

Narrator 0:02
From Curtco Media

Bruce Wallin 0:06

A private trip to a polar extreme aboard an ice breaking super yacht. Today we'll hear from an expedition leader whose journeys to the far corners of the earth might just be the ultimate luxury adventures. I'm Bruce Wallin, and this is Travel that Matters. Hello, everybody, and welcome to Travel that Matters. This is the podcast where we explore the world's most exceptional and meaningful travel experiences. And we meet some of the fascinating people who make them possible. Now, of all the extraordinary adventures that we cover on Travel that Matters, I can't think of any one that can top the types of trips that we're going to talk about today. My guest is Ben Lyons who is a CEO of a company called EYOS Expeditions. EYOS specializes in what's known as expedition yachting, which basically means traveling by super yacht into some of the most extreme and spectacular destinations on the planet. We're talking about going deep into places like Antarctica, the Arctic, and Papua New Guinea, and exploring them completely on your own terms, no set schedules or tours or meal times or any of that stuff. It is your own private journey aboard a luxury vessel in some of the most extreme conditions on Earth, where you can get up close with orcas, polar bears, penguins, and much, much more. Ben personally leads a lot of these journeys. And we're going to talk to him today about some of his own adventures as well as the best destinations for expedition yachting. But we're also going to hear from him about some of his firsthand observations, and how he is personally witnessing the significant changes taking place in our polar regions. This is going to be a lot of fun. So let's set sail on an extreme adventure with EYOS CEO, Ben Lyons. Ben, great to have you on Travel that Matters.

Ben Lyons 2:16

Thank you so much for the invitation. I'm delighted to be here.

Bruce Wallin 2:19

There's so much I want to talk to you about but first, I just won't start with chartering a yacht. It's an ultimate experience, right? And chartering out in the types of places that you guys go, takes it to a whole different level. Give me a quick anecdote about a time and experience on one of your trips that was just beyond compare one, like even you were blown away by this moment.

Ben Lyons 2:41

I think the one that first comes to mind was, we were on a yacht in Antarctica, and it was New Year's Eve. And we sail through the Lemaire passage, and we just sort of kept going. And we hit a significant amount of ice. But it was something that the yacht that we were on, which is a converted icebreaker, was able to handle really comfortably, and we just kept sailing south and further south and further south, until we were really surrounded by just ice everywhere, on this most beautiful, pristine day, you know, bluebell skies, not a breath of wind, dramatic mountaintops sort of all around you. And eventually, we got to the point where we just kind of stopped the ship. And the guests just went out on deck. And they spent the rest of the day and

into New Year's Eve just being outside taking in the moment. And it was just one of those moments I think you sort of look back upon and think God what what? How remarkable was it that that you get to do this? How remarkable is it that you get to spend New Year's Eve surrounded by ice in the Antarctic Peninsula with absolutely nobody else around.

Bruce Wallin 3:41

That ability to get away from the crowds and to be able to have that moment all to yourself is something I want to talk to you about because I think that's a huge component of what you guys do. But let's step back and talk about how we got here. Like, this is a real niche market here. Like, it's not a career that you just kind of happen upon. It's, how did you get into the business of expedition yachting?

Ben Lyons 4:05

Well, I have to say that I have been obsessed with ships my whole life ever since I was five years old. And I ended up going to the Merchant Marine Academy to become an officer on ships. And I ended up working on cruise ships. And I ended up spending five years as an officer on board the Queen Mary II. And then at the same time, I was doing travel writing, so I was going to different destinations going on different ships and writing about them for magazines or websites, so forth. And I ended up taking a trip to Galapagos. And this trip, I think kind of changed the trajectory because all of a sudden, I was on a small ship filled with really interested curious passengers, with these expedition staff that were there to sort of explain and provide enrichment and to really give a new level of insight to the destinations that you're going in. It wasn't about the ship. It was about the destination. It was about learning. It was about this sort of sense of discovery. And and I think that kind of woke me up to realize He's like, Oh my God, look what you can do if you use the ship as a platform to do something else, right? It's not about the ship, but it's using the ship as a platform for for understanding, for enrichment and for for excitement. From there, I ended up taking a trip to Antarctica as a travel writer, and I just loved it so much right away, it was kind of magical. And in so many different ways that I decided to quit my job on the Queen Mary II, and I went to work for an expedition cruise line for Lindblad Expeditions and National Geographic.

Bruce Wallin 5:29

I love that the focus on the activities, the destination and say, rather than the focus on the ship, which, you know, Cunard, it's definitely something where it's all about the ship, right? Of course, the ships that you're on now actually do really, really matter. But so okay, at EYOS, what are some of the things that you can do so much differently than than you would have been able to do with with even with Lindblad, a smaller expedition company?

Ben Lyons 5:53

You know, I think some of the, so much that what our clients value is choice, right? I mean, it's the ability to kind of dictate the experience that you want, you're not dependent upon what 100 or 150 other people are doing. It's really your trip in a completely customized way. Who are the guides that you have on board? Where are you going to go? What's your focus going to be? Even what time do you want to go ashore? How long do you want to stay there? Do you want

to, you know, add another two days in one spot, just because it magically captures you. It's that ability to dictate and tailor your own experience.

Bruce Wallin 6:27

And I think that's one of the key components of any truly extraordinary travel experience, is to be able to shape it to the moment and shape it to what you personally want to do. And I think, well, you already give us an example with the New Year's Eve and getting away in a magical stretch of ice. But think, tell me another one, like some time when you were able to just kind of spontaneously change course. And it led to just some spectacular occasion.

Ben Lyons 6:51

What I would say about spontaneity is it's the ability to sort of react to the wildlife and to the weather that's there, right? And, and I'm thinking of another wonderful moment in Antarctica, where it was probably 11 o'clock, and we had set sail, we were heading north along the peninsula, when all of a sudden, you know, we saw killer whales. And rather than sort of keep going, rather than sticking to a schedule, we said, oh my god, let's let's see what these whales do. And guests we're just finishing dinner, we got them out, all out on deck. And the whales sort of responded in this most incredible way. They just ended up coming right behind us on the stern of the ship. And this is a yacht that had a swim platform. So you could be right down at the water level. And the killer whales sort of came right up to us and ended up following the ship. And we sort of kept course we didn't change anything. And these guys, guys just got so incredibly close that you felt like you could reach out and touch them. And we actually at one point, sort of, you know, stop the ship so that we could be sure that we weren't disturbing them, that we weren't, you know, there was nothing that we were doing that was influencing their behavior. And they, they ended up going away, swimming away. And so we said, okay, that was an incredible encounter. It was wonderful. And then we put the ship back into gear, we ended up you know, sailing forward and the whales came right back as soon as we put the ship back into into motion. And they loved, apparently, the sound of the propeller, the weight to play in. And they just spent the next 30 minutes with us, all within almost arm's reach. And everyone was elated and energized.

Bruce Wallin 8:17

Magical moments like that are why people are drawn to EYOS expeditions. The company started as a service for yacht owners, helping them to outfit their boats for extreme conditions, and then leading them into the polar regions. Today, EYOS also offers yacht charters for people who don't have their own boats, but still want to experience these ultimate adventures.

Ben Lyons 8:40

So somebody comes to us without a yacht, wants to know, you know, what's a good yacht to go with. And we can tell them from our experience, you know what? We've been on yacht X, Y, or Z multiple times, we know the captain, we know the the crew. This is an incredible yacht. And we arranged the whole experience from chartering the vessel to providing the guides to providing the itinerary, sort of trying to take care of everything from from A to Z. We also our design consultants, so sometimes owners come to us and say, you know, I want to take my

yacht to an unusual destination, or I want to build a yacht to go and be really well suited well built for expeditions. How can you help us design the yacht? So many times we get on these private yachts and there are compromises, you know, the owner wants to have a certain experience, but he comes to realize or she comes to realize that the yacht isn't actually built for that, or there are limitations within the vessels design, of course, just ice classifications. How capable is the actually operating in ice, you know, how strong is the steel? What is the distance between the frames and the hull of the ship? Or what is the visibility from the bridge so that you can actually navigate more successfully in the ice? And of course, you want to be in the ice. That's where the real magic happens. Right?

Bruce Wallin 9:50

You said the ice is where the magic happens. Tell me about that for a second. I know we've already heard the new the New Year's Eve example. But what is it about ice that that creates the magical moments?

Ben Lyons 10:01

I've been to Antarctica, I don't know, 30, 40 times, something like that. And I feel like once you've seen your first 200,000 penguins, you know, you've kind of seen them all. I love penguins. They're they're wonderfully charming, cute, charismatic, I still get excited seeing them every year.

Bruce Wallin 10:16

I've never, I've never seen a penguin before. It's actually on my list. I need to see a penguin.

Ben Lyons 10:20

So they're wonderful. And I don't want to diminish the appeal of penguins at all. But, after you've seen your first 200,000, you know that 200,001st is not that different, right? But what is remarkable to me is the ice because it comes as an incredible variety of colors, and textures and shapes. Everything from you know, crystal clear to sort of the deepest blue that you'd ever imagined. And it can be as small as like a baseball, up to icebergs that are 17 miles long, you know, that we've come across on our trips. And it's just something magical and compelling and otherworldly about it, that it's it has a real fascination for me. And I think it's what draws people back and back and back, because it's just something that is so different from people's day to day existence. And of course, ice is the whole fabric of the existence in terms of wildlife in the polar regions. And, you know, if you're up in the Arctic, there's there's no more kind of incredible experience than having the ship wedged in the ice and a polar bear seeing the ship from miles away. And you watch that polar bear start coming across the sea ice slowly and deliberately making its way towards you, until it gets right up to the bow of the yacht. You know, and you're having this incredibly intimate encounter with a polar bear on its natural environment.

Bruce Wallin 11:38

Okay, you brought up the Arctic now and tell us quickly, I think a lot of people don't know, is what is the difference between a trip to the Arctic, and a trip to Antarctica? And like, tell us a little bit how they're different. And then kind of what appeals to you about both destinations?

Ben Lyons 11:54

Yeah, I mean, obviously, just right off the bat, the simplest, you know, thing to know, Antarctica, penguins, the Arctic polar bears, let's just get that, you know, out of the way right there.

Bruce Wallin 12:04

And you don't get sick of seeing polar bears, I'm guessing.

Ben Lyons 12:07

You don't get sick of seeing polar bears, because every one is a unique encounter. Every one is sort of this, you know, magnificent creature, that's clearly the master of its environment, right? A polar bear encounter is perhaps the singular, most exciting element that you can have on one of our trips, but they're actually very different. The Arctic and the Antarctic, the Antarctic is kind of an abundance, it is hundreds of hundreds of thousands of penguins, it's seals everywhere, it's these towering peaks that are just weighted down with, you know, years and years and years of snow, you know, you know where you're going to find these penguins, you know, where you're going to find whales too. It's, you go from spot to spot to spot where you have these incredible encounters. But it's quite predictable because there is such an abundance of life in the Antarctic. You go up to the Arctic, it's more of a safari, so to speak, it's kind of like a hunt, where you're looking for these wildlife encounters, you know, you might spend hours or days scanning the ice looking for a polar bear. And it just makes it that much more rewarding when you do see one. And of course, the other big thing that's different in the Arctic, especially in Canada and Greenland, is that there is Inuit communities and local communities that you can go visit that you can learn about and you can have the sort of cultural interaction, there's a cultural element that's in the Arctic that isn't in the Antarctic.

Bruce Wallin 13:26

Right. And so tell us a little bit about that. I mean, when you're visiting areas, are these places that a lot of typical cruise ships, not that they're typical cruise ships going to the Arctic, but a lot of these communities that you guys can get to, are they not really accessible by other, you know, other ships?

Ben Lyons 13:41

You know, I think that the truth of the matter is that, yes, some of the communities that we visit are visited by by other expedition passenger ships, no doubt about it, especially the ports that we are using to start off the adventures and the expeditions and then, you know, to fly into and fly out of, but of course, we do have that added flexibility to, to go into smaller communities, and to sort of have less of an impact, I think.

Bruce Wallin 14:05

So now we're getting to Antarctica. I mean, there's the you know, the famous crossing of Drake's passage that everybody dreads and I, you know, I sure you've done many, many times, but but do you most of your clients, do they do that? Or do they fly down and meet you down there? How does that work?

Ben Lyons 14:21

Personally, I love the Drake Passage. I mean, I'm a captain. I'm a mariner at heart, right? So I love the two days crossing the Drake, the variability of weather watching the albatross follow the ship. I think it's an amazing experience. And it really highlights kind of how remote you're getting, you know, and then you have the experience of seeing your first penguin, and then your first iceberg and then your first set of landmarks. You know, I love that. But understandably, for a lot of our clients, the idea of being potentially seasick for two days down and two days back and then taking that time away from the office. It's just not particularly appealing. So for probably 90% of our clients now, we actually fly them down into Antarctica, and they board the yacht at King George Island. So what that means is the clients have to get down to Chile. They fly from Punta Arenas, and they get on a chartered plane that's specially equipped to land on a gravel military runway in the Antarctic, and then from there they are able to take a zodiac right out to their yacht. There's no dock, so the yachts are still at anchor. And it's all weather dependent. I mean, that's the, the challenge is this is not flying into New York City, this is still flying down to Antarctica. So you know what, you know, there, there might be delays with with fog, there might be delays with wind or weather. And it all kind of adds to the mystique of of traveling there.

Bruce Wallin 15:41

Even EYOS can't control that. Yes, you'll get there when you get there.

Ben Lyons 15:46

Exactly.

Bruce Wallin 15:49

We're going to take a quick break. And we'll be right back with Ben Lyons to hear about some of his favorite spots beyond the poles for expedition yachting.

[Ad Break]

Bruce Wallin 16:21

Welcome back to my chat with EYOS CEO, Ben Lyons. Okay, so tell us a couple places outside of the poles that you like to go.

Ben Lyons 16:31

I think outside the poles, one of the areas that is really attracting interest right now is Melanesia. You know, and Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu. These are still areas that are relatively far removed from the typical tourist trap, where you can still have these wonderful authentic cultural encounters, where you can have a whole variety of activities, you

know, World War II history, the local culture, incredible diving, just beautiful scenery. You know, these are these are destinations that kind of have it all in a very authentic, not used to tourism manner.

Bruce Wallin 17:02

And that is that ability to when you guys come in, and there are only 12 people on board or whatever it is. It's a much different experience in these communities than, than when you're coming on there's 200 or 2000, in some cases, people downloading off the ship. Tell us, tell us a little bit how you received by these communities sometimes and is it different from what your experience was with Lindblad or Cunard?

Ben Lyons 17:24

No I think it's certainly different from the than the larger ships, you know, these are just opportunities that don't exist on the larger ships at all, of course, and I think it's a lot of it's about the pace, right? On a yacht, you can go and stay well into the evening you can stay the next day you can stay two or three days if you want to. Your experience is not limited to just a couple hours. First zodiac ashore is at 8:30, you need to be back on board at 11:30 and lunch is at noon. Instead you sort of can linger. You can integrate yourself with these communities in a different way. You know, I think of a client who chartered with us in Papua New Guinea for three weeks. And you know, they ended up spending this wonderful evening ashore in this community, bonfires with all the locals, just stretching well into the night. And it was it was a dialogue. It was an, you know, it was a different level of understanding and interaction than you'd otherwise get.

Bruce Wallin 18:13

For clients who maybe aren't quite ready for Antarctica or the Arctic or, you know, you mentioned some ships just aren't quite prepared for those places to or you know, New Guinea might be a little extreme to get a taste of it. What's a good place for a client who's interested in expedition yachting, but maybe not quite ready for the more extreme destinations?

Ben Lyons 18:32

Two destinations come to mind right away, first is Scotland. The Hebrides and Western Isles in Scotland are absolutely drop dead gorgeous, and they have so much to offer. There's these sea cliffs that are also teeming with with birds and with wildlife, just 1000s and 1000s of these birds taking off ,going to flight coming back you see it's like a Time Square, but for birds, you know, coming and going this mass of animals. There's history in terms of, you know, old castles and ruins. It's really an area that's very inaccessible by land, you know, you can't drive from island to island or you can't drive through some of these more remote peninsulas in Scotland. Another destination is Norway. You know, you get up to Northern Norway, you are getting actually above the Arctic Circle. But you still have communities, you still have roads, you still have infrastructure, but it's also not hard to sail 20, 30 miles down a fjord, and disembark the yacht, and go off on a hike or go take a kayak out and just be totally amongst yourself, you know, and I think that's, that's one of the great things that we can offer. We talked about just at the

beginning, it's this ability to be out by yourself to not have people around it's an incredible feeling of privilege to be in these areas and to not have the crowds.

Bruce Wallin 19:49

So that privilege, though it does come with a certain amount of risk, right? I mean, there, there are certainly safety issues. Clearly you guys are the pros at this, but tell me a little bit about what, what the biggest risks are that you face in expeditions like this, and then how you guys mitigate those risks?

Ben Lyons 20:06

The biggest risk that we end up facing, of course, is just the remoteness, right? That you have to be self-sufficient. It isn't that if something goes wrong, you can just pick up the phone and call somebody and you'll have help within 15 minutes. It's an entirely self-sufficient organization and operation. So you have to be prepared from the start, it takes a lot of planning, a lot of organization to make sure that in case something does go wrong, you have the capability to to handle it. You know, we never want to put a vessel in a position that is greater than its capabilities. And that sort of engagement with a yacht, six to nine months ahead of time, really gives us that sense of what the yacht can and can't do.

Bruce Wallin 20:45

So with all these trips that you've done to Antarctica, and, and the Arctic, are you noticing a difference over the past several, you know, there's a lot of talk about how climate change is affecting these areas, these very sensitive areas. What are you seeing? And is it something you can just see with your own eyes?

Ben Lyons 21:01

Yeah, it absolutely is, of course, you don't necessarily see it from year one to year two, there are seasonal variations. But we're now at the point, you know, where I personally have been going to Antarctica long enough, or the Arctic long enough, and I'm talking with my colleagues who have been going for 20 or 30 years, it's, it's evident. Of course there are changes that you can see. It's anywhere from glaciers that 10, 15 years ago, were a mile further out, you know, they've now receded a mile back, or it's simply the season. I mean, I think what's one of the most incredible things is that, you know, nobody used to be going to the Antarctic in October, or going to the Arctic in May. But now that's becoming common, you know, there's not as much ice that is prohibiting travel there, there's just the window, the availability to travel to these regions, is wider now, because of climate change. It's very easy to see, and I spent my actual last trip to Antarctica, we spent several days just with rain coming down, you know, and that's extremely unusual, you know, to have several days of rain and turn gray. And it was kind of all over the entire peninsula. That's not common. But that's also not something that you would have seen, I don't think, 30 years ago for sure.

Bruce Wallin 22:14

Okay, so another issue that, you know, may be of concern to some people and, and rightfully so is clearly, you know, expedition yachting and yacht charters have a massive carbon footprint.

There's no way getting around that, right. But you know, a huge part of what you guys do is going to these places and appreciating the nature, I mean, clearly for you, and you've given your responses so far, you love the wildlife in these places, you love the beauty, the natural beauty of these places. So, what do you guys do to kind of offset the inevitable damage that you do as travelers, that all of us do as travelers, but you know, what are you doing to kind of offset that and, and work to try to preserve these places that you so cherish?

Ben Lyons 22:58

Yeah, we are a company of passionate people. You know, we all come from the field, we've all been in Antarctica, we've all been in Papua New Guinea, we love it, we want to see it preserved, we want to see it cherished, no doubt about it. And so, so it is we were all passionate about these areas, we're passionate about preserving them and making sure that they are there for generations to come. And we're in a very fortunate position. Yes, of course, going on a yacht, it has a carbon footprint, no doubt about it. We do offset now our internal emissions ourselves, and we are encouraging all of our clients to actively offset their carbon emissions as well. But I think there's a lot more than that. We take some of the most influential people in the world, to areas that they haven't had much experience with beforehand, and we show them firsthand what's going on, and why it's so important. And we instill upon them sort of a passion as well for the area. You know, we provide them the education and we show them why these areas need to be around for years and years to come. And they become these ambassadors for the destination. And we've have clients, of course that have given back. We were with a client recently, you know, who's supported a large foundation for education in Papa New Guinea, you know, and bought, I don't know how many 1000s and mosquito nets, you know, for for the locals, little things like that, or water purification systems. So there's a lot of ways that you can do good. We've had clients who have supported now other conservation organizations with resources with filming with donations. You know, I think we've probably raised for one conservation organization alone, somewhere in the realm of probably \$5 million, either indirect donations or in kind gifts to allow them to continue their work and bring awareness to a much broader group of people. It sounds cheesy, it sounds a bit hokey. But I can tell you that I've never seen an area that affects people as much internally and emotionally as Antarctica does. So by taking these clients down there who can pick up and call, who can pick up a telephone and call political leader or a business leader and say, hey, how are your operations? How are your decisions affecting the environment? That's an incredible ability that we have, we're incredibly fortunate to have that kind of influence with our clients and then ultimately with the world.

Bruce Wallin 25:14

Well, I have some friends in this fight business, who would argue with you on that point and say that a safari in Africa is the one experience that would have that great of an impact, but it's the same, it's actually the same idea.

Ben Lyons 25:25

Absolutely.

Bruce Wallin 25:26

You know, with a lot of them, they, bringing influential people into these places, and having them be affected by the magical wildlife, whatever of these destinations has such a positive long term impact, potentially. And I think we've seen with with COVID, with travel shutdown, is a lot of the negative impacts that when you take travel tourism away, then a lot of these places are no longer bringing in the funds needed to protect whether it's wildlife or local communities, or whatever it is. And, and so I do think your argument is, is very valid, where, where next? What's, what's your next expedition?

Ben Lyons 26:02

You know, for me, it's probably going to be going back to Antarctica, in December or January. Then actually, the next expedition we're organizing is back in Iceland. And it's on this new vessel that I was in Iceland with, which is the Nansen Explorer. And it's kind of a pretty cool product. It's a, it's a partnership that we've just entered into. This is a former Russian government science or survey vessel that has passed hands over the years, and is now being turned into kind of a 12 passenger luxury experience or yacht. And so we're going to be this, the exclusive partner of the ship. And it was a great experience. This is sort of a different product. It's not a full super yacht, but it's certainly not a commercial ship at all, you know? The outside is rugged and tough. It has an incredibly strong ice classed hull, but then you walk in past kind of the steel outer decks and you enter inside. And all of a sudden, you have this brand new ship that's been refitted over the last eight months for only 12 people. And you have these huge staterooms with floor to ceiling windows. And these, you know, enormous showers and you have this chef that was just coming up with the most incredible creations. So that's kind of one of the next big things for us at EYOS, is really expanding this this partnership on Nansen Explorer and bringing her out into the, to the charter market. I think it's going to be a totally unique product, that's going to be very, very popular.

Bruce Wallin 27:22

Well, that sounds absolutely amazing. I am so jealous of your 30 or 40 trips to Antarctica, I need to go and I need to see my first penguin. And when I do, I will think of you. Ben, thank you so much for joining us today. It's been fascinating hearing, hearing your stories and learning more about these expedition cruises.

Ben Lyons 27:42

Thank you so much. It's a great pleasure. I really appreciate the opportunity.

Narrator 27:48

And now, for the Wallin wrap up.

Bruce Wallin 27:50

I think my favorite thing that Ben talked about today is that element of spontaneity, the ability that these trips have to let you do what's right at the given moment, right. If you're on a big cruise ship, let's face it, you're not able to do whatever you want, whenever you want to do it.

But with EYOS, with this type of trip, you can just follow those orcas or you can go hang out with that polar bear for 10 hours if you want to. That is the beauty, that spontaneity that ability to do what you want to do when you want to do it. And, and I'll say that is a common thread through every episode that we've done with Travel that Matters. I mean, I think back to Will Jones who runs these, you know, intricate safaris for his company Journeys by Design. I mean, he plans trips for people like Ralph Lauren and Katy Perry and these are intricately planned affairs. And yet, he told me all the best stuff happens off plan. Calum Morrison from the Extraordinary Adventure Club, everything he loves about travel is the stuff that you don't expect. Matthew Upchurch, who runs Virtuoso, he said true luxury is having options, that sense of freedom, that sense of spontaneity. And that's what makes these EYOS Expeditions such amazing adventures. I'd like to thank Ben Lyons for joining us today on Travel that Matters. For more information on EYOS Expeditions and all the destinations that we talked about today, please check out our show notes or visit Curtco.com. This show is produced for Curtco Media by AJ Moseley and Darra Stone, music by Joey Salvia. I'm Bruce Wallin, and we will see you down the road.