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Narrator: From Curtco Media. Coming up on the show.

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Sue Hills: You could rock up in Bavaria, say my ancestors are from Bavaria, get a brilliant guide and they'll take you to the churches, and to other places where the family probably hung out. But what we do is so specific and so personalized to the client that, you know, you could never replicate that with anyone.

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Bruce Wallin: That's Sue Hills. I'm Bruce Wallin, and this is Travel that Matters. Hello, everybody, and welcome to another episode of Travel that Matters. This is the podcast where we explore the world's most exceptional and meaningful travel experiences. And I got to say I can't really think of a more meaningful travel experience than the one we're going to talk about today. My guest is Sue Hills, the founder of a company called Ancestral Footsteps. Now, Sue's a TV person. She was a director and producer on the original British TV show, 'Who Do You Think You Are?'. That's the show where they take celebrities and do detailed research into their family backgrounds and take them on these surprise filled journeys where they gradually reveal all the secrets and stories about their ancestors. You can probably see where this one's going here. At the encouragement of some of her celebrity guests. Sue, along with her historian husband Andy Taylor, started offering this service to individuals. What they do today is, quite frankly, unlike anything else out there or that you've heard of. It's not one of these ancestral pub crawls through Ireland. These are highly researched personal journeys that take you anywhere in the world and reveal fascinating family stories along the way. Now, before any of us go on a major trip like this, it's always nice to speak with someone who has done that trip or traveled with this company, and today we are fortunate enough to have one such person. So before we get to Sue, I want to introduce you to this very special person who will be co-hosting today's show with me, she's a journalist, a New York Times bestselling author, and she also happens to be my wife, Lisa Sweetingham. Lisa, thank you for joining us today on Travel that Matters.

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Lisa Sweetingham: Thank you, Bruce Wallin. I'm happy to be here.

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Bruce Wallin: Very good. Very good. Okay, let me set this up a bit why my wife is on this show. A few years back, when I was the Editorial Director at Robb Report, I was researching a story about Ancestral Footsteps when I realized there was really only one writer who could do this story justice. Not only was she a great writer, of course, and my wife, but she had a very strange, sad and mysterious family story that just seemed like the perfect challenge for Sue and Andy. So Lisa, can you just give us a little bit of background on that family story and how you found yourself traveling down the Autobahn with Andy?

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Lisa Sweetingham: Yeah. So just to set the scene for you, it was the night of April 4th, 1951, and my maternal grandfather, Will Valenzuela, was getting drunk because his wife, Margo, my grandmother, had just told him that she was going to leave him. Now they had met in World War II. She was a very poor German girl and he was a soldier, a Mexican soldier fighting for America. And he brought her over here. He had two kids, my mom and aunt, and that night he just was so distraught that he shot her with his military weapon and then he shot himself. Now, fast forward to today, I didn't know anything about them, and no one in our family really did too and I had so many questions about, did he love her? What was the story? Why did he do it? And I knew nothing and my parents knew nothing, and I really wanted to know more about this family history. So that's how I found myself traveling with Andy down the Autobahn.

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Bruce Wallin: Okay, so let's go from there to Sue. Sue, thank you so much for joining us on Travel that Matters.

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Sue Hills: It's a pleasure, pleasure.

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Bruce Wallin: Well, we are very excited to hear some of your stories. We teased it a little bit here with Lisa's story, but I want to start. How did you come up with this idea? I hear Jerry Springer has something to do with it.

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Sue Hills: He did, indeed. I mean, I was working for a program called 'Who Do You Think You Are?'. Which I know they have all over the world, including America. And, I was really fortunate to be directing Jerry Springer's story. For some reason, I thought that Jerry Springer was American, possibly with Irish roots, because the surname Springer said that to me. But we uncovered an incredible Jewish story which involved a tragic, very tragic Holocaust tale. Both his grandmothers had perished in the Holocaust, but he was an absolute pleasure to travel with because he saw positives in everything negative that was being thrown at him. And at the end of the trip, he just said, this has been such an emotional, brilliant once in a lifetime journey. Why don't you do this for everybody, not just for celebrities? And I said, well, Jerry, I have been thinking about that because it is incredible and I feel honored to be on the trip. And it's not even my family, but I'm emotionally involved. So how must it be for you? You know whose actual family, who's who's the subject of this? And it got me thinking and sort of probably about a year later, I launched Ancestral Footsteps.

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Bruce Wallin: Was there anyone else out there doing something like this at the time?

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Sue Hills: No, there was nothing that was as global as us. So for example, you could have ancestry from Scotland, Sweden, Germany and France, but probably to organize that tour for

coming from America, you would have to do separate tours with different companies within those countries. Whereas the beauty of what we can do here at Ancestral Footsteps is we can organize the whole thing because we have global contacts. So for example, if I've got Irish roots, and I know I'm from Derry. Of course I can go. I can contact the local Derry guide, who does tours to the local pubs, the local castle, et cetera, et cetera. But they may not do tours that involve the documents, which is specifically what give the fascinating information about the family.

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Lisa Sweetingham: I think you're actually underselling it a bit because what you do, Sue, and which I so appreciated as an investigative reporter, is you find the evidence and you find the documents and you dig so deep and you live with our ancestors. I know that in my case, you actually lived with William and Margot and Helga and Helene and all of the ancestors. And as they were in the war time in Germany and as the buildings were crumbling around them, I felt like when you and I met, you already knew more about me than I knew about me, and that was something you can't find that anywhere.

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Bruce Wallin: Living with your ancestors. Lisa and Sue were first in touch just a few months earlier. And already, as Lisa puts it, she knew more about Lisa than Lisa did. Clearly, this was not the result of a few Google searches and phone calls. This is serious investigative reporting. So we asked Sue how she went about uncovering Lisa's family's story,

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Sue Hills: For example, with Lisa's story, it was an incredible opening gambit, you know? I mean, she told me that her grandparents, it was a murder suicide that was phenomenal. So already my interest was piqued. I thought, I've got to help this person out. I knew the family were from the Cologne area of Germany, and of course, the first thing you're going to do is go to the Cologne archives. The first point of call. Let me guess what? The Cologne archives were closed because they've been damaged. They were being rebuilt. So that was like, Oh no, we managed to sort of sweet talk someone in there and they said we could. If you're very specific about the years, we could look at some old boxes, but it'll take us weeks to do that. We just thought, you know, we just need to see there must be some family there. I think from Lisa, we knew that her grandmother had her brothers and sisters, so we must have some family members still in Germany. So we thought, well, what is the way to get hold of Germans? And someone said it's the local free newspaper, which again was a big thing back then and probably a bigger thing than it is in the U.K., where people, you know, literally pick up the local paper that falls on the doormat in the morning. And the local paper was quite interested in us because we had a story and Lisa had a photo of the two lovers. And so therefore already there was quite a nice sort of slant for them. So they've kindly published a story for us and then probably within a week, Elsa contacted the paper and the paper contacted us, and the rest is history.

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Lisa Sweetingham: So the most amazing thing happened on that last day when you took me into this tiny little town and you said, this is Elsa, and she has some things to show you and Elsa turned out to be my second cousin once removed. And she had all these documents in her hands, and she had photographs of my grandmother holding my mother, who was just a baby in California, photos that we'd never seen before. And that was and she had so many wonderful details that we didn't know. Like that Margo's sister. They called the foxy one, had to resort to prostitution just to get maybe a bar of soap or some chocolates, and that she had a brother who was like a gay tailor for the opera. You know, and also the mom who lived in this tiny rented room with one wall missing. That was just nice for me to know that these real people who I had never known anything about before. It cements your story. It gives you a sense of who you are.

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Sue Hills: Yeah, I think that's really important as well to understand the struggles these people had. And you do realize that people's lives were really messy in the old days. I mean, you know, they can be messy now. Of course they can. But yeah, you know, there really was a struggle of hand-to-mouth.

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Bruce Wallin: What are those moments that people react to the most? I feel like when Lisa's story, you kind of it's kind of the holy grail was discovering someone. But what is kind of typically the moments that people are just blown away by?

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Sue Hills: I think that people are blown away more than anything by the kindness of strangers, the absolute kindness of strangers. In a way, Lisa's relative, she was she was a stranger, you know, but she was kind. She didn't have to give up. I think she took a day off work, didn't have to do that. You know, she didn't have to get the photos together, and she didn't have to come and meet Lisa. But she did, and it was just so kind. And you find that, you know, with a lot of trips, you go to a really far flung village maybe in Eastern Europe, and the local schoolchildren have never seen Americans before or British people before. Here they are, rocking up in the village. You know, they make them a cake, or they give them a school assembly to say, welcome to our village. Or, I had a trip with a guy actually who lives in Los Angeles. He went over to Kaliningrad in Russia and wanted to see where his family home was that his grandparents had been chased from during the war. And we managed to go there in advance, knock on the door of the family home and a beautiful couple answered, a beautiful Russian couple and said when they come, we must make them welcome. And they came over on the tour. I said, will you the client, you ring on the door? But he said, Well, why? Because no one will be in. I said please ring on the doorbell, because I know someone's going to be in, because I've organized it. He rings on the doorbell and a coach trip of us, of 15 of us, walk in and this couple have made them the most amazing spread. Welcome to our house. This is probably where your grandparents slept. This is where they ate. This is the garden. And he just turned to me and said this is the most beautiful birthday present I've ever had. And his wife was in tears saying, thank you. This is amazing. And it was, you know, and it was kindness of strangers that didn't have to do that.

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Bruce Wallin: Let's talk about that for a second. That experience you just brought up in Russia with the family and they opened the door and there's 15 people and you all go in there and eat and like, this is an experience that has never happened to before. It's not like you're on some tour from a hotel and you just you bring your group there and they make you dinner just like they made it for a hundred other groups this year, like this has never happened before, and it's never going to happen again.

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Sue Hills: Never going to happen again.

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Bruce Wallin: That, to me, is something so special about these trips and talk to me a little bit about that. Kind of that, whether you call it luxury travel or whatever it is, it's like that idea of doing something that no one has done before and no one will ever do again.

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Sue Hills: I mean, this is the thing that sort of sets us apart from probably other genealogical tours or ancestry tours. In that, you know, you could rock up in Bavaria, say my ancestors are from Bavaria, get a brilliant guide and they'll take you to the churches and to other places where the family probably hung out. But you know, what we do is so specific and so personalized to the client that, you know, you could never replicate that with anyone. Even if I had a family next week that said, I'm from this particular street and in Kaliningrad, in Russia, I'd know that it wouldn't be the same house and the same people in it. So it wouldn't be the same story. So I can never, ever replicate a tour.

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Bruce Wallin: Let's get back to those moments, those moments, you know? Are there others that you can think of, whether it's discovering a new relative or a gravestone or what? What are some -

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Sue Hills: Gravestones are quite personal because again, I mean I come back to, I mean I do have a lot of Jewish clients that have been told that everything was destroyed in the war. A lot of things were destroyed in the war. They were also told all the records were destroyed. But I think that that's another misnomer in the ancestry world. If the record isn't on Ancestry.com, then it doesn't exist. Of course it exists. It just is in a sort of archive miles from nowhere in a village or something. And I think people are told that, you know, a lot of the towns were desecrated. So if you do come to a graveyard and the grave of your great great grandfather is there, you can place the stone on it. It's incredibly emotional.

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Bruce Wallin: So how do you discover all this? Okay, so we talked a little bit about what you did for Lisa, where you know, you start with the archives clearly. And, you know, with Lisa's case, you know, one of the branches that you went off to was taking out a story in a local newspaper like, what are some of these other branches? It sounds like archives first, then what?

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Sue Hills: Archives first and then local people. You know, you find out where people are from and then you go locally. There's nothing better in this world than someone with local knowledge. I did have a trip actually once where we went to a village in Norfolk, it was a UK trip, and we went to the pub for lunch and I didn't know because I'd never been to this pub before. And the client very sneakily told the person at the pub, this is my surname, and I hadn't really sort of factored that into the tour at all. And of course, the person with the surname said, oh, there's a road named after you a couple of streets away. And of course, that was where we were going after lunch, I was going to reveal it to them. So they already knew that. So again, there's nothing like their local knowledge. Often if you go to the pub. So that's why it's really important to do what we call a recce, like a sort of scoping mission where we go in advance to see what's going on.

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Bruce Wallin: It's sounds very old fashioned, no offense, you're talking about going into archives and meeting people in pubs, taking out stories in freebie newspapers that, you know, in many parts of the world don't exist anymore. You know, I haven't heard DNA testing. I haven't heard, you know, Google searches or anything. Let's talk about DNA testing. Is that something that you do or s?

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Sue Hills: So DNA testing, I think, is brilliant in certain circumstances, but I think DNA testing will be wonderful when everybody is on the database. That's when you really will be able to find people. But in some cases, it does help. I think it's brilliant if you're looking for a birth relative, if you were adopted and for certain situations like that, or maybe if you're from somewhere that doesn't have any records, such as Africa. I had another, actually, because Bruce did make a joke at the beginning about how Lisa had a very unique story. I did have another murder suicide, actually, and this one was unbelievable because we went to the archive. It was in Britain and the lady who was, I think, the granddaughter. Yep, she I said, we're going to find the documents to do with your family and you'll read that actually, the husband was traumatized from the war. And he came back several years later, he shot his wife and then he turned the gun on himself.

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Lisa Sweetingham: Oh God, just like mine.

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Sue Hills: The most incredible thing about that is we were looking through the papers and in the documentation were the actual bullets that had gone through the skulls of both people. They'd been kept by the police and the police records were kept in the archive. So it is, as you say,

Bruce, it is all about stories. It's all about understanding why my family had the motivation to do certain things, you know? Okay, my family came to the U.S. Why did they come in 1855? What was going on in Sweden? What was going on in Poland, what was going on in Ireland, what was going on wherever, you know, why did they come then? And you can really find out specifically, you know, in the local areas, why they went there. It's great to have names and dates on the big family tree on the wall. But if you don't know what any of those people did, it's kind of pointless, really.

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Bruce Wallin: Now, these stories, okay, so you're based in in the UK, and a lot of these stories are, you know, a lot of the Jewish stories, a lot of the other ones, they're they're Eurocentric. I know you do offer services in other parts of the world, too. And how has that gone, you know, whether if it's an African origin story or Asian or whatever it is like, how do you work differently in those areas than you do in Europe?

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Sue Hills: I don't really work differently, to be honest, because it's the same thing. Like in India, for example, India, there's lots of records because India was governed by the British for many generations. Therefore, was a lot of bureaucracy there. So, you know, bureaucracy means records. Hey, you know, so India is pretty good. You can go out there and find quite a lot of amazing records. You know, you can find records everywhere. You know, we have contacts with people in China, you know, pretty much everywhere. And again, that's what's so wonderful about having a television background. You know, working for the BBC, there's always a local fixer somewhere. So a lot of my trips to places that we don't generally go to are by contacting the local fixer and saying, can you help me? But everybody loves the mystery, so everybody likes helping out with that.

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Lisa Sweetingham: Have you ever done your own history or Andy Taylor, your husband's history?

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Sue Hills: Yup. So my own history, I was always told that I was related, direct ancestor, of the first prime minister of Britain. Oh, so I said to my mum, I'm going to look into this. My mum's even got his name is called Robert Walpole. She's even got his name in her extended name. Anyway, so as I was going through, I was getting closer and closer to the elusive prime minister and realized that suddenly, you know, the ancestors were butchers. I was thinking I don't know about this, lived in the same area, have the same name, butchers. And eventually I found out that, no, we weren't related. But the really brilliant thing was I sort of found out when the rumor started by a letter that a relative had that sort of was from an aunt who was quite a snob. And it sort of felt from the letter that she was probably the one, that she'd married herself. Her surname was Walpole. So obviously, in order to elevate her status, she had started this myth up, and I think that's how it started.

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Bruce Wallin: Whether it's her own story or one of her clients, Sue always finds something fascinating when she starts diving into people's family histories. So who's the typical Ancestral Footsteps client? Are the individuals, entire families? We asked Sue, what do these trips look like?

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Sue Hills: Very rarely one person, often its siblings. And again, it's quite lovely because the siblings might not particularly see one another, or sometimes they might not even get on. I've had that as well. You know, just like, okay, I've been warned by both of them oh it's going to be really strange trip because I don't really get on with my sister. You know, okay, deep breath. But then they arrive. And then at the end, it's like, this has been the most beautiful bonding experience with my sister, you know? So it's quite lovely to see the family dynamics when you're on a trip. So mainly siblings. There's quite a lot of gifts of a 50th birthday or 60th birthday. I've got a couple at the moment a 70th, actually. And therefore often that person might hire a private jet and take an extended family with them. So you could have 20 people on the trip, because it's a real chance to get everybody together.

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Bruce Wallin: We're going to take a quick break and we'll be right back with Sue, Lisa, and later the Wallin wrap up.

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[Ad Break]

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Bruce Wallin: Welcome back to our chat with Sue Hills from Ancestral Footsteps. You mentioned private jets. You mentioned, you know, large groups traveling around, stories in newspapers, your pre-trips that you go to, you know, research this. This is a complex undertaking, no matter how it unfolds. And you know, there's tons of hours of research that go into it. Tell me a little bit about the cost of these trips and how clients react to that cost.

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Sue Hills: Clients do react to the cost because it's something they've never done before, and it's something that they all say, I'd never understood about the cost until I went on the trip. So I say to them, how can I communicate that with future clients? They say, you can't. I can't think how you communicate that. So often a lot of my trips come from referrals, because the way it's communicated at a dinner party or a gathering saying, wow, you know, you've got to do this, it's the most amazing thing we've done. And the friends think, well Mike and Jane are telling us it's the most amazing thing they've done. They're really hard to impress. What is this? You know,

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Lisa Sweetingham: What's the process when someone reaches out to you?

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Sue Hills: So the process is that someone reaches out. I say that we need to start with research. And you know, I'll spend several months, well the team will spend several months looking into it and we'll communicate with you at the end of that. We can then say to you, there's a great trip here or there is a great trip there, here's what you should do.

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Lisa Sweetingham: I know for me, we sort of did it special to do this story, but what's the timeline in terms of when someone reaches out to you to when they go on a trip?

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Sue Hills: So the timeline, again, depends where you're from. I like to say three to four months. But again, if you're going to Eastern Europe, probably five to six months.

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Lisa Sweetingham: So meeting your husband Andy Taylor was fascinating because when you picked me up and we were speeding on the Autobahn with Andy and I was sitting in the back seat with him and he was setting the scene and he was basically talking to me about what was happening in World War II during the Battle of the Bulge and what I would soon discover is we were going to that German Belgian border and he was going to take me to the area where he believed William would have been. And the most amazing thing was we pulled over and Andy and I literally got down into a 65 year old foxhole and he talked about trench warfare. And I just felt like, Oh God, like, this is horrible and exhilarating, and I feel like I'm really connecting with my relatives in a way that nobody else could have done for me.

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Sue Hills: Now we do try and do a lot of the experiential stuff like that, you know, even if it's corny, you know, maybe we can go to the local, you know, the ancestor was a blacksmith, but is relevant to go to a blacksmith who's still doing the old ways and to maybe try your hand at that. Sometimes it is relevant to try out a profession that they did or to understand how they did that. And again, I have had all the people crouching down in foxholes.

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Bruce Wallin: How does it differ, the trips that you put together for the celebrity clients, for for the TV show that you've directed compared with some of the private trips that you've done, are they, are they very similar or are they... the stories unfold?

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Sue Hills: Yeah, they're very similar. Obviously, there's a much bigger team for the television thing, whereas we're more multitasking here. You know, we'll put the trip together and we'll do the research on the story. And it's exciting to, you know, show someone the census return rather than pointing out, Oh, here's your ancestor, and this is what they do, look. You say, can you find your ancestor? Oh, no, I can't, because the writing's really difficult. Well try harder, you

know, can you read that? Okay. Oh yeah, now, I think I can. What does that say? Sailor? No, it says tailor. Oh, tailor, okay to it. So that sort of thing is lovely when people. And again, you can do that on the trip where maybe the dad is racing with his son to see who can read it the quickest. Who can see it the quickest, you know? And you know, archives are traditionally quite boring things for people. I know lots of people that are allergic to archives, but actually a trip to the archive is quite an incredible thing because you do see all the documents and you understand that someone would have spent four days rifling through these tomes. And I might say, produce a couple of tomes that I know that the signatures or the records are in, and get the client to sort of look through that and to get a sense of, you know, this is what it's like to find it. And again, it's much more exciting when you come across it yourself. Than me just saying, like page twenty two, third line down, off we go, right? You know, so it's lovely, all that sort of discovery stuff. It's wonderful.

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Bruce Wallin: You know, a lot of the episodes of the TV show, they they'll end with major realizations and tears a lot of the times. But is the ending to these personalized trips, is it similar? Is there that kind of climax that they have and then that, wow, that was a life changing moment?

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Sue Hills: Well, I think we do try and end it, again, I mean, sometimes maybe the television things can be shot slightly out of sequence. If you see a story, a reaction to a story is stronger. Say you do the maternal side in the first half of the program, the paternal in the second. Possibly, you think in advance the maternal is going to be stronger than maybe the paternal is. So you, you can change things, you know, not what happens, but the order, maybe. So with my stories less so, but you do have an idea of who which particular line they're fascinated in. And I, yeah, I do think that the last day you do try and keep your one of your best things back for that.

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Lisa Sweetingham: I know for my story, you did hold one of the best moments for the end, and it was quite emotional for me to meet a relative and to see photos of my mother, which here I am in Germany. How does this woman have photos of my mother? I think I got pretty teary and because I know I just choked up looking at the story again just now. And I'm wondering, have you ever gotten so invested in a research story that you cried at the end? Do you ever get emotional at the end of these?

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Sue Hills: I do, definitely. I get emotional when other people get emotional as well. It's just incredible to see someone react in a really deep way. I've really felt that, really fell out as well.

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S3: Do you have a favorite that comes to mind?

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Sue Hills: I don't, I remember being really moved by a story with two brothers when they turned up at the Jewish cemetery in Germany. This wonderful local man had been looking after, and he sort of took them up there on the hill. And one of the brothers literally was sobbing because he didn't know anything about this and didn't know it was there was sobbing because it had been beautifully tended. I think that we all had a good cry.

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Lisa Sweetingham: People were caring for his relatives that he didn't even know about. So like you said, the kindness of others moved him.

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Sue Hills: Yeah.

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Bruce Wallin: Well, the kindness of others and a lot of work that goes behind setting up these, a lot of research.

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Sue Hills: that is what you pay for is all the work.

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Bruce Wallin: Sue, thank you so much for joining us today. It's fascinating. And someday I am going to follow in Lisa's footsteps and figure out my own genealogical story. This has been fascinating and we look forward to many more adventures with you.

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Narrator: And now for the Wallin wrap up.

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Bruce Wallin: A couple of years ago, I took my two daughters on a trip to Belize and like everyone who goes to Belize, we went snorkeling. We were staying at Francis Ford Coppola's Turtle Inn and we take a boat out, way out, stop at some tiny atoll out there and we go out with a guide. We're about 300 yards offshore, seeing all these fish, and all of a sudden I hear this screaming. I look up and the boat captain, the guy who had taken us out there, is on the beach, waving his arms frantically and screaming at the top of his lungs. And I think, oh no. First thought, of course, is Tiger Shark or Bull Shark, whatever it is. I grab both my daughters hands and pull them close, and I tap on our guide. I say, hey, this guy, he's yelling, he's trying to get your attention. He pops up. We can't understand what the guy's saying. This is going on for, I don't know, seemed like forever. It was probably 30 seconds. But finally, we hear what the guy's saying and he's screaming manatee. So huge sense of relief. And all the sudden it goes from terror to joy. And we take off. We're going deeper and deeper looking for these manatees. We catch up to them. We're swimming with them for a long time, like up and down. They're feeding, such a magical experience. But the whole thing, just like, unfolded in this dramatic fashion, at least for us. And it felt like, you know, like we were living in a movie which was, you

know, appropriate considering we were staying at Coppola's resort. But it this sense of drama when traveling, not necessarily scary or anything, but that storytelling travel as a story, trips as stories. I think Sue Hill's trips, the Ancestral Footsteps trips, they really epitomize that. They're, you know, they're very personal, of course, but they're emotional. There's ups and downs. I mean, when was the last time a trip brought you to tears of joy? I mean, that's great storytelling right there. And clearly, her TV background has something to do with her ability to tell great stories, but everybody has that ability. So whether it's your family history or some random adventure, get out there and create some stories of your own. I'd like to thank Sue Hills and Lisa Sweetingham for joining us today on Travel that Matters. For more information on Ancestral Footsteps, please check out our show notes and 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'll see you down the road.

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Narrator: Curtco Media. Media for your mind.