alissa Ruxin:

Um, so we're here in Kigali. Um, yes, March 13th, I had a great pleasure actually, Melissa, of staying for the first time at the new Singita Lodge for my birthday. And, uh, we had a wonderful night there. And then the next morning, March 14th was the first case of coronavirus in Rwanda. So, it was just this incredible experience for

Indagare®

How you travel matters

us to see one of the top, top luxury lodges in the country, which is just phenomenal. We had such a great experience, and then the next morning realizing how is this gonna impact all of us, and facing the reality of quarantine.

So we went home and got together with our kids and started to plan how we're gonna get through this. And so we were here at home with our three biological kids. Literally that morning at Singita, we had to fly our adopted Rwandan kids from Kenya. They're in high school, in a boarding school in Kenya. We had to fly them to Kigali that day. Um, they moved back in, and then we convinced our wonderful nanny who also works at Heaven with us to live with us for this period. So ...

Josh Ruxin:

And, and maybe just to, um, pick up where you left off Melissa, I mean, one of the amazing things about this particular period is that we're actually are in the 26th anniversary memorial period of the Rwandan Genocide. And as you know, from your travels here, Rwanda has come so far during the last 26 years. It's gone from being a place that everyone assumed would be a failed state to having fabulous infrastructure, clean roads, um, good rule of law, no corruption and luxury resort experiences across the country, including what Alissa and I built over the last couple of years called Retreat, here in Kigali. And, uh, uh, it's, it's, it's an extraordinary backdrop. So one of our cooks that we've held on to, um, at Heaven right now, which was as you know, Rwanda's first gourmet restaurant destination. Um, he was joking with me last week, as I was asking him how he was fairing, because he's actually staying at The Retreat. (laughs). Um, so he's, he said, you know, "I had to go into hiding. There were marauding Interahamwe in the streets who wanted to kill me and my family. And at nighttime, I went next door to actually where Heaven is, to a small swimming pool. And I would take water from there for cooking during the day, I would fill up a container and bring it home. So COVID 19, this is not such a big deal for me."

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Well, yeah, I mean, and for those of you listening, who are not familiar with the facts of the genocide, I'll, I'll briefly give you what I know. And obviously Josh and Alissa, please jump in. But in 1991, in a period of three months, the Hutu and the Tutsis, which were the two main tribes within the country, had a period of genocide, where the Hutu decided they were going to try and kill all of the Tutsis. And they actually managed to kill about a million people in the course of about three months. So in 100 days, basically one in 10 Rwandans were murdered and there's an incredible Genocide Memorial in Kigali that tells the story in a very powerful way. But I remember a chilling fact, I learned there where they talked about how the killing in this genocide was actually more efficient than the Nazis were during the Holocaust, even though the tools with which they killed people, were machetes and clubs. So, I mean, it was an absolutely brutal experience and no one in the country was unaffected. And as Josh was saying, most people will tell you, they lost a lot of family members and witnessed truly unbelievable horrors. But what happened was, and Josh, I'd love to have you talk a little bit about Kigali, and how this country that lived through this, I mean, truly worse than hell. You know, people thought the odds of it coming back again were minimal, and it's really now become the safest country in Africa. I know Kigali is one of the cleanest cities in the world, certainly the cleanest city in Africa. It's got some of the highest literacy rates, education rates, number of women in parliament, and very fast growing GDP. I mean, it's a phenomenal success story for the continent.

Indagare[®] How you travel matters

Josh Ruxin:

Yeah, and, and of course the big success story that we were just talking about before we jumped on this call, is that because of the genocide, because this is a country that has gone through a reconciliation process, because it's a country where the government speaks to every single household within an hour, if there's a directive to hand down, it was actually the most responsive, most reactive when COVID-19 clearly was emerging as such a threat. And bear in mind, we've had Ebola, just 200 kilometers away just over the border, in Congo. So it's also a government that is very prime to deal with a public health scare and epidemic. Um, HIV of course, on this continent has been a horror for 30, 40 years at this point. And yet Rwanda has done a tremendous job with managing that pandemic. So when COVID-19 hit, this country was ready. Um, there were no questions about what's the result gonna be for the economy, or for the tourism industry, which is the fastest growing industry in the country. It was just, "We want to do the best that we possibly can, um, to maintain our good standing."

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

So, imagine early on in the pandemic, you guys asked yourself whether you'd be better off staying in Kigali, or going back to the States for the pandemic. Is that right?

Josh Ruxin:

I mean, Alissa and I had to make this decision with our family. Are we staying, or are we going? We were getting these constant messages and text messages from the U.S. Embassy. What are you gonna do? Are you going to take the last flights out? We can't guarantee, you know, our services and our ability to serve you from a U.S. governmental standpoint. And we just looked at each other, spend about 10 minutes noodling on it and thought, "Do we trust this government more to handle this crisis (laughs) or the American government? It was a pretty easy decision to make. So we're here."

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

I wanna go back and give our listeners some background on you guys. Can you talk about how you first got to Rwanda and what it looked like then?

Alissa Ruxin:

Sure. So we actually, we always joke, but it's true. We came to Rwanda on our honeymoon and never left. We were actually newlyweds in New York City, living and working in New York and, uh, still miss it by the way. But, um, we, I moved here sight unseen. Josh had been working in public health for years in Rwanda and East Africa, and we had this opportunity to come to Rwanda for Josh to run a public health and poverty reduction program, then The United Nations Millennium Village Project, he was gonna be the director of that. And so, I kind of followed him without really a plan. Um, it was really recent. The genocide had just happened. We moved in 2006. So the genocide that had happened 12 years earlier. It was a very different place. So it almost felt like we were doing a Peace Corps stint in a post-war country where they were still digging up bones of people who had died during the genocide in our neighborhood, and-

Josh Ruxin:

And in our house.

Indagare®

How you travel matters

Alissa Ruxin:

... here, in our house-

Josh Ruxin:

[inaudible 00:10:38].

Alissa Ruxin:

... even we had people come to dig and found bones of relatives in our home. Um, it was just such a different time. It was ... Electricity and water would go on and off when we first moved here. And when I first moved, I didn't really know what my purpose and what my calling would be. I thought either I'd work for my husband for his public health project, or I get a job. Um, so the whole idea of starting a restaurant wasn't even born when we first moved here. It was, "Let's move to Rwanda for a year. It'll be an adventure, our honeymoon, honeymoon in Rwanda, and Josh will do this great work in public health and I'll find a job. And then after a year, we'll leave."

Josh Ruxin:

Upper West side.

Alissa Ruxin:

Yeah. Back to the Upper West. That was the plan. Um, and it, it evolved and it became home, but it was a process. It was a journey from the beginning-

Josh Ruxin:

And, and really, the, the results of the journey are extraordinary. I mean, Alissa personally has trained over a thousand Rwandans in hospitality. Heaven restaurant, which was her landmark first venture, first time in the restaurant business, um, is still the top restaurant in the country and the top hospitality training center. So anywhere you go, whether it's Singita or out to the fabulous new Safari camp at Magashi, that we've got in Akagera National Park, you come across people who were trained by Alissa at Heaven.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

So Alissa, will you actually talk a little bit about that, because it's an incredible story, how you started Heaven.

Alissa Ruxin:

Sure. So after six months of being house mama and taking care of all of Josh's colleagues and kind of, you know, I didn't really have a purpose. I did a lot of volunteer work at an orphanage in Kigali, and I got to know a lot of young adults kind of sitting around wondering what they were going to do. And that's the problem in Rwanda. There's such a young population. There's a lot of, I think 70% of the population is between, is, is younger than 25 years of age, something crazy like that. So with this very young population, a lot of young people didn't have the resources to go to university, or get a higher level of education. So in my volunteer work, I looked at Josh and said, "I wanna do something for this population, and I'm looking at Kagame's vision 2020, and he had all of these great goals to develop the tourism sector. And I said, "If I do anything here, I think it should be in hospitality, because that's the sector that's building the economy. People are coming to see

Indagare®

How you travel matters

the gorillas and we don't have any great restaurants. We didn't have great restaurants. So it was sort of a selfish decision to [inaudible 00:13:07] the restaurant, and serve great food to ourselves and our family. But-

Josh Ruxin:

I mean, there literally was not an international restaurant in the entire country in 2008.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

(laughs).

Alissa Ruxin:

You'd have to go to big hotel. Yeah, that's true. So this idea came out of just feeling like, "I wanted to do something." It's it was wildly out of, uh, outside of public health. That was what I studied. I got a master's in public health. I, I figured that would be my career. But working with these young people at the orphanage, I realized they need skills and they need jobs. And I wanna, I wanna do something to, to create opportunities for young people. And so we wrote a business plan for a coffee shop, and it kind of evolved into a restaurant. Um, as we went along, the, the government partnered with some other investors and opened the first sort of like Starbucks of Rwanda called Bourbon Coffee. And I said, "Oh, Josh, we can't compete with this. They've already done it." So, lets-

Josh Ruxin:

The, there's actually still one in Boston and Washington D.C.-

Alissa Ruxin:

Yeah.

Josh Ruxin:

... of Bourbon Coffee, yeah.

Alissa Ruxin:

And so we said, "Well, let's do a restaurant, because we're foodies." We were so naive. We thought, "Oh, because we're from New York and San Francisco, we know, we know what it takes to run a restaurant." So we took a huge risk. I was pregnant with my first daughter. We built Heaven from nothing. We took out loans and we had a mortgage on our apartment in New York, which we still had rented. Um, and we ended up just taking this huge risk and building a restaurant, which we had no idea how to run. And I have to say, it took us five years probably to learn how to run it in a way that ended up being profitable. I think the first five years were surely social enterprise where we made just enough to pay salaries just enough to hire a lot of young people and start to do training in hospitality. But it really did take us time to learn how to run it as a proper business.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

And then you expanded it. Like what three years ago? Four years ago into the retreat.

Indagare®

How you travel matters

Alissa Ruxin:

Yeah. So we had Heaven Restaurant, which was kind of like a cultural venue. We would not only serve food, but we do like all night election parties when it was a presidential election, or we'd have Halloween, or Thanksgiving. We do all these art exhibits and dance performances. So it really became a space for the community to hang out in. And then Josh said, one day, "Honey, we don't have hotel rooms, and a lot of people would like to stay with us." So we took these three little rooms that were being used as an office and a storeroom at Heaven Restaurant, and we converted them into bedrooms and we charged like \$30 a night to the ex-pat community, and people working for embassies. And people just loved our food so much. They were so happy to stay with us. And then-

Josh Ruxin:

It was the first time, by the way, we made a dollar. (laughs).

Alissa Ruxin:

It was the first time.

Josh Ruxin:

After, after working in the business for five years, opening those three rooms was the first time we made a single dollar.

Alissa Ruxin:

And then it slowly evolved into a restaurant and hotel business. We took over a house, a couple of doors down from Heaven, all on the same road, we call it the Heaven Road now, because we ended up taking over a 12 bedroom apartment building, and turning it into Heaven Boutique Hotel. And then it grew and grew. And now we have 31 rooms that are just part of our 4-star Heaven Boutique. And then yes, Melissa, three years ago, before gorilla permits went up in price, before we really knew there would be a luxury market for Rwanda, we decided, "Let's build the first luxury boutique hotel in Kigali." And we took another big risk and ended up building The Retreat from scratch, which is right next door to Heaven. So, it's all on the same road, but now we do have a 5-star luxury hotel and we're already expanding it. In the midst of all of this, we, we took on an expansion project six months ago, um, because we were asked to host the Commonwealth, um, we were asked to host some VIPs during the Commonwealth Meetings [crosstalk 00:16:56]-

Josh Ruxin:

You can mention, you can mention-

Alissa Ruxin:

I think I can mention-

Josh Ruxin:

... the VIPs.

Indagare®

How you travel matters

Alissa Ruxin:

We were asked to host Prince Charles. And fortunately we heard, a few days ago, it's postponed and not canceled, thank goodness, and they'll still be staying with us. So, we've taken on a lot, um, with The Retreat and the expansion of The Retreat just in the last six months, and now everything's at zero. So, we're just in a holding pattern now.

Josh Ruxin:

But, but I think, what, one, one of the things, if I can just jump in for one second, um, the reason we built The Retreat, wasn't just because we thought maybe luxury was coming to go see the gorillas. We built the retreat because we love Kigali and what we were witnessing with the emergence of Radisson and The Marriott and all the brand name hotels, was that people were starting to see Kigali like any other African city.

Josh Ruxin:

Uh, it's a place where you go for a night when you land at the airport, and then you go to the places that are great to see. And what Alyssa did over the last several years was, really cultivate incredible cultural expeditions into Kigali, to find the best artists and jewelry makers, um, to design, um, workshops where you go to the market with one of the Heaven's chefs and come back and make your own meal, and learn how to make a meal that you can make back at home for a dinner party, when you're back from Rwanda. Um, all these great, uh, cultural activities-

Alissa Ruxin:

[inaudible 00:18:18].

Josh Ruxin:

... and, um, Oh yeah, definitely, instead of just going to The Genocide Memorial here, which is a fabulous museum, um, actually going out to where I used to work, which was the epicenter of the genocide, where I got to know the nine survivors of the genocide in that area, and sit down and share their personal testimony at an actual genocide site. Um, so, we really started investing in these incredible experiences that we think are life altering, that we think are actually up there on par, if not more incredible and more memorable than the gorillas. Because we wanted to give people a reason to spend time in our home city. And, and so, that was really the motivation behind it. Um, and at first that first year we opened, I mean, we were pretty much empty, and the tour operators said, "Oh, no, nobody wants to spend time in Kigali." And then if you look at recent press, everyone's saying, "Kigali, it's the best city in Africa. It's so beautiful. It's so clean. You can go for a run, you can go mountain biking, you can go up Mount Kigali, you can do all this great stuff." And so, we really felt as though we nailed it and that was why, 16 months in, we were expanding, and then this. So, it's been a really wild ride.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Yeah, I mean, the fact that it has one of the lowest COVID-19 rates in the world, to me is a testimony of just how much the government has done to make sure that the country thrives. And so, I'd love to hear you tell us a little bit about, um, how it has changed since you've been living there, about for 15 years.

Indagare® How you travel matters

Josh Ruxin:

Yeah. So, I, I don't think that there's anything you can point to, that looks the same. Um, when we first moved here, it was really a post-war country, and, and that was actually the reason I was working here was that, I, I was a Management Consultant, um, back in the 90s, and I worked in post-conflict nation. So, I lived in El Salvador just after the war, um, I lived in and worked in Columbia during the war and their troubles, um, and Bolivia before a lot of its troubles. And, and so that was sort of, um, my [inaudible 00:20:22], and the Government of Rwanda reached out to my company and said, "Hey, can you help us develop a tourism strategy?" And that was my first introduction to this place. And so, what the place looked like was incredibly poor. Um, I mean the public sector was virtually nonexistent, and um, one day a week under a tree, uh, in every single community in the country was Kichacha, which was the reconciliation process, where members of the community had the chance to confront the perpetrators of the genocide, and, uh, the perpetrators had a chance to ask for forgiveness. And, I mean, that was our first five, six, seven, eight years here. And then we kept looking at each other once a year and saying, "Is this place changing?" And some things started to happen that we really could sense. In about 2013, um, it was about the time that Heaven Restaurant and Heaven Boutique Hotel started to take off, which was, we looked around and they were laying Korean fiber optic cable across the entire country to give it the best bandwidth, of any country on the continent. Um, they were building roads to all the incredible destinations in the country. Um, they were investing in rule of law and a great police force, um, the military was already extremely good. Um, they started investing more in the public healthcare system, and while it's still relatively basic, it is the best public healthcare system in sub Saharan Africa. So all these investments started coming through, um, clean water, uh, electricity, uh, I mean every direction that you could, uh, point a stick at, you would find that there was development happening. And this was really all done by the government. And as the government built that platform, the private sector very slowly started to get incubated, and little businesses started cropping up all over the place. So, Alissa's fashion designers that she works with, in fact, one of the most popular things that's just emerged in the last few months is, everyone who stays at The Retreat, has a designer come in, uh, work with our tailor and have these custom made shirts and dresses and everything made. Uh, you know, people are really realizing how resourceful the Rwandan people are. So, today it, it is a little hard to describe it, but Kigali looks like a very wealthy place. That doesn't mean that there isn't extraordinary poverty. I mean, we've converted what business operation we have and to doing emergency food relief for over 400 people. Um, and that's, (laughs) that's what we've been busy doing, uh, with our kids and, uh, with our extended family here. Um, that said, the development of the technical infrastructure, technology, tech startups, all that stuff is definitely underway here. Um, and it's just, it really is the easiest place to visit in Africa. I, I mean, I, I don't know if that, if you share that view, Melissa, but I mean, it is easy. We tell people, "Don't think about coming to Rwanda, just come."

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

You know, I agree with you. I mean, totally have that sense. I mean, yes, the infrastructure is new and people are investing in the country, but one of the things that I love about it is, you have this sense, as you said, of this reconciliation culture, which, is still part of the fabric or the narrative of the people. And so people are very straightforward about what happened, um, but also about how they wanna come out of it and what they want Rwanda to represent to the world. I mean, there's incredible pride.

Josh Ruxin:

I mean, there, there has been a cultural shift. I think when we moved here, we felt together with the Rwandan people like everyone was pulling in the same direction for all Rwandans, um, regardless of ethnic group, of

Indagare®

How you travel matters

course. I would say that today, it feels more like an emerging economy where everyone is in it for themselves, and trying to do the best they can to get good education for their kids, to get a bicycle or a motorbike or a car. It's, it kind of feels like that capitalistic fervor has definitely hit here, and we need it here, because the country does need to grow. And this country is not a place that wants to have handouts. I mean, literally the president has stated, time and again, that he does not want this country, in the future, to be a recipient of international aid, but rather to be a donor of international aid.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Yeah. Maybe you could touch on some of the elements behind the country's success handling COVID-19.

Josh Ruxin:

Um, the infrastructure for public health, but in particular for disease surveillance is extremely well honed, because here's the country that's focused on tourism, but where there is an Ebola epidemic, still 200 kilometers away just over the border in Congo. Um, and it's a country where even though it has done its best to combat malaria, you can't eradicate malaria unless all of your neighbors eradicate malaria as well. So, they have this acute awareness of how important it is to surveil disease, and that when a disease is spreading, you have to take action. Um, and this might be a little bit of a digression, but, uh, you, you'll remember, Melissa, from my book, Melissa, our first adopted daughter who's now a doctor in Kenya, um, she is a double parent HIV orphan, and for years she thought to herself, "Maybe somehow from my mom or my siblings ...". One of her siblings died, uh, when she was just 14 years old, um, from AIDS. Uh, "Maybe somehow I contracted HIV and I just don't know." And it was spending a lot of time living with us here in Rwanda, that she built up the courage to go in and get tested, because here, getting tested for HIV was never stigmatized. Because when you live in a country where people who have had to confess, "Oh yes, I killed your mom, and raped your sister, and killed her too." Going for that HIV test, not such a big deal, being HIV positive, not such a big deal. Getting through COVID-19 not such a big deal.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

And can you share a bit about your adopted children? I, I know, um, it, wasn't exactly a straightforward, um, experience, but really it's become a way that you define your family.

Alissa Ruxin:

Sure. Um, so eight years ago, uh, we had a housekeeper in our house, who was like part of our family, Denise, and she very, very, quite suddenly died. She was HIV positive and had a brain aneurysm-

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Hmm.

Alissa Ruxin:

... and left, her three kids were, were left behind. And we knew that we didn't know them well. They didn't speak English at the time, [inaudible 00:27:35] and Claudine's siblings, and their cousin Leticia, who was living with them. And Josh and I just decided from that day, "Let's at least support their education, and, and help them have a new path." They were in public schools, learning only Kinyarwanda and not English. So we decided, "At least we'll pay for them to go to private school, and their uncle can be their guardian." And it was

Indagare®

How you travel matters

just a transaction like, we'll give money. Um, but then quite quickly, uh, just a few months after her, her death, we realized we were really going to be co-parenting, because the uncle who was their guardian was only 23 years old, and was still in medical school. So, they were living with their uncle in this little house she had left for them in Kigali, and we were paying for school and food. And then the relationship really changed into like family, like cousins to our kids. The kids would come over on the weekends. We would celebrate holidays together, um, we would go to the parent-teacher conferences at school. You know, it was really, it suddenly became six kids that we were raising, not, not our three, even though they weren't living with us. Um, and it really became something we never expected kind of like this, this really unexpected part of the path of our life journey, um, taking these kids on. And then not just taking them on, in a financial sense, but then becoming part of our family and then actually parenting them and raising teenagers [inaudible 00:28:58] becomes 14-

Josh Ruxin:

15.

Alissa Ruxin:

... 15, Leticia 16, and Claudine's almost 18. Um, and it wasn't until just September that we decided they're ready for boarding school to hopefully get scholarship to university. So we sent them to Kenya, but now they're back home. (laughs). So, um, so now yeah, we do have the six with us, but it's just been this incredible part of our journey that not a lot of people know about, but, um, it's enriched our life immensely.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

And are there any NGOs that you work with or that you find particularly inspiring? I'd like to hear your thinking on that.

Josh Ruxin:

You can actually do more good in a more sustainable way with more dignity through the private sector, than you can through NGOs. So, we're not really big fans of, of any that I can think of. I would say if there were some that I would give a shout out to, um, they're focused on education. So British Rwanda, definitely. Um, Rwanda Girls Initiative, um, started by good friends of ours, just an amazing group, an amazing, uh, young woman's school, uh, at Bugesera District, the epicenter of the genocide.

Alissa Ruxin:

It's called Gashora Girls Academy. Um, we love the Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village which was-

Josh Ruxin:

Yeah.

Alissa Ruxin:

... started by Anne Heyman, who was from New York, unfortunately died due to a horse riding accident. But she started kind of like a kibbutz high school for Rwandan orphans. And it's really well run, and we really like that organization. And in terms of agriculture and other areas, I like One Acre Fund. So the One Acre Fund, or Gardens for Health, um, they bring sustainable nutrition to poor, poor villages. But you know, feel free to email us and ask if-

Indagare®

How you travel matters

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Yeah.

Alissa Ruxin:

... you want ideas of-

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Hmm.

Alissa Ruxin:

... how to engage or who to give to. But yeah, we really pick and choose who we think deserves, um, financial support, because a lot of money is mishandled in the not-for-profit sector.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

That's amazing. We will definitely include all of those in our show notes. Um, now I wanna ask you some, some fun kind of travel questions. Do you guys have a favorite, um, memento that you brought back from a trip?

Alissa Ruxin:

So we collected and left money in these crazy places, all over Namibia for precious stones. You know, that every rock that you turn over in Namibia has a geode in it. It's like the whole country is crystals. So, (laughs) we brought back crystals from Namibia, all different colors. And one of the things ... It's my favorite thing that I have, and one of the things I've done recently is go onto the construction site at the retreat, and hidden them in the new building. The, just for good luck. It's this little thing that I've put-

Josh Ruxin:

(laughs).

Alissa Ruxin:

... inside of the walls of the new extension.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

And what about your favorite destination for relaxing?

Alissa Ruxin:

You know, we love Lamu Kenya-

Josh Ruxin:

Yeah.

Indagare®

How you travel matters

Alissa Ruxin:

... and not a lot of people know about it, but it is spectacular, and so untouched, and the beaches are incredible. So Shelah Beach in Lamu, Kenya. We've been three times, and it's, it's a place we'll go back to.

Josh Ruxin:

Right, I, I've got to put in a vote for, it's very rustic, but Mafia Island is extraordinary. South of Zanzibar, we just went, uh, several months ago and for seeing the whale, sharks, and marine life, it's the best, um, the entire continent. Incredible coral, um ... But there's only one super luxury place to stay there. It's called Pemba Island.

Alissa Ruxin:

Oh-

Josh Ruxin:

We did not get-

Alissa Ruxin:

[inaudible 00:32:22].

Josh Ruxin:

... to stay there. Yeah, yeah. We did not get to stay there. But it is in that area. It's just a longer boat ride to get to the Marine Refuge from there, but it is spectacular.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Fantastic. Okay. What about a favorite place for exploring?

Josh Ruxin:

Hmm, Rwanda. (laughs).

Alissa Ruxin:

We're still discovering Rwanda. I mean, we had such a great time visiting the new Singita, and seeing new parts of the volcanoes region, and new projects that are happening, and the new ... Kind of embarrassed, after 15 years, we still have a lot to see and do. We wanna hike Bisoke. So people do come for gorillas, le, let yourself have a few extra days to see Kigali, and then also do some of these other unique outla, outdoor adventure experiences like hiking volcanoes, or stand up paddle boarding on Lake Kivu. There's a lot of fun things to do that people don't really talk about, or know about.

Josh Ruxin:

Or the canoeing. We, we just took our kids a few months ago, um, in the gorillas region on a canoe trip, um, on the Mukungwa, uh, River. It's Fabulous.

Indagare®

How you travel matters

Alissa Ruxin:

Near the [crosstalk 00:33:21].

Josh Ruxin:

It's just amazing. You, you're just whining through volcano territory. You see the volcanoes up on all sides. And there are kids in the villages, just jumping into the water with you, uh, making fun of you for rowing. (laughs).

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Okay. Thank you for indulging me. Um, now how is the Rwandan government doing widespread testing to ensure that there are so few cases? Can you maybe talk a little bit about that?

Josh Ruxin:

Yeah. So, actually the government was really smart. Very early on, um, and this is going back to the end of January, they were giving very detailed digital, not paper-based surveys of every single arrival, both at the borders and at the airport. And in fact, people were coming in to the retreat and saying, "Oh, this co, this, uh, coronavirus thing. There, there's so many questions they're asking us at the airport." Well guess what? When they closed the airport, they knew exactly who is in the country where they've been, where they were staying. So unlike the States where it was just emerging, and you didn't know where it was and who had it, and who was potentially exposed the government very quickly narrowed it down to a little over 600 potential cases. So actually, if you look at the Ministry of Health Twitter feed every night at about 8:00 PM, they post the new cases, how they identified them and just a reminder to the public. So, it's a (laughs) completely different well-organized situation compared to what you're facing where you're, unfortunately.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

[inaudible 00:34:51].

Josh Ruxin:

But, but you can imagine Rwanda will contact, trace, right? I mean, anyone who arrives in Rwanda, they'll keep track of you during the time, hopefully the two weeks that you spend here as a tourist, and they'll make sure that they know who you're coming in contact with.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

That's so good to hear. And, and so it seems like you're gonna get through the pandemic, uh, sooner than the rest of the world. And do you think Rwanda's economy is gonna bounce back faster as well? And also, actually you've talked a bit about this already with some of your wishlist places, but what are the first places you'll visit that you haven't been within the country, especially since tourism is coming back faster, um, in Rwanda than, than elsewhere?

Josh Ruxin:

So we were supposed to go out to the fabulous new Magashi Lodge on our familiarization trip for those in the industry, um, with all of our kids. That is top of our list. It's this amazing, um, reserve within Akagera, exclusive to Wilderness Safaris, it's called Magashi. They've got [inaudible 00:35:54]. It is spectacular. People are

Indagare®

How you travel matters

seeing animal life there that is as good or better than what you'll get to see in the Serengeti, in part because they've tagged all the leopards. So you just see a lot of cats. Um, you see the big five. It's such a fabulous park. Um, so that's one area that we haven't had the chance to explore.

Alissa Ruxin:

Yeah. I was just gonna say my interest, a lot of it is cultural tourism. So I'm very interested in exploring more about what's happening outside of Kigali in terms of, um, products that are being made like pottery projects, and different kinds of basket weaving that are happening in other parts of the country. I really wanna support artisans that don't live in Kigali, and need a market. And that, I'm really driven to explore that more and make, make tourists. It connects them. So if you're gonna see gorillas and you're in that region for three days, why don't you also visit this project while you're there? Um, so I'm really interested in developing that.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

So, can anyone come and volunteer with you? I mean, is there an existing process for this? And are there any small businesses that you work with in the U.S. that you may feed any volunteer programs you do offer in Kigali, to create some sort of cross continent connection?

Josh Ruxin:

Well, definitely in the hospitality industry, we have had a running list of volunteers. Um, generally we do demand that they spend a significant amount of time with our team. If they've got very specific skills, we've done as little as two weeks. Um, some of America's top bartenders and mixologists have come to stay with us, um, to work with our bartending team. And, um, our fantastic cocktails, just for example. Um, but we've also had people who work in health and hygiene come in, and work with our team at Heaven and do that training. And then we work with a lot of different organizations that do take volunteers. I think the trick with volunteerism is that they think it's all about how much time you have. Um, and what we tend to tell people is don't feel that you have to have a volunteeristic experience in order to have social impact, because just coming to Rwanda, you're gonna have impact.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Okay. And further to volunteering specifically, I know we had a member who's a woman of color who was very interested in your work. Do you have any advice for a woman of color who would wanna come and volunteer in Rwanda? What kinds of things could she look into doing?

Alissa Ruxin:

Again, I mean, there are ... Well, everybody here is, is a person of color and there are ... It's amazing how many African Americans would like to connect more with Africans. So, I mean, I think there's just ... I think first step would be figuring out an area of interest. Like we, we know a lot of not-for-profit projects. Every, you know, organization that work in education, or health, or agriculture. So first pick a theme, something you might be interested in, or even hospitality. Come and work with our staff on customer service skills. I mean, you, everybody has a skill set that Rwandans need and could learn from, and you don't need to be a doctor or a lawyer. You can just have some work experience and wanna come and help. We've had actually college grads come for summer internships and make a huge mark on our company. We, we setting up Excel

Indagare®

How you travel matters

spreadsheets, and doing training with our staff. So you don't have to necessarily even have a, an, an area of expertise. Just-

Josh Ruxin:

You can teach English.

Alissa Ruxin:

You can teach English.

Josh Ruxin:

You can teach basic English.

Alissa Ruxin:

Yeah, you could-

Josh Ruxin:

Um-

Alissa Ruxin:

... you know ... So I think it's just, you get in touch with us, tell us what, what are you interested in doing? Um, and we can help connect you with the right experience.

Josh Ruxin:

Yeah. Well, a young woman of color coming here to work with Rwandese, we would love that. That is exactly what Rwanda needs.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Awesome. And are there books, movies, or documentaries about Rwanda that you recommend, to better understand the country and its history before a visit?

Josh Ruxin:

So, um, definitely a couple. Um, one would be, uh, Stephen Kinzer's book, um, Land Of A Thousand Hills. Um, it's probably the most complete history of the country. Um, I also wouldn't, um, miss our friend Philip Gourevitch's book, We Wish to Inform You. I mean, that is sort of the ultimate tale of the genocide. Um, there's just so, there's so many films that have been made, um, about the genocide. I mean, Hotel Rwanda is kind of a lie. Um, but that's another story for another session that we'll have with Melissa. But, um, certainly some of the local productions like Shooting Dogs and others, um, give a much more accurate portrayal of what actually happened here during, um, the time of the genocide. And, um, there are some emergent movies coming out of Hollywood, which is the Rwandan Film Festival, um, about the new Rwanda and a new Rwandans stories, which I think are really exciting. Um, on the literature front, not that much that's out on the international press, um, to read about the Rwanda of today. Um, probably outside of what I wrote.

Indagare®

How you travel matters

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Yeah, I actually completely agree with all those recommendations. I mean, Stephen Kinzer's book is just an amazing portrait of Kagame, the President and it reads like a spy thriller, but it's also the history of rebuilding Rwanda, and Philip Gourevitch's book won a National Book Award, I think on the genocide. It's amazing. But Josh, your book is also the perfect compliment to those two, because it's a much more intimate account of somebody coming into the country and living through everything. It's just a wonderful memoir, so ... Okay, what about the milk bars in Kigali that's completely real, right? Is that a must do?

Alissa Ruxin:

It's very real. And we take almost every visitor. You know, milk is such a huge part of the culture here. It's symbolic. It's ... Literally, there are milk bars. It's not coffee, tea, or anything else. It's just, um, processed and safe milk to drink. They even serve buttermilk called the Kivuguto, and smoked milk. Literally they smoke it with smoke, and it gives it a different flavor. And, and so, we'll take tourists to, you know, some of the places that we've checked out, are super hygienic, and then they'll, they'll have a milk tasting. And that's part of the journey.

Josh Ruxin:

Gu, guys at 5:00 PM at the officer here say, "Hey, you wanna go out for a glass of milk?" I'm not kidding. That's literally what they do.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

That's incredible. Now, what would you say the minimum amount of time one should spend in Kigali is, if you're on route to see the gorillas as the primary goal of your trip?

Alissa Ruxin:

Well, like Josh said, it used to be first night, last night. And yes, we'll take that if you're on a super tight timeframe, but now we're saying two, or three, or even four nights in Kigali. Because jet lag from America, first of all, you usually land at night and you need at least two days to kind of settle in and enjoy the spa, and all the wonderful things we have to offer at our hotel. But also see all of these cultural projects in, in Kigali, and then move on to the gorillas, the Safari, the chimpanzees, there's just so much to see. And I would say minimum-

Josh Ruxin:

Three days. You need three days-

Alissa Ruxin:

... minimum, three days-

Josh Ruxin:

... to get to [crosstalk 00:42:56]-

Indagare®

How you travel matters

Alissa Ruxin:

... Kigali.

Josh Ruxin:

Yeah.

Alissa Ruxin:

You can even like do gorillas, come back to Kigali for a night in the middle, and then go to another area of the country. So you can kind of work it in, in the middle of your trip. But most people are spending, um, seven to 10 days in Rwanda. I mean, it's a really standalone destination, you know, which is amazing. It never used to be that way.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Okay. So what about working together? I, you guys have been in business for a long time now together. Do you have recommendations for couples working on a project together, and how you balance the romantic and professional aspects of your partnership?

Alissa Ruxin:

(laughs).

Josh Ruxin:

[inaudible 00:43:30]. (laughs).

Alissa Ruxin:

That is such a big deep question. Um, our, I hope we have always been best friends and I think from the beginning. I mean, not all, not all married couples could do what we do because we literally work together all the time and, and raise our kids together. And so it's just a lot of time together. Um, I mean, somehow for us it works, and I don't know, it just could be our personalities. But when we're busy and working at the facility at the restaurant and hotel, we're not always together, we're focusing on different aspects of running the business. So in that sense, we have space and we're interacting with a lot of other staff. So there's a more of a balance. Um, but yeah, it is very unique that it, somehow it does work for us and our marriage too, to be running this business together [crosstalk 00:44:18]-

Josh Ruxin:

If I weren't so lovable, it would be a lot harder.

Alissa Ruxin:

(laughs). Yeah.

Josh Ruxin:

Um, but, uh, but seriously, I think, I think the secret for us has been the openness to new ideas and inspiring one another. When Alissa started Heaven, I mean, it was sort of a hobby. She was ... How old were you? 32?

Indagare[®] How you travel matters

Alissa Ruxin:

Hmm, let's not say out loud.

Josh Ruxin:

I don't know how old you were then, but I mean, you were young and it was a hobby. It was, "Oh, that's what Alissa is doing." But it was really going through this process of, of writing my book and realizing, "Wait a second, she's got these amazing insights." I was the professor at Columbia, but she had all these great insights and really taking those insights to her and saying, "Okay, I'm gonna do something that's aligned with my wife's insights."

Alissa Ruxin:

Yeah, but I, we're real people. I mean, we're human. So when I freak out, he's not allowed to.

Josh Ruxin:

[inaudible 00:45:06].

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

[inaudible 00:45:06].

Alissa Ruxin:

When he's suppressed, I have to be up. And, you know, we balanced each other because we have to. It's a survival thing.

Josh Ruxin:

(laughs).

Alissa Ruxin:

Um, we have our ups and downs like everybody, and, you know, Rwanda is not an easy place to have chosen to stay here this long, but we've learned how to persevere through all of this. And I think that, that ... I think we've become more resilient because we chose to stay here.

Josh Ruxin:

Yeah.

Alissa Ruxin:

And now we can't really imagine life outside of Rwanda.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

For my next conversation, we're going from far away Rwanda to our own backyard in California, and checking in with Bill Harlan, the owner of the famed Meadowood Resort, as well as some of America's greatest wine estates, Harlan, BOND, and Promontory. Our regular listeners will recall the episode where we

Indagare[®] How you travel matters

featured Meadowood Chef, Christopher Kostow, along with The Wall Street Journal's Howie Kahn. Unfortunately, since that episode a lot has changed.

The recent glass fire in California that has to date grown to 70,000 acres and destroyed, close to 800 homes, a few weeks ago, claimed the famed Meadowood Restaurant. We'd originally recorded a conversation with Bill and his wife, Deborah, prior to the fires, but realized this devastating event would fundamentally change the conversation about Meadowood.

Bill was incredibly gracious to schedule a follow-up conversation with me, where he discussed the current state of things, as well as the impact of the fires, not just on the restaurant, but the region. And he also shares his 200 year vision for building a legacy, lessons from Robert Mondavi that he learned, and some of his incredible travel tales of learning to fly and sailing around the world. I'm so grateful. We get to share this conversation with you. I hope you'll join me.

Producer:

Thank you for joining us for this Indagare Global Conversation. We hope you'll tune in next time, and subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts. It also helps us enormously if you rate and review us on iTunes, and be sure to check out www.indagare.com/globalconversations for information on joining one of our conversations live. Be sure to also follow us on Instagram @indagaretravel for more travel inspiration, and news on our programming, and upcoming episodes.