

Lauren: Hello and welcome to Wanderlust, a podcast about travel. I am your host, Lauren. In each episode we'll meet a traveler, learn more about them and something they're passionate about. I hope you enjoy this journey with me.

Today we are joined by Jessica, writer of the Guac & Roll in Seoul blog. She graduated with her masters at 22 and has been an expat for over 5 years. She teaches English as a second language in Seoul, South Korea. Let's get to know her better.

L: What got you interested in travel?

Jessica: You know whenever you really meet a long term expat it's never as simple as wanting to see the world or you know try something new, it's always got a deeper root to that, right?

L: yes

J: And hearing someone's real expat story as opposed to a backpackers story, it's probably some of the best stories you'll ever hear in your life. My story was, when I was 18 years old, I had grown up outside of New York city, and my parents thought it would be a fun interesting coming of age experiment to make me live in the countryside all by myself in a very religious tiny school. And that didn't work so well with me at 18 I felt very alone and very lost. And I made friends with a girl, who was part of this major I'd never heard of called Peace and Global studies. And she said, if you sign up for it you could leave this school and you could move abroad. So I actually just signed up for this extra degree on a whim, just to somewhat kind of a youthful rebellion. I was going to move to Beijing. To retaliate against my parents. [laughs] And I actually ended up moving to Prague, Czech Republic or Czechia, as it's called now. For a semester abroad. Like most people who have studied abroad, you know the travel bug, you catch it. It doesn't ever fully heal.

We'd (Jessica's parents and herself) agreed the Central Block was as far as I'd be allowed to go, it had a program straight through my college, and it also, when I went there, I met other people that I resonated with. I guess that's a really important part of being an expat, when you are kind of forced to be different or live in a different area like I was in college and you feel isolated and alone you meet these really interesting people when you live in a foreign country and that's how you kind of bond. It's a connection you forge with each other. So that's what happened to me in Czechia and I still, to this day, 10 years later I'm still kind of acquaintances with one of the girls I connected with. She travels all over the world, working for non-profits and such. I got my masters degree at 22 years old. My parents- they have this belief of pull yourself up from the bootstraps. There were all these qualifications. If I did this or if I did that I could come back to my nice life outside of New York and I could have all my friends and my mom would help me with great professional networking opportunities. So I was really eager for that and the final milestone was if I got my Masters degree they would have this big celebration and I could move home. I'm sure you can imagine that's not what happened.

I'm not done with travel.

L: hmm

J: I want to try this. I want to try Asia. I was- I finally got a cubicle job that was pretty good but the pay wasn't great. You know, it was great people, no stress but I didn't come all that way for nothing. Yeah, so eventually I signed up- A boyfriend and I actually- I did not come to Korea alone, we decided to take the plunge to move, to outside of Seoul together in 2015 and that is how I got to Asia. They flew me over, I remember being on the airplane, I actually *cried*, 'cause I thought it was the craziest thing I ever did. Like who does this? Right? Like-

L: [sound of agreement]

J: There's a black van that picked me up. I'll never forget this- this Korean adjushi (아저씨) and he's he's swearing on the highway driving all sorts of who knows how fast, I'm holding onto this boyfriend I had in my twenties, "oh my gosh what am I doing? What have I done?" I have no idea where I'm being driven to. They take us to the 5th floor of this building where they take us to this circle of other foreigners like here's your new friends, here ya go. [laughs] It was, it was kind of the craziest thing I've ever done but I fell in love with Korea. I love living here. I don't see myself being here for the rest of my life, it hasn't been a perfect 5 years, I can tell you that much, but there is a lot of good in it. It's a great place to live. It's a great place to also find out who you really are.

L: [sound of understanding] What's your favorite part of traveling?

J: Pick one or two things you really have your sights set on and you let people just guide you along the way. If that makes sense.

L: Yeah

J: Just of any country I've been to the best experiences I've had are just honestly saying "Hey hotel, hey hostel, where's a good place just to explore that's safe? Just point me, left, right, straight," you know? and they do and you just stumble upon, you stumble upon things. I would say hostel culture. The people you meet. That's incredible. I've met some of the greatest people of my life from hostels that I still talk to. I went hiking on my first giant mountain in South Korea because of a stranger I talked to on a beach in Thailand. He ended up flying here just as, touring the world and we did, I'm horrible at Korea pronunciation but, Baegundae? (백운대) It's my first mountain I ever hiked and I hiked that one [laughs].

L: That's impressive! Are you going to hike the one on Jeju?

J: One day I plan to. That would be fun.

L: Mount Hallasan I believe it's called, it's the volcanic mountain that is at the heart of Jeju island. It's supposed to be gorgeous.

J: The thing with travel anywhere or living abroad, is you know have a couple ideas of what you want to do and just let it happen. That's the thing with the friends, these connections, you make, who would've- like you and I, who would've thought we would've met the way we did?

L: [laughs] very true.

J: You know, that's just what life is all about, and that's what I think travel allows you to have that come together that wouldn't be so easy to in many places of the States.

L: 'Cause you already have some connections, or like some things in common- you're not home.

J: True. Yeah,

L: Do you have any travel advice for others? Tips or Tricks?

J: [laughing] Whatever you do don't brush your teeth using the tap water or any kind of water from Koh Rong, Cambodia. Don't- don't that. Don't. I lost 10 pounds that way.

L: Oh no!

J: Yeah, but seriously all things aside, the world, you know, do exercise precautions but the world isn't as scary and hostile as people may make it sound to be. Do be wary of where you eat your food. Something I've actually done, when I've traveled, ever since getting sick in Cambodia is discreetly look at the back of the house at a restaurant. That's probably the biggest travel thing I've seen that's saved me a lot of tummy aches. You know, look at the sink, look at the floor. You can really see how food is being prepared. Honestly, just go up and talk to people. Like if you find another traveler, just walk up to them and say hi, you know, I've made so many friends that way I've done so many excursions with just random people just by saying "Hey, how's it going?" and that's travel, it's about the sights for sure but travel really and life, it's about the people and the connections you make with others.

L: Very true. I've met some very cool people from traveling. What is something you can not travel without?

J: My mom bought me this-I have a kindle, I do-I am- it's my one boujee, my one boujee item. My dilapidated Kindle, and she bought me this flexible light for the kindle 'cause it's the Paperwhite Kindle, so the kind you can read outdoors.

L: oh, yeah.

J: And I swear to god that flexible light has done so much good for me. [laughs] I just travel with the bare basics and a backpack. You know, in Asia if you're from a western country, bring

deodorant, that's probably a good bet. You can buy most anything anywhere. Clothes, anything you need, deodorant and a really good Kindle light. [laughs] I know that sounds so crazy but that Kindle light, I mean, cause seriously, you're in your hostel you need some unwinding time, not all hostels are made equally, some don't have like the nice overhead light, you have the Kindle Paperwhite, get one of those little foldable things. It's probably like 10 bucks on Amazon. It's a great investment. [laughs]

L: yeah, I love resting by reading.

J: yeah

L: Very calming. What would you say your biggest misadventure is?

J: Ah! Here we go! In 2015, I- with the boyfriend I traveled to South Korea, we thought it was going to be a great idea to go on Skyscanner and pick the cheapest flight for Chuseok (Korean Thanksgiving-like holiday in autumn) Book it, grab a backpack and just go rugged. Lonely Planet, which I'm not a huge fan of to this day- I do understand that they have their own duties to try and use more colorful words to spice the place up-but we ended up in the slums of Manila. And in 2015, being in the slums of Manila, everyone was- they were all armed gunman- and it was incredibly incredibly dangerous. That was probably the worst life choice I ever made. And one day I told my boyfriend at the time, I said, "Hey I want to go to a market. You know I think it would be cool if we went to like a fun market, we could like *haggle*." Like for some reason I was thinking more of like Thailand or Cambodia like those markets. And on Trip Advisor I found this market. It was *not* that kind of market. It was so dangerous actually that a police officer saw us, two foreigners, and literally saw us and just *shoved* us in the first cab possible.

L: wow

J: That was probably my biggest misadventure. I have since returned to the Philippines in August, I went to Cebu and it was a great experience. I mean, you know, years pass. I was determined to give the Philippines another chance and I can tell you I'm so glad I did. The people, I-gosh, I love them so much, the kindest, warmest people, so hard working. They would do anything for you. I can understand Manila is not an ideal destination for many people. But people fly into Cebu, give that country a chance. There is so much great in it. Great opportunities.

L: Where is somewhere that you want to go back to?

J: Borneo.

L: Borneo?

J: Borneo, Malaysia- some people have told me some- I guess there are some areas of KL (Kuala Lumpur), or I've heard Penang can be suggestive at times. Malaysia is kind of an underdog, the same way I feel about Taiwan. Everyone, their knee jerk reaction is "Thailand!"

Which is great, Thailand is wonderful. I've been twice, totally go. But Malaysia is great at least where I've been in Borneo. Borneo you've got that pure- I'm mean you're in the rainforest. It was incredibly safe being a female solo traveler. English is an official language. I can tell you from being there there is zero funny business. I wouldn't say it's as safe as Seoul. I mean you know, you are in Southeast Asia, do proceed with caution, where you go. But, you know if I was walking from my hostel to just a local restaurant, a twenty minute walk at like 10pm, it's part of their culture, there's just no one bothering you. They're very respectful people. I found it very easy to get where I needed to, either by public transportation or via Grab. I just- I love love love love love Borneo. No one even talks about poor Borneo. Malaysians are just incredible- just oh my gosh I just love Malaysia. I'm a little biased. I think Malaysia and Taiwan are my two favorite Asian countries. I mean I love Korea too, sorry Korea.

[both laugh]

J: Borneo, 'cause it's got everything right? It's got the whole tropical vibe, it's got the whole rainforest nature, it's got incredible food, it's got curry. It's a great place to have fun, but it's not known for being too much of a party island. Because you know alcohol, most people can't drink alcohol there. Since only Hindu's can sell it, or Chinese. Because Muslims don't drink alcohol. So for someone whose maybe more not into heavily drinking or partying like us, it's just like the perfect place with tons of day time excursions. That was the best part of Borneo. That I felt like there was so much to do, outside of worrying about a nightlife, that my day was just very rich and very filled.

L: I've been to Malaysia. I've not been to Borneo. Did- Cameron Highlands, which I highly suggest, It's like in the middle of the main part of Malaysia and it's also rainforest-y.

J: Oh!

L: Yeah, you would like it! Please tell me about Hunter.

J: Hunter Barker. Okay, there is a distinct difference, I think we can all agree on, between how dogs are perceived in the West and how dogs are perceived here in Korea.

L: Yes, so Hunter Barker is a dog.

J: Yes yes.

L: A Korean Maltese, 3 kg. (6.6 lbs)

J: He's just like a regular- so in Korean for those who are not aware, the typical dog is just this tiny little white thing with clothes. [laughs] Most of them are in strollers, and you know, they're like little purse puppies. The culture here is very different as opposed to the West. Small dogs can be popular but usually bigger dogs are seen as better.

L: In the West.

J: The golden retriever is like the All-American, you know what I mean?

L: yeah.

J: When we think of American dogs, you know the all around he's the golden retriever, he's on a hike with ya, he's running with you on the beach, you know. We tend in the states to like our dogs to be a little more rugged, or more willing to be with us in the outdoors.

L: Right.

J: We also have a lot more space. So dogs here are very very small and in shelters in the United States, it's very common for dogs to be older, have a disability, be too large or be a bully breed. Right? Kind of one of the undesirable breeds that have been tainted, and wrongfully so. But in Korea, an animal shelter is very different, a lot of the animals you'll see are these cute little puppies or these cute small dogs, there's nothing wrong with them. They're very young. It almost appears that, my interpretation of it, it kind of reminds me of when I'd go to the carnival as a child and would just get a goldfish and not really think about it. Does that make sense?

L: yeah.

J: Yeah, so I'd get the goldfish and I'd put it in the plastic bowl and he'd have a 5 day life-span, as they do, you know. It seems that, in the States, not always, I don't want to generalize, but dogs are considered to be part of the family.

L: mm yeah.

J: And you know, a dog is an investment for life. Or to death do us part, they're a family member, your best friend and it's also there's the whole phrase "adopt don't shop" you know? It kind of raising awareness of give these dogs in shelters a second chance. Whereas in Korea, to me it seems that hasn't fully hit it here yet. A lot of these dogs seem like they have maybe have been present, maybe couples have bought one of these little puppies for someone and they realized it was just too much work, they didn't want it, they could've moved and just decided they didn't want to bring the dog with them. And this is the interesting part, I know this from first hand experience, I know someone who works for the UK ASPCA.

L: What's that?

J: So the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, so I guess the UK version, or whatever they call it. I'm friends with someone who was coming over here, back and forth as part of a rescue mission. It's their job to go to these farms, these dog meat farms, and they jail break these dogs and they ship them overseas to be pets and I believe, from what I understood, they give a different incentive to the farmer. 'Cause it's so easy to paint this as a black and white issue but you know a lot these farmers, they are probably elderly people, this has been their- it's

another culture. It's easy to judge without knowing their story. We don't know for sure, but what these people would do is give them some kind of other method of farming or whatever to get out of the dog meat farming industry. But basically I was shown a bunch of photos and videos of the dogs in their conditions, and it seems to be the stereotype that there's a certain dog for a dog meat in Korea. Like there's a certain breed, but that absolutely not true. A lot of the dogs are pets and little puppies, little pets, perfectly- they're not, they're domesticated. Could be your dog from next door.

I went on Facebook and there was a girl and she volunteers for a pet shelter in Busan. And Hunter Barker was in there for a *month*. I hadn't gone to the shelter personally but she posted an emergency post, like "Someone please take him." It was a kill shelter "they're going to euthanize him, he's free. You just need to pick him up. He has his shots. Come take the little guy." At the time he was between 1 and 2 years old, just this tiny little white puppy. He just needed a home. I saw him, he became the light of my life.

I woke up at, was it 5 o'clock in the morning, on a Sunday? So yes, I think I said yes to her on a Thursday and I couldn't get him on a Saturday. I was like "I'm going to wake up at 5 o'clock on a Sunday all the way from Seoul to Busan, I'm gonna take the train, get the dog, and come back." And so I did and I've had Hunter for almost 4 years now.

L: Wow

J: yeah, he's a healthy little guy. He's bilingual actually. He understands both Korean and English. It's kind of a crazy thought, right? Like you live overseas, why would you get a pet? Why would you- well what if you *leave*, right? What if you want to *travel*? That seems to be some very big questions people like to ask.

L: Well let's get some answers for that. What do you do with Hunter Barker when you travel?

J: Well I'm incredibly lucky that Hunter is the same- he's a popular Korean breed. It's a joke I have. When I walk him down the street, even though I'm a foreigner, there's almost solidarity, you almost do a head nod with the Koreans because they also have their tiny little white puppies walking down the street. So you guys kind of understand each other. It's some good comradery. Actually because Hunter is so small- so for big dogs I have no idea it must be a lot harder- he's only 3 kilos, you can take him to any vet and he stays at a hotel. The average cost would be about 20,000 won in Seoul, so maybe 17-18 USD.

L: So per night or for the entire trip?

J: No, per night.

L: ah

J: But you know, he does not, contrary to what people worry about he's not locked in a little cage. Again, he's a small breed so there's also 10 other small puppies just like him. They run

around the vet, you know so he's running free, he's getting attention. I've been doing it for years now. I also kinda like doing it 'cause he's socializing. He's- well- he doesn't have friends because of his personality, he's more of a people puppy. But he is able to socialize. So he goes to a hotel and in the instance that I go home, he'd come with me.

L: Have you looked into what that would entail, to take him home?

J: I have. It's apparently going to cost a lot of money. [laughs] It's close to \$1,000. It's something, like because you have to get all sorts of paperwork done, you need something called a pet passport, he needs to have- he has a bunch of shots already, he has a bunch of vaccinations, but he needs a bunch more. I don't know the full story, 'cause I'm not going home in the near future...There's all sorts of courier services here. There's actually some that to encourage kind of rescuing some of these dogs that might be soup, I'm sorry I'm not trying to sound crass, but it's quite literally they would become dog meat soup. You would rescue the dog. My cousin actually did it actually, she rescued a dog here from Korea, and it was shipped over to New Jersey. It obviously is going to be more expensive than a dog in your home country, that I do know.

L: So you sort of answered it, but what is like being a pet owner in Korea? 'Cause I know, probably 10 years ago and still- one of my coworkers had a dog and brought it to school and all the students were scared to death of it. What would you say it's like being a pet owner in Korea?

J: It's so funny you mention that. It's mostly evolved. Where I'm living in my neighborhood in Seoul it's very- I wouldn't say boujee, but it's definitely very kind of trendy-ish, it's a very nice area. And there's also a lot of people that have these like designer purse puppies, it's very common to see people with puppies in strollers, actually. That's something I see everyday. So with people seeing the dog, at any time I'm out walk him around the neighborhood, there's someone else walking their small dog, so that has definitely changed. However, I still notice that people do get more scared of dogs here. A lot easier. For example, if he yips outside, I feel that in the United States it'd almost be the sound of a bird chirping, or no one would even think about it, right?

L: yeah.

J: But people here would like "OAAHHHH"! And you'll know , they'll kind of run. And [laughs] sometimes I've seen it from grown men before and I'm like he's 3 kilos with a leash and a harness, he can't- he actually can't like- I can pick him up with one arm, he can't do much. [laughs] So yeah, it has changed a lot, but it is significantly different as compared with the States. Pets in the states are seen to be, you know, almost like dogs here are seen more like people, but not treated as such. Like dressing up your dog. I've seen dog makeup, dog shoes, there's a variety of so many grooming boutiques, so many dog pet clothes shops. So dog clothing stores are popular in my area, strollers. It's funny for a country that the average western might feel is very different from how we see dogs. Like in the States or Canada we might see the dog as a family member you know, like the dog, no questions asked we would not get rid of

the dog, it's a part of us. But here it's actually treated like a baby. [laughs] The sling, it's on the subway, it has a hat, a backpack.

L: You got Hunter for free by just going and getting, but do you know how, if you we're to get another dog, how does pet adoption work in Korea?

J: I would say, I think you have to pay like 50,000 won, 50 US dollars, around. I think it's a pretty cheap, it might be significantly, cheaper. I do know for a fact that it's easy for foreigners to adopt.

L: Do you know of any ways to look about adopting a pet in Korea?

J: Facebook. Facebook, absolutely. That's how I found- Hunter just popped up on a community I was a part of and there's many Facebook community groups.

L: How is it having Hunter Barker?

J: Being an expat, while it's really interesting, and it's really fun, you know you get to live in this country it's so different from your own, you're in a city that literally has 1 million more people than New York City, that's how large it is. There is constantly something to do. You are *never* bored. And Seoul is so safe, you can do so many things at all hours. Meaning, if I want to go for a walk at 10pm at the lake around my house, well I totally can because it's completely well lit and there's probably, realistically 400 other people doing it too. So, you know the safety, there's just so many resources here. But it gets really lonely. You have your expat friends but they're constantly coming and going. And you're kind of living in a state of constant, transience, is that the best way to describe it?

L: Yeah, it's a bit temporary, feeling.

J: Everything is a little bit just constantly unstable. You never know who's going to be here next month, where you're going to be, you could be in one place for five years or one place for five days, you just don't know. Which is a whole other story. But having a dog I think, back to the important part, was the best choice I ever made. For as crazy as it sounds, he's a permanent friend. For people that love dogs, he's so small, he's so easy. And in this country, dogs aren't fully regarded like they are back home, it's easy to convince people: "Can my dog please live here with me? Look he's so tiny, he's harmless, he couldn't make a mess if he tried." In the instance he made an accident it's very tiny. So having a dog in Korea is really great in a sense of companionship. You're never truly alone when you have a pet. And in times when you're maybe stressed out from, let's be honest the long work hours or even if it's not super long work hours you're definitely earning your keep in this country. You're definitely putting good effort into your job. People don't realize this isn't just a vacation, we have to work. And we have to do a lot of it, and we have to do it at full capacity at all times, even if we don't feel well. You know, just kind of Korean work culture. And coming home to him is just the greatest feeling. Definitely a really great choice. To be honest most people here would probably consider getting a cat before

a dog, I've heard that's more popular for the stereotype that cats are probably easier. As a dog person I can tell you that you don't have to compromise in Korea with a dog.

L: So you're able to take care of your dog, work your full time job, and travel?

J: Absolutely. My job is also a 7 minute walk from my apartment. As for most of us (expats English teachers in Korea) you know your company owns your housing, or school if you work for the government. So it's obviously very easy and convenient to get to work. So I can go to work, come right home, it's a 7 minute walk, I can take him out, I'm right there with him. Yup, I can travel, I can put him right in the puppy hotel. You'd be surprised at how many- there are *many* 24 hour vet clinics in case of an emergency. That, a lot of veterinarians actually do know English. A lot of them have probably gone overseas for training. So that's something to keep in mind as well.

L: That's good to know, yeah.

J: There's a lot of, like my vet I just stumbled in, my Korean is embarrassing, but I can speak it and it turns out he spoke pretty pretty good English, and you know we were able to establish a professional relationship, I was like "Can I get Hunter registered here? Can I have him on file?" All I needed to do was spend about 100 USD on getting him some vaccinations to get in his file and he's good to go.

L: I hear him growling.

J: He is resource guarding. Right now. The problem with Hunter is that he thinks he's a lot bigger than he really is. And yeah, he thinks he's the Incredible Hulk and he doesn't like to hear no for an answer.

L: I was wondering if you'd be up for doing a quiz with me?

J: Sure. There's no math in this, is there?

L: no, no. [Jessica laughing in background] It's a travel related quiz, I went on Rough Guides, which is sort of an alternative to Lonely Planet.

J: That's so great 'cause I, I think I, not even knowing this quiz was going to exist, shared that I - I do like Lonely Planet, I respect Lonely Planet, but I haven't always been in love with them.

L: This is one of their, where should I travel quizzes. So I'm going to give you some options, so you tell me off the top of your head what you're interested in. So I'll ask you the question, give you the options, go with your gut reaction. Ready?

J: Let's do this!

L: Where would you rather be? Mountains and beaches or cities and towns?

J: Mountains and beaches.

L: Where would you prefer to stay? A cabin up in the mountains? An airBnB in a trendy neighborhood? A hotel in the city center, close to attractions? Or campground under the stars?

J: Campground under the stars.

L: How do you like to spend time on your travels? Finding the best local food and activities? Hiking, zip lining, surfing, kayaking? Visiting iconic sites steeped in history or wildlife spotting, taking in the natural scenery?

J: ooh

L: yeah

J: Ah, I just did zip lining and I'm literally hooked now. It was the coolest experience of my life, but I'm going to have to pick the first one.

L: Food?

J: Just the little things, right? The wandering around, the what the cool little eateries pop up, the little bookshops, right? The everyday little trees, parks, you know?

L: Alright so your result: Adventure. Hmm, some of these I don't know. So I apologize for mispronouncing places. [proceeds to stumble of the names of] Wadi Rum, Kyrgyzstan, or Ireland Reeks District. So it says: "These destinations will have your heart racing with Wadi Rum sand dunes in Jordan, are a playground with camels, safaris and 4 by 4 excursions. [sigh of knowing I'll mispronounce it] Kyrgyzstan's treks to epic peaks, glaciers and waterfalls, the Reeks District is home to Ireland's tallest mountain, oh no [struggle to pronounce the mountains name] Carrauntoohil and the biking, driving, kayaking and sailing around the area is well worth it.

J: [thump sound] Ah you're killing me![laughs]

L: These seem like all places you'd be interested in going. What is your dream trip?

J: Okay, I have two dream trips. I have romanticised and dreamed about and am just literally obsessed with. I am secretly obsessed with all things Mediterranean and Greek. I would do *anything*. But- But! I also know that the visions in my head are probably not the visions that I would see. I also want to go- I just want to experience like all these stories I've heard, I want to experience the 600 people on the bus with the music, just once before I die I do want to do India.

L: Is there anything you would like to promote?

J: I don't want to tell everybody to adopt a dog, obviously, different strokes for different folks, but you know it is something near and dear to my heart. Something just to consider, you know their situation, if you do want to adopt a dog, try to go for a Korean one. I'm going to make the argument that the shelters here aren't as nice as shelters that might be back in the west. But yeah, again adopting a dog has done a world of good. Especially because a lot of times for however fun your life might be overseas, it can also be very solitary, as well. He's definitely saved my life.

L: awww Alright, well thank you very much, Jessica.

J: No problem. It was so great. Thank you so much for having me on.

L: Have you adopted a pet while overseas or far from home? I'd love to meet your animal companions and introduce you to Hunter. Share them with me on Twitter @wanderlustpod.

Until next time dear travelers. Thank you for listening.