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Bruce Wallin: That's safari expert Will Jones. I'm Bruce Wallin, and this is Travel that Matters. Hey, everybody, and welcome to Travel that Matters. I'm your host, Bruce Wallin, and I've got a question for you. Do you think it's possible to do something that's not on Google? I had never really thought about that question until I caught up with an old friend of mine, Will Jones, a few weeks back. Will is the founder of safari company Journeys by Design, and he's one of the most creative and passionate people I have met in the world of travel. He's constantly looking at new ways to approach African adventures, and he's currently on a mission to uncover experiences that you can't find with an internet search. He calls it off Google Travel, and for Will, that means wild adventures that no one else is doing. And yet they're done in a way that's safe and surprisingly high on luxury. Journeys by Design actually organized a trip for my family a few years back, and we went to this extremely remote national park in Zambia called Lewa plain. There's only one lodge in the entire park, and we were the only guests there. Now this is a 1300 square mile park. It's about three times the size of Los Angeles, and we did not see another tourist the entire time we were there. Now, admittedly, that's not for everybody. My teenagers, for one, they didn't really like that part of the trip as much as they did others when we were staying places where there are other other people. But I personally loved it. I'll tell you, we had an experience when we visit a school there. It was a tiny village about three hours by car from the camp. And when we were there, our guide told us it was probably the first time these kids at the school that we visited had ever seen a foreigner their age. They'd seen adults before, but never another kid. And it was almost like this whole scenario had flipped. And they were, you know, they were as interested in us as we were in them. And to see the mutual curiosity between my kids and the kids from this village was incredible. So we're going to talk to Will about how he pulls off some of these amazing adventures, as well as the very cool conservation and community work that comes out of them. But he's also going to give us his expert recommendations for every type of safari goer, the best destinations, itineraries, camps, whether it's your first time on safari or you're a seasoned vet of the sub-Saharan circuit. Will, so great to have you on Travel that Matters today, thanks for joining us.

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Will Jones: Thanks, Bruce.

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Bruce Wallin: Okay, I want to start off with the pole of inaccessibility. You and I had talked a couple of weeks back and you casually mentioned that your friend is building a camp right near the pole of inaccessibility. I consider myself a pretty well-traveled person, but I had no idea what that was. So tell us what is the pole of inaccessibility and why on earth is your friend building a camp there?

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Will Jones: I'll be honest with you, I hadn't heard of a pole of inaccessibility until about two months ago when I was talking to a friend of mine called Ed Gowie, who's in search of giant tigerfish. So the freshwater fish, which is a, you know, favorite amongst anglers. But there is a goliath tigerfish on the Chinko River in Chinko National Park in Eastern Central African Republic

going miles from nowhere. And I was just talking to him the other day and he was talking about the fact that he'd built a camp 90 miles from the pole of inaccessibility. There is one on each continent, and gosh, it really gets the juices flowing, doesn't it? It's exciting. It's appealing, it's wild.

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Bruce: And so for the listeners, I have since Googled the pole of inaccessibility, obviously, and it is the point on every continent that is the farthest away from any body of ocean. Correct?

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Will Jones: Yes.

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Will Jones: Yes. So in Africa, that is somewhere in the Central African Republic where there are giant Goliath tigerfish that this guy wants to go after. So I think that that's actually a great place to transition into your concept of off Google Travel. I would say that that even though I did find, you know, pole of inaccessibility on Google, it's just this camp is pretty much off Google Travel. So I love this idea of traveling differently, of going places that other tourists aren't going and doing things that other tourists aren't doing. But with all the information out there about seemingly every destination on Earth, like is that even possible anymore?

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Will Jones: It is possible and it's happening now. We've got a database of nearly 50 experiences, which are described as being broadly or entirely off Google. So, yeah, it is possible, but it obviously represents the results of a long journey. You can't just go and put your pin on a map and say, this is off Google and I know where it is and let's go there. It resides broadly in my head. And I think that's a big part of the point here is that actually, in order to access these areas, it's in large part in the hands of private guides, hosts who have relationships that are not necessarily written down or aren't sort of reflected on a platform where Google can commoditize it and commercialize it. I think it's the big opportunity. I think it's also really important that we go down this route because one for the spirit of adventure, two for the low impact environmental paradigm, if you like. But three, because businesses need to stay relevant, you identify your niche and drill into it.

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Bruce Wallin: Yes, I totally agree with you on that. However, sometimes people just want to go on an amazing safari and stay in the best camps and see that the big five and do all that. So how do you do? Do you know? Tell me a little bit about that. You know, when you have a client first time safari go or, you know, they want to just do absolutely right and have the best trip possible.

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Will Jones: So we would define that as a Classic. And with with RARE, it's very difficult to stitch a whole RARE program together by the very nature of where there aren't that many of them. So

it's quite difficult to stitch a whole RARE program together. So we still rely on your Classic. So take, for example, Odzala National Park, and again, this is a bit RARE and I'll come onto the Classic. But Republic of Congo, Odzala National Park, some really lovely camps in there, Ngaga, Lango, and Mboko. Access to 50,000 western lowland gorilla run by a company called the Congo Conservation Company. I mean, it's really, really awesome off-grid gorilla focused park wildlife experience. But the quality of accommodation is fantastic. I would also argue this, luxury is defined more as space and the caliber of guides that host you, as opposed to the chandelier above the bathtub. However, for those that do want that soft adventure and that soft experience into better known sort of parks and reserves, I mean, Africa is brimming with extraordinary camps and lodges, you are spoiled for choice. We tend to do that in a very private fashion. We tend to book up private camps or using private charter aircraft to high level of luxury meets specialism meets frontier. And so our job as an international specialist, if you like that has no financial interest in any of those businesses is to choose which ones make sense and to be honest, east and southern Africa, you're spoiled for choice. And that's been part of the problem as well is that there's been so much inward investment into parks and into those safari lands for want of a better description, that actually you start to lose the edge of the wilderness and the solitude and the frontier that I think a lot of us travel for and which pushes us into this RARE space, which is why we look at Eritrea, why we look at Sudan and Chad and the others, because in 20 years, that's where the next frontier lies.

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Bruce Wallin: So you've mentioned, you know, these private maybe buying out a camp, things like this. I just to put this in perspective. A lot of your clients are high profile people. I know you've taken Ralph Lauren on safari, on a private safari and other very high profile people who you may or may not feel comfortable mentioning. Tell me a little bit how that works about, you know, like taking Ralph Lauren on safari. You know, is it that mix? Where where do you go? Do they, is at camp buyouts? And I mean, it just kind of shows how, at what level this can be done at.

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Will Jones: So like I say, we've got so much choice that we are in that very privileged position of being able to curate a journey that has access to diverse culture, diverse ecosystems that support a whole heap of different types of wildlife, a whole range of different camps and lodges that we can, that we can pick from the majority of which are seasonal or permanent camps. But where I think the real specialism lies and where I think the true luxury lies is in the fully mobile safari that is intertwined into all of this. So it's like going on, you know, your early adventures going into Africa on those mobile safaris, we will go in and set up a camp in advance of their arrival. It might take three days to put that camp together. The client might come in. We'll spend three days there. We'll then pack that camp up as they the clients then head off to a fixed lodge somewhere, let's say, up in the central highlands of Kenya. And in that time, that mobile then is repositioned and is set up again and in another park in another part of Kenya. I'm just using Kenya as an example here so that the client then comes out of their last fixed lodge and into that private mobile camp, and they meet the same crew and they see the same guides. And they have that continuity of journey again, relationships with the staff and with the guides

and then being able to build in complete flexibility, say a private camps, private vehicles. If you're up at the top end, we've got helicopters that are on standby. We might book out a whole ranch and you might just do off ranch activities and come back home at the end of each day. So it's about knowledge. It's about your ability to tell a story over a map. It's about being able to understand the contours of that land. It's not an itinerary, and it's about being brave enough to go off plan because all the best stuff happens off plan.

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Bruce Wallin: So, I want to go through a few different scenarios with you, and I want your recommendations on on where we should go, what we should do. You know where we should say, first up, Okay, here's a person, a couple, whatever never been on safari. They're looking at this maybe as a once in a lifetime trip. Where should they go and why?

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Will Jones: I think if it's a one off, it's either Botswana or Tanzania. Why? Because I think if you're going to zero in on the two epicenter wildlife experiences, and if you're going once that, you know, it's key that that's part of the part of the mosaic is your wildebeest carving on the southern plains of the Serengeti in January February. So that's the Tanzania one option or is the Okavango Delta in Botswana, which is equally extraordinary, completely different, but equally extraordinary. And then, you know, you have Zarafa, you've got the Great Plains Camps there. You've got some really fantastic premier level camps in the Delta, as you do in Tanzania. Tanzania has really raised its game in the last sort of 10 or 15 years. And then with Tanzania, you've got the East African coast as well. So if you want to get down to Zanzibar, that's cool. And that's a that's a fantastic journey, Tanzania.

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Bruce Wallin: Okay, so I've done this epic trip. I've gone to the Serengeti and then skipped over to the, you know, Zanzibar or whatever on the Tanzanian coast. And you know, it was supposed to be a once in a lifetime trip, but now I am completely hooked. Where do I go next?

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Will Jones: I think Kenya, Kenya, to my mind, I think of all of them. Actually, Kenya is my favorite destination in the sense that it has the diversity that I don't think anywhere else offers. And a big piece of that is northern Kenya. One third of Kenya's population live in the top two thirds of that country, and you've got these different Nilotic and Omotic and Semitic cultural groups up in northern Kenya, the Masai, the Samburu, the Rendille. And it's wild. You know, there's this is community landscapes. It's unfenced, they're nomadic. They're rangelands. It's not to say that it's not without its conflict, and it's tension occasionally, but very rarely, almost never directed at travelers. But the cultural mosaic up in northern Kenya, linking in with some of the private reserves in the central highlands of Kenya. Linking in with your parks like the Maasai Mara, that is a really cool adventure in terms of second stage.

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Bruce Wallin: And I will say as a completely skewed Western perspective, the first time I ever got off a plane in the Maasai Mara, I remember looking out and thinking, oh my God, this is what I always envisioned Africa. It just it looks like Africa to someone who you know, grew up watching wildlife shows or what it's just like. It's the picture that you have in your head from Out of Africa or whatever it is. And it's so incredibly striking that landscape, but it just makes you feel like, oh my God, I have arrived. I'm here. Okay, so we're going to Kenya next. Actually, let's switch directions. Family Safari, you've arranged one for me, multigenerational. I got grandparents. I got pre-teens, I've got teens, I got the parents. So what is the best destination for that group where everybody's going to have a fantastic time.

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Will Jones: It generally boils down to one of two choices. I'd say either South Africa or Kenya. The South Africa option being a softer landing into Africa. Probably, maybe a bit more of a first timer where you can combine your Cape Town, your winelands, your museums, your art galleries, exquisite cuisine and attention to detail is sort of second to none. I mean, the South Africans, you've got to take your hats off to them. They do do it extremely well. Fantastic wildlife in the Kruger and you've got these private safari villas, which actually works. And that part of the reason why choose these two destinations because they've really developed that family, private family safari villa thing where you can your, the kids can make as much noise as they want, jumping in and out of the pool. You've got your own kitchen, your own staff, your own chef, your own vehicles. It works really, really well. Again, Kenya, a little bit wilder, a little bit edgier, but up in the central highlands of Kenya, which I just mentioned, there's some brilliant private ranches, there's some brilliant private houses like Sierra or Harajuku. Superb little sort of bases that you can sort of station yourself out and you have the complete run of the place. So multigenerational works really well in South Africa and Kenya.

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Bruce Wallin: Yeah, I mean, your point to Cape Town is, you know, you've got incredible winelands there. You've got an amazing art scene with the new museum that's opened up there. I mean, it's an incredible destination to complement that safari experience. I feel like, okay, so we've been to South Africa, we've been to Botswana, Kenya, Tanzania now you're that seasoned event that we're talking about and you want to push the envelope a little bit. What, where do I go and why?

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Will Jones: If it was a different time, I would be suggesting Ethiopia. Right now, I am wary of it because of the civil unrest up in the north of the country. Of course, that will settle at some stage, but it's a complicated situation in Ethiopia, which would mean that I wouldn't. But under normal circumstances, somewhere like Ethiopia, mountainous early form of Christianity, five of Africa's major river systems flowing out of the Central Highlands, the highest concentration of highlands anywhere on the African continent. It's extraordinary. We've just been into Eritrea, which is also equally fascinating. We're doing mobile camps with the Rashida who are these Red Sea coast traders that came across from Saudi Arabia, gosh, 100, 200 years ago. I don't know any other company in the world that is doing that. That's another one of our RARE off

Google experiences. Republic of Congo. I just mentioned it a moment ago. Odzala, fantastic accommodation run by Congo Conservation Company the parks are amazing, 50,000 western lowland gorilla. If you like a little bit of exercise, everything's on foot. You follow these elephant trails through these forests. You can only get through the forest because you're following these elephant trails. And sometimes these elephant trails are like two feet under water and you can be wading through water, tracking forest elephant and forest buffalo and seeing some really unusual creatures like yellow back dyker. And you get to go tracking these gorillas with nobody else. It just gives you an indication of how little visited it is. If you're going to the mountain gorillas in Rwanda or Uganda, it's very strictly controlled, park permits and maximum number of people. In Odzala, you immediately get separated out. You get two, maximum of two of you, heading out with the local Pygmy bush tracker and you get the whole experience to yourself. It's pretty mind blowing.

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Bruce Wallin: We're going to take a quick break and we'll be right back to talk to Wil Jones about some of the rewards and risks to this type of off Google Travel.

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[Ad Break]

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Bruce Wallin: What part does conservation, you know, community development investment? What part do they play on these types of trips and for Journeys by Design in general?

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Will Jones: I have been committed to the idea of trying to prove that tourism is not the answer, but it is extremely well placed for generating, I'd say, the lion's share of potential revenue opportunities back into conservation and development programs, and it has eventually ended up with us going, you know, Journeys by Design has done really well out of Africa and its assets that we now have a moral obligation to protect those assets on which that businesses is dependent. And also the, you know, you ain't got a business no more if that asset is so undermined that it isn't worth visiting or isn't in good condition. So it's a, it's a moral obligation. And I do genuinely believe that the world, particularly with COVID, has presented an opportunity. The children of the future are not going to thank us if we don't start taking this seriously. So our project is all about making as much money as we can out of tourism, but redistributing that wealth as of most as effectively as we can into into those programs on on the ground.

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Bruce Wallin: Can you give me an example? So, for instance, a couple of years ago, you opened up Lale's Camp. Am I pronouncing that correctly? Lale's Camp in Ethiopia. So you know, this is an area of Ethiopia that is not highly touristed. Give me an example of how opening that camp is working towards those goals of conservation, of wildlife conservation or, you know,

community development. And then also, you know, building a sustainable model that's going to be able to grow.

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Will Jones: So Lale's Camp is right down in southern Ethiopia, it's the only camp on the Omo River, where the only guys that operate a boat on a boat got 200 kilometers a stretch of river. I mean, it's wild. It's a very marginal community. It's an afro Asiatic community called Acara. There are only about 2000 Acara in the world. They practice infanticide. They kill the children depending on particular beliefs, which is why actually this particular population hasn't grown. But we are investing in jobs, jobs really being the main way of redistributing wealth back into local salaries that put bread on local children's table. So it's an impact investment that we've made. So we bought a company in Ethiopia, started a company in Ethiopia. It is run by Ethiopians for Ethiopians. We have a female Ethiopian country manager running running that company for and in the interests of Ethiopians. And we have four local Ethiopian shareholders, one of whom is a local junior Cara elder called Lalebewa, who holds the keys to the valley. He is our man. He opens up all of the doors to all of the communities. So that is an example of a completely off Google experience that we know firsthand, and it's all about redistributing wealth back into those communities. So it's about RARE. It's about the social justice piece we have Wild Philanthropy, which can take their donations. But we also have, and this is really, really important, is the impact of investment vehicle as well. It's primarily a trade, not aid model, but is trade and aid the two interplay really neatly with each other. But actually, in terms of empowering and motivating and incentivizing individuals on the ground in Africa, we think it's trade. It's about a respectful relationship between, I give you this and I expect this in return, not I'm just going to give you this. Respectful trade relationship with our partners on the ground. Is the primary driver in that model.

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Bruce Wallin: Right. Absolutely. And I mean, but that said, like clearly, philanthropy plays a big part too. I know it's a priority for for you guys and what you do for your clients. I know you work with conservation organizations like African Parks. They do the Lewa plain park that I visited in Zambia. How does that play out on your safaris, the philanthropic side?

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Will Jones: So I suppose, much like the way that Journeys by Design works with our partners on the ground Wild Philanthropy works alongside its conservation partners on the ground too. You just mentioned African Parks just then, you know, fantastic conservation agency primarily based out of South Africa, southern African model rolling out and doing some really, really interesting work. And it's really interesting because it's the conservation organizations that have access to landscapes at scale, which is where the real future opportunity of travel and RARE and wilderness lies. So working alongside partners like African Parks or WWF, World Wildlife Fund or FFI, Fauna and Flora International, the conservation partners don't know really how to deliver tourism, and we struggle to get access to landscapes. So there is this beautiful interplay where we can send families, for example, to Zambia or Niassa up in northern Mozambique, which FFI is working with, or Pendjari, where African parks have just opened

something up in Benin. And through the sort of intelligent doorways of opportunity, if you like, we are suddenly able to open up a whole new gateway of opportunity for travelers to go and mix in with conservation related, culturally related, environmentally related programs. The wildlife piece is, of course, important, but actually particularly when you're traveling kids, I've often found particular with my own kids. You know, the memories that they take home, that they that sticks with them longest are actually the cultural social interactions with Maasai warriors or local traditional cultures, because so often they're so diametrically opposed. You know, maybe a kid coming out of L.A. who assumes that drinking water comes out of the tap and sort of takes that for granted and then goes and visits a child, you know, in the Maasi in the Omo Valley, for example, who is completely naked and is covered in dust. That's not what they all are, of course, but there is that really interesting educational element to this. It's inspiring. It inspires you to come back, it inspires you to get involved. And tourism is just a mechanism.

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Bruce Wallin: And that's clearly something that we experienced in Zambia at that school. But I also feel that there's a potential drawback to places that are so remote or, you know, underexplored. And, and that's safety, right? I mean, you know, we've talked about Central African Republic. And look, that's not a place that many people are going to want to go on their next vacation and safety is a big, big part of that. And so these types of trips, these off Google experiences, clearly there is a higher level of risk. How do you guys manage that?

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Will Jones: So that is definitely one of the challenges. And it comes with the territory, so to speak, by the very nature of RARE and Frontier. What I would say, however, is that I think once you're actually fully understand fear and the statistical probability of actually getting caught up in some sort of, let's say, civil unrest in Gemena, capital of Central African Republic, or, you know, something happening in Massawa, which is the airport in Eritrea. Relative to your decision to jump in a vehicle every day, relative to your decision to go on an annual skiing holiday, where you're more likely to come home with some sort of spinal injury. Getting it into perspective, I think, is very, very liberating, and fear has such an insipid way of getting ourselves in. Not without really unpacking that fear. We can prevent ourselves from doing all sorts of things in life. And so I think I would encourage people to try and not hold ourselves hostage to those remote statistics because actually, once you do the relativity piece, that fear tends to melt away like a mirage the closer you get to it.

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Bruce Wallin: As you know, most people aren't doing that relativity equations when they're planning a trip. They, it's it's just this for for whatever reason, statistics don't don't play into that decision. I hear what you're saying, but still, you're going to run into it. I'm sure you do all the time. You know, these clients are people who are used to very high luxury, very, you know, the best of everything all the time, like, are some of these off Google destinations. Is it possible to do this, these high adventures in a high luxury way? Or is it kind of a mix? How do you do that?

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Will Jones: So we were selling about 100 safaris a year pre-COVID. We think coming out of COVID and into this sort of RARER landscape, we will sell half that amount. So we don't have the same aspirations as before. We're selling a smaller business model. We're selling fewer trips to fewer people by design. And it's in that journey. It's a relationship piece that we have with our clients. So that may be when we still get new inquiries, of course. And but the majority of that is repeat or referred and we've been going for 20 odd years. So a lot of the relationships that we have with our clients now are as relationships and they've maybe traveled with us a few times. And so eventually they get to this point like, hey, Will, what do you what do you recommend now? Go, well, okay, I think you're ready to go and do one of these trips and do you trust me? Yes, we trust you. Sure, we're going to do that together. Yes, we'll go and do it together. So I think it's about trust. A lot of it is about trust, and a lot of it is about being narrow gauge around it. We're not trying to scale. We're not looking for growth, for growths sake, if we grow organically fantastic. But otherwise, I think the new narrow gauge, environmentally sensitive journey is, is more villagized. It's much smaller scale.

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Bruce Wallin: Let me ask you this. You are in the business of creating moments for your clients, and you have for many, many, many clients, including myself. What was the last time that you had a moment on safari?

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Will Jones: So I was in Eritrea, if we define safari as to travel as opposed to necessarily being just wildlife. We were in the Dahlak archipelago with a photographer called Don McCullin, who's quite a famous war photographer who in his 80s now he's had a triple heart bypass, and he wanted to come with me to go and do a trip into the Dahlak archipelago, which is in the Red Sea, off of off Eritrea. And we had found these two little islands called Dohul and Dargela, and we took a little fly camp on the boat and we went and set the fly camps up on these little beaches and we had basically run out of fish to eat. But we had some vegetables and we came up to this. We're out in the sea. We're sort of parked off from from the beaches, nobody around. We haven't seen anybody. We didn't see a single of a traveler in the entire two weeks that we traveled around there. And that was just this moment. We came up to this fishing boat and we didn't exchange money. We just exchanged smiles and a conversation and some bananas in return for two kingfish. And we went on our way again. We ate that kingfish on the beach that night in a tiny little sort of canvas tent that we popped up on the side. Nothing fancy, but like I say, the luxuries in in the frontier and the caliber of guides that that host you. And I always remember, like, when was the last time we traded like that? It felt like we'd gone back to some early roots and then waking up the next morning. And that fishing boat had actually anchored right off the beach and the guys on the boat were praying towards Mecca as the sun was coming up. And it was just an extraordinarily powerful reminder of, I think, humanity and where we've all come from and where we're going and what we've lost in this journey towards modernization. And you come back to the bridge where Homo Sapiens effectively branched out of Africa wasn't the Sinai, but was that bridge between basically Eritrea and Yemen. And it was like very, very powerful. I think we've lost our way in some ways

in this journey towards modernization, we've lost a lot of what the traditional values and benefits of traditional society taught us. And so that really got me just then.

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Bruce Wallin: That's amazing. The simple act like barter, a moment like that is what sticks with you and what is the fundament. Not that it's not that it's not the chandelier in the in the camp. Like you said, it's not. It's that and that's what travel is all about. That's fantastic. Yeah. Well, we will keep on supporting you Will and Journeys by Design. We wish you the best of luck and thank you so much for joining us on Travel That Matters.

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Will Jones: Well, Bruce, thanks very much for having me. Really appreciate the opportunity.

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Narrator: And now for the wall and wrap up,.

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Bruce Wallin: Okay, I'm slightly obsessed with this whole concept of off Google Travel, but it's not just in Africa or on safari if this is really something that can happen just about anywhere. I mean, couple of years back, I was camping with my son and a couple of friends in the High Sierras to set the stage a little bit. There had been a drought in California for several years, so snow levels had dropped way down, making certain parts of the mountains accessible that hadn't been in many, many years. And my friend found this lake on some topographic map and we just decided to go for it. So we started hiking. We go the trail ends. We keep on going. We were scaling waterfalls. We were like hacking our way through bushes. And just when we were ready to quit, you know, I was the first one ready to quit. I was done, just when we were about to quit, we come over this ledge and before us is this magical sparkling lake in, you know, with peaks rising all around it. So we walked down to the water. We start, you know, casting our fishing lines in there and we start catching trout after trout. And I had this realization. This place hadn't been fished in who knows how long, like no one had been to this lake in years. I can't say that with any kind of authority, but I'm pretty certain we're the only people crazy enough to go to this place and this place had been inaccessible. And it was a sense of like, wow, we are doing something that no one else has done. And that sense of making a little extra effort and doing something that no one else had done, it was so rewarding and bonding. It's something my son and I still talk about, and he cites it as his greatest travel memory ever. Now that experience our experience, it doesn't compare to some of the stuff that Will is arranging in Ethiopia or Eritrea or wherever it is. But that concept, that concept of off Google Travel, it's something that we can all embrace, no matter where in the world we are. We'd like to thank Will Jones for joining us today on Travel That Matters. For more information on luxury safaris with Journeys by Design, please check out our show notes or visit Curtco.com. This show is produced for cargo media by AJ Moseley and Darra Stone. Music by Joey Salvia. I'm Bruce Wallin and we'll see you down the road.

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Narrator: Curtco Media. Media for your mind.