

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 41: Rolf Potts

Show notes and links at tim.blog/podcast

Tim Ferriss: Hello, my little munchkins. This is Tim Ferriss, and welcome to another episode of the Tim Ferriss Show. It is late at night. I'm in Boston, back on the East Coast for a beautiful, beautiful fall day, or I should say evening. It is probably close to 1:00 a.m., and I just finished up some work with Build.org. If you are entrepreneur, you've got to check them out, Build.org. But to our subject matter at hand. Rolf Potts, Rolf Potts, Rolf Potts, Rolf Potts. I'm in the Halloween spirit, and I'm attempting to summon Rolf Potts to my hotel room like Candyman, but it's not working. And why would I do such a thing anyway? I would do that because Rolf Potts is hilarious, and he is one of my favorite writers. And this episode showcases his intelligence and his wit, I think.

One of the quotes, for instance, is, "War is God's way of teaching Americans geography." This guy is hilarious. And he's also a very astute observer of human nature, and a master world traveler, among other things. He is the author of several books, including *Vagabonding*.

And *Vagabonding* – *Vagabonding* has a very important place in my life. I sound like the science duck modeled after Albert Einstein. I'm going to run with that. But I won't subject you to that horrible imitation for the entire bio. So Rolf Potts wrote *Vagabonding*. *Vagabonding* is a very important book in my life. It is one of two books, the other being *Walden* by Thoreau, that I took with me when I left the US and ended up traveling nearly 18 months around the world in 2004. And of course, all of those experiences set the stage for later writing *Four-Hour Work Week*, all of the notes that I took.

And *Vagabonding* had a huge impact on my thinking and how I approached all of that time. And it was initially a four-week trip that turned into 18 months. So *Vagabonding* is an incredible book; so much so, that I partnered with Rolf very recently to produce the audio book, because it is one of my favorite books of all time.

And you can check that out by going to audible.com, forward slash, Timsbooks, if you want to check that out and get a free sample, an excerpt. But long term travel – long term world travel

does not have to be a wealthy person's sport. And in this conversation we talk about all sorts of things, ranging from how to travel, how Rolf travels, writes, wanders, gets lost, studies success, studies quitting success or managing success. And maybe you haven't thought that's an important element of life planning, but it apparently is, I've come to believe.

And I almost forgot of course, there are a ton of resources and links and websites, and books mentioned in this episode. All of it can be found in one place, in the show notes, so you just have to go to fourhourworkweek.com, all spelled out, forward slash, podcast; fourhourworkweek.com, forward slash, podcast. You can find the show notes and resources and links for this episode, as well as every other episode like those for Peter Thiel, Tony Robbins, Mike Shinoda, you name it. So you don't need to scribble furiously, unless you want to, but fourhourworkweek.com, forward slash podcast is where you want to go.

And I had a blast with this interview. It is a two-part interview. This is going to be part one, and then there's part two. And I really hope you enjoy it as much as I did. It was just fantastic fun. So without further ado, please meet Rolf Potts.

Tim Ferriss: Hello, ladies and gentlemen, this is Tim Ferriss, and welcome to another episode of the Tim Ferriss Show. I am very excited for this episode because I get to catch up with a good friend of mine, who didn't start off as a good friend. And that is Rolf Potts. Rolf, thank you so much for making the time.

Rolf Potts: It's good to talk to you.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, and I realize by saying that you didn't start off as a good friend, it makes it sound like we might have been arch enemies or something. But what I mean by that is I really felt like I got to know you through your book *Vagabonding*, which was one of two books – many people do not know this – that I took with me around the world for about a year and a half, starting in late 2004, early 2005. It must have been 2004. And it is one of my most heavily underlined books, and really acted as my guide and my companion for all of the various travels, adventures, misadventures during that time. So first and foremost, thank you for writing such a spectacular little tome.

Rolf Potts: My pleasure. Thank you for reading. It occurs to me that I heard from you in late 2005, which was – in retrospect was pretty soon

after I had written the book, so you must have found it pretty soon after it came out.

Tim Ferriss:

Yeah, I found it soon after it came out because I suppose – and this may be true for many people, the buying of the book, then the reading of the book, and then the implementing of the book had quite a bit of lag time in between those various junctures. But I think like a lot of people, I was really – I spent a lot of time fantasizing about travel, and taking that leap, and but had more the handful of nebulous fear about it.

And I suppose we could start there actually, and I could ask very simply what are some recommendations that you have for people who may be able to work up the savings, if necessary, and are really just fearful of taking the leap, and exploring long term travel? And I suppose just wrapped into that you might give a brief description of *Vagabonding* itself, and the subtitle, and why you wrote it. But I'll let you explore that multi-part question, if you wouldn't mind.

Rolf Potts:

Yeah, well, I like that you bring up the idea of fantasizing about travel because I think it's something that everybody does, and it's one of those top three, if not top two or one things that people dream about that. And you see it in the movies all the time. And in fact, I mentioned this in *Vagabonding*. *The Heist* movie, where the whole goal is to have this complicated robbery, so they can have enough money to move overseas to a wonderful place. And as I say in the book is you don't need to rob a bank to do that. In fact, you can do that for a cost that is equal to, and sometimes less than your cost of living in a major American city.

And so I think an important principle I bring up in *Vagabonding* is saying don't put this off. If you're dreaming about travel, and most people do – and if you don't dream about travel, that's fine, but I really address these travel dreams, which are so common – but don't wait until you're too old because retirement isn't necessarily the best time to do something like this.

And in fact, Henry David Thoreau – I think *Walden* was the other book you took on your travels – talks about how people – and I'm not quoting him directly – they put off what they really want to do until they're too old to actually do it. That's a paraphrase. And so if you are 18, 28, 38, 48, whenever, you're dreaming about travel, make your goals soon, and don't put off those goals because they're very attainable. And you know, I think there's a lot of fears that are tied into confronting vagabonding, which you asked

me for the definition. Vagabonding is long term travel. It's not just a vacation. It's not a week or two off that society gives you as a vacation.

It's six months or two years, or six weeks that you make for yourself to travel in earnest, not as a consumer experience, not as a vacation, but as a more deeply meaningful life experience, and as a way to actualize your wealth of time.

And I think this is an idea we'll come back to a lot, and it's something that you write about, as well as me, is the idea of time wealth, the idea that you're experiences are more valuable in life than the things that you accumulate, the things that are always being touted as the most important things in life. So travel is a great way to cash in on your time wealth. And vagabonding, just by definition, is a more meaningful way of travel. It's a way of slowing down, and really discovering parts of yourself, instead of just buying a lot of experiences, which we've sort of been conditioned to do as American consumers. My first vagabonding trip was 20 years ago this year, oddly enough.

Tim Ferriss: Happy anniversary.

Rolf Potts: Thank you, thank you. It was just this time that I was straggling back to Kansas after having this amazing eight-month trip around North America. And it was a trip that I thought would be my last. I thought I would get travel out of my system so I could become a responsible American workaholic, and then maybe return to travel when I was old.

But you mentioned the idea of fear, and the fears I had going out were is this going to be expensive, is this going to be dangerous, am I going to come back and be compromised professionally? And all of those sort of turned into the opposite, that it was a lot safer than I expected. It was a lot cheaper than I expected. And I came back, and for 20 years, I've been integrating travel with a professional life that continues to diversify. I continue to do other things to make money, while at the same time having big swaths of time to travel.

And I'm not suggesting that everybody needs to become a vagabonder for a 20-year chunk, and in some ways I travel a lot less than I used to 10 or 15 years ago. But it's something that you can do. It's an option that you can have. And it's not an option that you wait for life to give you; you create it. And so I'm a big

believer in the active aspect of vagabonding, of saving your money.

The lottery is another metaphor I use a lot in vagabonding that people keep waiting for the lottery to reward them. But as we all know, the odds that you're going to win the lottery is pretty low. But we've already won the lottery. We were born with time wealth. And so it's just a matter of creating these travel experiences, or these time-rich experiences through things like simplicity and just the decision to make these sort of things happen.

Tim Ferriss:

Well, that's one of the themes and I think gifts that you provide in *Vagabonding*. And for those perhaps wondering, the subtitle says a lot, which is An Uncommon Guide to the Art of Long Term World Travel. And I think uncommon and art are both key words in that subtitle.

You provide a portfolio – that sounds too financial – a quiver of philosophies and suggestions for simplification, viewing the world through a different lens, really decluttering your life both materially and emotionally and psychologically, even if you do not travel. And what I've noticed is I recommend *Vagabonding* to people who have no intention of traveling, or for whatever set of circumstances, feel they can't travel, simply because – and I'm blanking on the attribution here – but I really believe that most people, even those who have more money than they know what to do with, live lives of quiet desperation.

And they have this – they've fallen into a drone-like schedule, where they have these material objects they thought might make them happy, or give them something they were lacking beforehand. But they've lost that – the excitement and anticipation perhaps that they once had, you know, the leaping into the unknown, the feeling that kids have the night before Christmas, or the week before Christmas.

And adults lose that. And I think one of the easiest ways to capture that is to actually fantasize about travel, but do it in detail, right, so not one day I want to travel, but to read *Vagabonding* and go, “Oh, my God, like I could do A, I could B. I could go to Japan for the first time. I could go to Europe and busk. I could do all of these things that rekindle that passion and enthusiasm and excitement, because I think that excitement is a much more tangible metric for perhaps what otherwise can be very nebulous in the word successful, right.

In the US, I think that for better or for worse, and I think perhaps for both, we have this bit of Protestant like work ethic towards a relatively undefined goal, which is this success. And what are some exercises, just in terms of helping to address that fear?

You mentioned one thing, which would be setting a near time horizon for travel, right. And I completely agree that the – in many ways, the utility of travel decreases as your physical capacity decreases, right, so you can do the most – you have the most options the younger you are when you travel, or at least the more functional your body is when you travel. Aside from setting a tight goal, and whether that's a few weeks away, a few months away, what are some – are there any exercises that people can go through to decrease that fear factor, and – or anything they can read besides *Vagabonding* to decrease that fear factor? There are stories, for instance, that I'll tell folks about – Columbia is a good example.

I recently – not too long ago – spent a month in Medellin, Columbia, which is formerly the murder capital of the world, when it was under the iron fist of Pablo Escobar, the drug kingpin. And I feel more threatened on Market Street in San Francisco, on a daily basis, whenever I go and walk down certain portions of Market Street, than I ever felt in Medellin. And I went all throughout the entire city. And you know, I think that sometimes those stories can be helpful. But do you have any recommendations for whether it's exercises or things to read, to sort of overcome the fear of the big, bad overseas adventures, and all the terrible things that await you or not?

Rolf Potts: Yeah, well, there's a couple of big picture ones. It's funny, Medellin, I was just there a year and a half ago. And I think now it's like the breast augmentation capital of the world.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, you know, South America, it's like the – I guess Korea has its facial bleaching, and then South America has – Brazil there is the butt implant capital of the world, which is still incredible just to even ponder, but yes, continue. Sorry to interrupt.

Rolf Potts: Right. No, the drug lords moved out, and the plastic surgeons moved in. It's a beautiful city, but it was a strange like physical attribute that's obviously surgeons have been hard at work – wonderful city. The advice that I have, there's a couple of big picture ones – big picture advice that I have for this. And one is to – they're both sort of mental. They're about redefining your relationship, or just how you think about things.

One is your relationship to money and what it represents, and one is your relationship to information and what it represents. You mentioned success, you know, the idea of – the American Puritanical idea of what success is. And money is a great metric for success, but it's not the only metric for success. And I think people fixate on money to their own detriment. As I mentioned before, it doesn't take that much money to travel the world. Travel isn't a consumer experience. And I think – you said you weren't sure of the reference – I think you were quoting Thoreau when you were sort of talking about these rich people who were sort of bound by their own riches.

And he's actually stealing that from the Bible and the old Hindu scriptures, which talk about these golden chains with – under which we sink. We're bound to our possessions. And through success – there's a very old philosophical idea – through success, we lose perspective on the good life because we tie success so closely with money and possessions and material splendor.

And so if you can just redefine your relationship with what success is, and really it goes back to the idea of time wealth, that success is being able to do what you want whenever you want. And there's billionaires out there who are compromised in ways that you or I, or you know, your plumber or your local park ranger are not because just realizing that money is a tool – it's not a metric for success. It's a nice side product of success, but it's a tool for allowing you to live a time-rich, an experience-rich life, and really live in ways that allow you to not only follow, but discover passions that you never realized you had.

Tim Ferriss:

No, I agree on so many levels, and just to – because of course, we both think about this stuff a lot and I apologize for jumping in. But the – just on the billionaire point, to give some concrete examples.

So this is very recent. I was talking to a fellow. He is putting together an event. It's going to be 20 or 30 people, a number of billionaires in attendance. And it's a weeklong retreat of sorts. And he said to me – this is a very – this actually, the gentleman who's organizing it is very materially successful, but actually has a very level head on his shoulders and has been able to keep things like time and mobility in mind as important currencies and metrics for his quality of life.

So he's done a really good job. But he said of course the billionaires can't take a week off, so they're only going to be there

for 24 to 36 hours. And I thought about that, and it's like the billionaires can't take a week off; what the hell is the point of having their billion dollars if they can't – if they don't have the options – if they have fewer options than I do, if that makes sense.

And it reminded me of a conversation I had at one point with another person who shall remain unnamed, but he has at least several hundred million dollars, maybe a billion-plus. And he was commenting on the number of homes that he had, and he's a good guy. But in effect, his accumulation had gotten so out of control, he had between, I don't know, six and twelve homes around the US. And he said, "I no longer feel like people work for me. I feel like I work for them," because he has staff of five to ten people at each of these homes. He's never at nine out of ten of them.

And so he's effectively just working to pay for homes where his staff basically are the owners of the homes because they live there. And it's like wow, it really brings to mind – this is also a quote. Unfortunately, I don't know the attribution, but the idea that things in excess become their opposite, right.

So, you know, money that provides you with freedom basically takes away your freedom when it reaches a certain point. It starts to reduce your freedom; the idea that so-called freedom fighters in excess, you know, given too much power become tyrants, right, so things tend to flip when they get to a certain point of excess. And also, just because I'm such a die-hard fan boy of *Vagabonding*, correct me if I'm wrong, but the example that I think you gave in *Vagabonding* of sort of Hollywood nonsense related to overseas travel was from Wall Street. Wasn't it from Wall Street where Charlie Sheen's big goal was to save up enough money, you know, one day when he strikes it big, to get a motorcycle and drive across China, I think.

And you pointed out that you could scrub toilets in China – not even in the US – for a month or two, and probably figure out a way financially to make that possible. So certainly, I mean when I was traveling, and ultimately putting together the notes and observations that became *The Four Hour Work Week*, I saved tens of thousands of dollars compared to simply staying in the Bay Area in California. Yeah, anyway.

Rolf Potts: That's the thing, is if you live in an expensive city like San Francisco, New York – there's probably a half dozen other examples in the United States alone – you're going to be living on fewer dollars per day by far if you're traveling in Southeast Asia or

South America or the Middle East, than you would just be paying your bills and paying your rent and buying your groceries at home. You're traveling in a completely different economic zone, which was sort of the point of pointing out this Wall Street example.

In China, that movie was from the eighties. Certainly China is more expensive since then. You might not have to clean toilets, you might have to clean something else now to ride your motorcycle across China. But the point is that all this importance is placed upon conspicuous consumption or romantic ideas of what we can do. And oftentimes, it's not money that's in the way. It's a mindset thing, which is why I'm sort of answering your question - your earlier question in a big picture way, that it's really a mindset about your relationship to money, and your relationship to information, which I'll get to in a second.

But you were talking about you know, the billionaire who's sort of become a slave to his parasitical wealth. That's an old idea, too. I have a quote from the ancient Sanskrit scriptures in *Vagabonding*, which is about the king and his palace only has half a bed and the food on his plate for all the grain in his fields. Does he own the rest?

And at the end of the day, even the kings – and they knew this 3000 years ago – even kings only eat one meal at a time. They only sleep in one bed at a time. And at the end of the day, the substance of your life is through experience. And if you're suddenly compromised, your material wealth and your money is there to actualize your experience, and to enhance your life meaning. And the moment that it becomes parasitical, the moment that you're a billionaire who has 36 hours to go to a conference. And I'd love to know how much money is spent flying to the conference, catering it, because I know people who could travel probably for five years on what one billionaire spends to go to the 36-hour conference. And I'm sure you know people would could do the same.

So that's just such an important thing to keep in mind, is to – I have nothing against success or material success, but really know where the line is, the point at which the success you've achieved is actually getting in the way of actualizing a good and meaningful and option-filled life.

Tim Ferriss:

Definitely. Where does the information come in? I'm very curious how the relationship to information plays into all this.

Rolf Potts:

Right. Well, this is where the fear factor comes in. You were talking about Medellin, you know, there's Mexico that has a lot of drug war violence going on. Of course the Middle East is a perennially – a bad reputation place to travel to. But keep in mind that information is something that can work against you or work for you. And these days, information is everywhere.

When I left to travel the United States 20 years ago, I was actually more afraid of the United States in 1994 than I'm afraid of any place in 2014, simply because pre-worldwide web, I didn't know what to expect. I had no examples. I lived in Kansas, which is not – you know, in sort of bulls-eye middle class circles. I didn't have a lot of friends traveling full time. And so I didn't really have anything to compare to.

Now if you're a successful person with the money to do it and the physical capacity to do it, you can go online and not only can you realize that people are traveling in Mexico, they're traveling in Columbia, they're traveling in Egypt and Israel and other parts of the world where you think that might be dangerous, you realize that there's family bloggers out there who are traveling with five kids to these places, or traveling with a diabetes problem, or with physical handicaps, or with money that they've made on a job that has a fraction of what most people make, you know, people who have simply decided to become wealthy in time, regardless of the fact that they work as park rangers or exotic dancers or maintenance men.

And so that information, you can – if you get past – I guess media exists in a man-bites-dog world. They're going to talk about explosions and revolutions and bad things around the world. And so much of what we understand – in fact, there's that famous phrase, you know, war is God's way of teaching Americans geography.

Tim Ferriss:

God, that's so horrible and so true. Oh, God.

Rolf Potts:

And so because Americans are so insular, our international understanding is really pegged to major world events that don't really represent day-to-day life in the towns of these towns around the world. So if you can look past the panic-driven man-bites-dog tenor of media, and realize that Mexico is actually a giant country, and that the drug violence is very isolated, and that there are ways to travel in a very safe way, and a very inexpensive way, then suddenly Mexico becomes this amazing and very close way to travel.

My sister is a college professor in north central Kansas, and she and her family took a little – there’s a big Mexican American community in Kansas, and they just took the local Mexican minivan down to Fresnillo, Mexico, and just a family of four, and they’ve traveled for next to nothing in an amazing way for their teenage sons, to a part of the world that people assume is full of drug violence. And that was just taking a minivan from five blocks away from where they live. And so that information, realizing that the big picture news media information is always going to be panic-driven.

It’s always going to be man bites dog. And so the more you get to the specific information and think, “Hmm, I’m 37 years old. I’m looking to take a sabbatical from my job. I live in Virginia and I like to drink beer,” well, within 30 minutes, you can find somebody who’s from a very similar life situation, who’s doing what you’re doing.

And again, even if – I mean there’s people who are blind who are traveling for years at a time. There are people with major impediments. And if you’re able-bodied, and you have a little money socked away, there’s really nothing stopping you except your own fear, which is sometimes tied to your ideas of money, or your ideas of what the world is like, which is pegged to information.

Tim Ferriss: Right, agreed. What type of sites or resources would you recommend to people who are trying to find comparable folks, let’s just say, people who will help them alleviate their fear of travel, or just in general, what type of online resources do you recommend?

Rolf Potts: Well, Google for one. I mean if you just Google 35 years old, two kids, one year of travel, then odds are you’ll find 20 blogs of people in that demographic who are doing just that.

So really be unabashed and very specific about Googling your fears or your demographic, and just see who like you is out traveling the world. There’s a lot of great traveler communities. I’ve been affiliated with bootsnall.com since the very beginning of *Vagabonding*. And part of their MO is just sort of creating community and support for people. And they have blogs and resources on their site. And there’s other travel communities as well.

Tim Ferriss: And you know, and BootsNAll has – we'll put the links to everything in the show, of course in the show notes for those people listening. But it's boots, the letter N, all.com.

Rolf Potts: Yeah. B O O T S N A L L.com And they've been operating out of Portland, Oregon for years, and have just quietly been doing very – the nice work of reassurance, and saying oh, so you're worried about an around-the-world flight? Well, here's how around-the-world flights look.

You know, you're worried about a certain situation? Here are some resources for that. And they're not alone. I'm most familiar with them because we've been – we've sort of shared a similar mission for a long time. But there are big communities of travelers who are happy to help and sort of help newbies feel better about these prospects of long term travel.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, they're all over. I remember one that was very helpful to me in the beginning was Virtualtourist.com, and that – I was with the site for a long time, and then *The Four Hour Work Week* came out, and I ended up becoming friends, much in the same way that I reached out to you. I became friends with the founder of Virtual Tourist, and so I'm now actually involved with a site of his called Trippy, which is just trippy.com, as people would expect.

But it's effectively a community of open questions, and you can follow specific locations, right, so if you're interested in, whether it's San Francisco, Buenos Aires, Spain, Medellin, whatever, all of the questions that come up. For instance, I'm just taking a quick look here. And you can pose any question you want. But what's the steepest place you've ever been in country X? Where is the best rock climbing in San Francisco, which is generally going to be extremely inexpensive. What are the best online tools for group vacation planning? So if you're a family or multiple families, so like you said there are many different options.

Speaking of technology, how have different services like – whether it's Couch Surfing, or even say, Airbnb, or anything else, really, these collaborative consumption companies changed travel for you? And perhaps there are older examples, but you mentioned that you're taking a trip – before we started recording – and you're doing a home swap. Would you mind perhaps elaborating on how some of those options work, those that you're familiar with, because I think that many people who consider travel, think in terms of one of their main expenses being staying in a hotel, right. And I'd love for you to share any of your thoughts on that.

Rolf Potts: Yeah, well, it's shifted the way the travel world works, in some ways that are delightfully convenient, and in some ways that are a little bit strange. I think that technology is one of these double-edged swords that in some ways has turned us into insufferable micro-managers on the road.

Tim Ferriss: Can you elaborate on that?

Rolf Potts: Yeah, well, I'll start with the negative. The travel culture, which I started in, which was 20 years ago, but really my more international travels are more like 15 years ago. It's about showing up in town and knowing that when you get there, the unexpected awaits you, that you're going to walk to the hotel district. You may have a guidebook with some hotel recommendations. But you're going to shop for your hotel. You're not going to find a deal online. You're going to walk in there, you're going to see the room. You're going to haggle, because in all throughout Asia – you know, basically any place outside of the industrial world, prices are up for grabs.

And haggling in person is so much more – gives you so much more leverage than haggling online because you can go in, look at the room, and physically leave if the owner doesn't give you a price that you're into. And so these days, it has become so convenient – not always a bad thing – but it has become so convenient that people just assume that the best deals to be had are the ones online. And then pretty soon, you've locked in your traveling for six weeks, and you know where you're sleeping every night in advance. And it really compromises the flexibility of travel, and the serendipity of being inspired by a place, and thinking I'm going to stay here for a few days, or wow, I just met this traveler who told me about this great place up in the mountains, and I'm not going to go to Varanasi. I'm going to go up into the Himalayas and spend my time there.

This technologically enhanced micromanaging cuts into that serendipity in a certain way. And it also connects us to home. And again, it's a two-edged thing. Social media and the constant connectivity that comes with smartphones for example, allow us to really find things that we couldn't find before, but it cuts into the idea of wandering around and finding things by surprise, finding things organically, and letting a destination reveal itself to us on its own terms, instead of sort of finding that place as a consumer before we get there.

And a lot of technologies have eliminated things like loneliness and boredom, which sounds good and is good to a certain extent. But loneliness and boredom can lead you to those moments that sort of force you into a new version of yourself. They force you to be more extroverted.

Tim Ferriss: Totally agreed, totally agreed.

Rolf Potts: They force you to read the local newspaper instead of looking through your Facebook feed. And so that is what we're up against with these technological advances. And I don't want to be the grumpy older traveler because I remember being 20 and listening to these Baby Boom era hippies sort of lecture me on how travel used to be, you know, back at a time when telephone answering machines and credit cards were seen as this decadent form of technology.

And so I know that there are younger travelers who don't anything but the constant connectivity of travel. But unplugging is important, and we can talk more about that if you want. And we can also talk about the pluses, and I have many recent examples about how technology have helped. This recent home exchange is just a long time friend who lives in Brooklyn. She's a writer. And she wants a quiet place. I have 30 acres in Kansas, and so I get an awesome pad in Brooklyn for a week, and she gets a quiet farm in Kansas for a time.

Tim Ferriss: And the positives, you mentioned or alluded to the positives. I definitely want to delve into the importance of disconnecting. I think I've become somewhat – especially living in Silicon Valley, but have some thoughts there as well. But what would you say – how would you expand on the recent positive examples?

Rolf Potts: Yeah, well, you mentioned Airbnb and Couch Surfing. I think in places – in more expensive places like Europe, the hostel was your go-to. It was where, if you wanted to save money, you would go to the youth hostel, and it was a great place to meet people. You could get a cheap bed. You would forego a few amenities, but you would hang out in the hostel. Well, I went to Amsterdam this summer. I teach a writing course in Paris every summer, and my sister and my nephew came and visited me. And we wanted to go see Amsterdam. And using Airbnb, I was able to get a full cottage, a 15-minute train ride outside of central Amsterdam, for about half the price as a hostel for three people in the center of Amsterdam.

So instead of staying at a somewhat grungy hostel in the red light district, we were staying in this little town filled with windmills, and we had our own house to ourselves, and we could just walk down the street and get groceries. And so that was an Airbnb hookup. Couch Surfing is a similar – has similar benefits. It just allows you to break out of not only that old hotel set of assumptions, but also out of the hostel set of assumptions; the idea that the cheapest option in any place is going to be a hostel, especially traveling in groups. For the three of us – if I'd been alone, maybe the cottage wouldn't have been cheap as the hostel. But with three of us, we were getting hostel one bed at a time, we just got the perfect place to stay through Airbnb.

And so those services, and even social media, even going on Facebook or Twitter – and I'm not a big believer of tweeting while you travel. I think that that really puts you into this home mindset and it pulls you out of the place where you are, and the point of travel is experiencing what's before your eyes, and not what's coming across your social media feed.

But before one's travels, I'm a big fan of throwing out a tweet or a Facebook post that says, "Hey, look, I'm going to be in this place, what are some suggestions?" And that is something that didn't exist ten years ago, and is not tied to a business or social networking thing like Airbnb and Couch Surfing. But it could just be that your buddy from high school has a friend who's in the military in Germany, and they have an ex-girlfriend who lives in Stockholm, and suddenly you have a place to stay through very random circumstances.

And so that kind of – it's the old model of sitting in the hostel, or sitting in a guest house or a bar in an exotic part of the world, talking to the six travelers who are there with you, and them giving you advice on points further down the road. That principle has been taken to social media, and through networking, that's another way that technology has allowed that old hostel room – it's actually killed the literal hostel room, where people are now staring at their phones in the hostel room.

But it has expanded the virtual hostel room, where instead of talking to the six travelers you're with physically, you can be talking to 600 travelers through your networks, who might have some good advice for you.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, great. And to touch on the disconnection point, I think that social media and being online while traveling, if the objective of

travel is to gain some introspection, have unique experiences, and come back better than when you left in some way, is very dangerous. And at least speaking for me personally, the laptop is a portal to many different things. And it's very common, at least if I'm speaking from my personal experience, and looking at many of my friends, whose professional lives are based on computers; they look at a laptop, they look at their smartphone, they look at their desktop computer for work, which is the vast majority of them, who are managing email, using Basecamp or other online services to manage business, it is very easy to use Twitter or Facebook socially as a gateway drug.

And you're only one tab away from going right back into your old routine. And it's extremely easy and seductive, like you said, because of the convenience, to travel abroad – and I know many people who do this unfortunately – I don't see the point – but they will take a laptop, go overseas, stay at a hotel that could just as easily be the Four Seasons in any major city in the United States, and they come back and they really haven't – they've changed time zones, but their mind, their experience hasn't changed more than perhaps what they had for lunch while they were abroad, which is a real shame.

And so, when I've taken these – when I've taken sabbaticals, which are typically because I feel like I need to reassess my priorities and gain some perspective on things that are hard to assess when you're down in the weeds, right, when you're deflecting bullets and dodging problems and putting out fires, looking at your email inbox, it's very hard to step back and look at the larger picture of your life and goals and whatnot, from a 30,000 foot view, that for instance, when I went to Bali – to Indonesia for the first time, and took 30 days off of computer, phone, and calendar basically, to like you said, move from the micromanaging of my daily experience, to the extreme opposite for me, at least, which was pretty much pure serendipity, and forcing myself to, rather than feel comfortable and convenience, to feel as uncomfortable as possible, at least when you consider how routinized life becomes.

Even if you're – or especially if you're kind of optimizing for efficiency, right, it's very easy to become trapped in systems of your own making, where you're like, “Well, fantastic, my per-hour output is wonderful. I'm doing all these new things. I'm taking on new projects.” And then you step back and you realize, “Wow, I might as well just be a cyborg running in all these systems. So this is a very long meandering observation, but I think that even if your

only goal - and I don't think this is a crass goal, but even if your only goal were to improve your professional life, especially if you run your own company, taking a month off the grid is perhaps the best way to do it because you have to set up systems that will persist after you get back.

If you're taking three days to go to Amsterdam, you don't need to do that; a week off, you can probably come back and still rescue things. But a month off – completely off the grid – and I was available for emergencies via phone, by my assistant or other people. They had to call the office at the Bahasa Indonesian Language School and find their way to me. You really have to I think think about the bigger questions that are easy to avoid by keeping your hands full with busy work. But anyway, long, long sort of preachy observation, but I really think that the less you feel you can go without your smartphone, the greater the value of going without your smartphone.

Rolf Potts:

Yeah, well, this is an old conversation. The first person to do this in the technological age was actually J.P. Morgan. When the telegraph was invented, he went to Egypt, and I forget exactly – it was a little over 100 years ago. And his companions talked about how he was in Egypt, but not really, because he was always – he spent his whole time in Egypt attending to business.

It was exactly – it was like the turn of the previous century version of what you just explained. It was him in a hotel room, attending to his business. Technology – basically the telegraph, which seems very primitive in retrospect, prevented J.P. Morgan from actually being in Egypt. He may as well have not left home. And so this is an old problem. In fact, the travelers of previous generations have complained that sailboats – that steamships were compromising travel in ways that sailboats didn't.

In the Roman era, the technology of roads was changing the way travel was experienced. George Orwell talked about how trains were changing the way that travel was experienced. And trains, when you think about it, was a technology that allowed you to travel so quickly compared to how you previously could, that you could maintain a business relationship of sorts while you were traveling.

I don't think that there's a silver bullet that can keep you from being a slave to your smartphone when you travel. It's hard. And as you mentioned, there are some things that you have to maintain back home if you're traveling for more than a couple of weeks. To

an extent, it's a lot about self-discipline. There's something to be said for physically not taking your smartphone with you, which is something I don't do when I travel. I use the internet.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, absolutely, I make it harder, so I don't have a data plan that generally allows me to get international coverage, so I can't use the phone.

Rolf Potts: Yeah. And this pays off in tangible ways. There's been recent research that having a vacation that is actually a vacation – and this isn't even about vagabonding; this is about vacations – is important for your creative mind.

It's important for your brain that having a cessation of obsessing on your creative life will allow your brain to work in ways that will make you more creative. So even if you go – if you travel to Amsterdam or Bangkok or the Andes for a week, and you're constantly attached to your smartphone, in some ways, it could be less advantageous to the creative life of your business or your career than if you just let go, because if you let go of that constant stream to the information and the micromanaging, then your brain is working in the same way that it was back home. And part of the gifts of travel is that your brain and your emotions and everything is working in a new way.

And your brain actually – that obsessive part of your brain is resting, but it's actually working in its own way. And this is actually scientific information. The New York Times reported on it about a week ago, that you actually come back – if you can unplug, if you can actually immerse yourself in a new place and turn off that obsessive part of your business brain, then you can come back and your mind will gift you with creative ideas and insights that it didn't have if you had spent your whole time in the Andes or Amsterdam or Bangkok obsessing on those very business issues.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely. I'm sorry, you took an inhale. It sounded like I interrupted you.

Rolf Potts: Well, there is one more point I was going to make, is that it sort of – this ties into the idea of time wealth, that sometimes these days, this new generation has a way of stealing time wealth. Again, it's not that new. I mean Plato complained about that written literacy was ruining people's ability to memorize poetry, right.

But now this technology is so immersed in our lives, that we can steal our own time wealth by being hooked into virtual experiences, into our social media feeds, instead of the experiences that are before us. You used a great phrase, which is optimizing for efficiency. And just think, if you're going to sit down to an Italian meal in Italy, are you going to want to optimize that meal for efficiency? If you're going to hike for a week in the Andes, in the Machu Picchu region, are you going to want to make sure that that hike is optimized for efficiency? If you're going to be sitting on a beach, you know, in Thailand or Brazil, are you going to want to optimize that experience for efficiency?

I think that that Italian meal metaphor can apply to so much of travel that of course, you don't want to make it more efficient. You want to savor every bit of it. You want to be eating tomatoes that were in the ground two nights before, and having just these very sensual tactile experiences, not just food experiences, but just ideas of the unexpected, of unplugging yourself from the life that you can predict, life that you can consume and buy, and stumbling into experiences that catch you by complete surprise. And I don't want to overuse the idea – the word serendipity. But it's something that is at risk when we can't unplug. And the gifts of serendipity are not just – actually you can stumble into a bad experience as easily as you can stumble into a good experience.

But it's the misadventures or the unexpected good experiences that actually change you to the core of your being in a way that those pre-planned experiences don't. And so if you can't unplug, you're robbing yourself of that aspect of your time wealth. You're making – to extend this metaphor – you're making an optimized efficiency out of an Italian meal in every sense of the word.

And it's hard to break away from, but in the vagabonding sense, it's essential. You're going to be selling yourself short if you can – if you can't stop micromanaging and optimizing for efficiency. And the more you think about those phrases in the context of the best parts of travel, the more you realize that you really have to throw the jargon – the efficiency jargon of daily life out the window, and just throw yourself open to the travel experience.

Tim Ferriss:

Definitely. And one thing that I think about a lot, and part of my motivation for traveling oftentimes – and you don't have to travel overseas to achieve this. But I find the change of scenery to be very helpful for resetting, is to focus on appreciation as opposed to achievement. And I'm very type A, always have been, and competitive, and those can sometimes really reinforce themselves

in good, but often destructive ways. And when I go abroad, I think food is a fantastic lens actually to use, not just metaphorically, but to really focus on slow long meals is I think one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself. And that was one of the experiences that I brought back after my nine months in Argentina, which was supposed to be four weeks, as these things often turn out, were the really long dinners.

You know, a couple bottles of wine, a bunch of friends – of course they have the [inaudible] and the incredible meats of Argentina, but putting aside the fact that they're famous in South America for being unproductive – putting that aside, the long meals with larger groups of friends was something that I brought back with me to the US, and that I try to do at least once a week or once every two weeks. The other observation I wanted to make for folks, because I really was – well, no, forget was – I think once a computer addict, always a computer addict, just to kind of borrow from AA. No, once an addict, always an addict, and you have to manage that.

And I think one of the easiest ways to manage that is to not rely on self-discipline. What I mean by that is when I took my trip in 2004, which some people know began with a one-way ticket to London and no planned itinerary, no planned return date, I didn't take my laptop. And I knew I couldn't take my laptop because I would default to using it. And what that meant was, at the time – and there are many different ways to do this now – but I had Go To My PC installed on a computer at home, and if I wanted to use my laptop, so to speak, I would have to go into an internet café, which is not generally one of my favorite experiences. They're usually dingy. It's just not an experience I enjoy, which is entirely the point.

I wanted to make it inconvenient and unpleasant to engage in sort of masturbatory computer use, you know. And I think that it's very easy to default to that because you can always find something on the internet, right, whether it's – and you can very easily go to Morocco and then end up sitting on your laptop watching the stupidest cat videos on YouTube for hours a day, because that's what the internet optimizes for. It optimizes for clicks and views, and everything else that can be commercialized generally speaking. So you know, don't even enter – don't walk through the door if you don't want that to happen. So when possible, change your environment and remove things that facilitate bad behavior as opposed to trying to rely on willpower, which I think is very, very fallible.

You mentioned creativity, and I wanted to ask you about that because I really, really enjoy your writing. And I don't say that lightly; not that I'm the ultimate connoisseur in writing, but I think that a lot of writing is very, very bad. And I've loved your writing and enjoyed it for a very long time.

Rolf Potts: Thanks.

Tim Ferriss: Of course, yeah, it's had a huge impact on my thinking, and not moreover, my actual behavior and way of living. So I wanted to talk about the concept of a stay-cation. Are there times for creativity, and let's just use writing as an example. Do you find that you can replicate some of the benefits of travel in what people might refer to as a stay-cation?

Rolf Potts: Yes. Yeah, and this goes back to something that we were talking much earlier in the conversation about decluttering emotionally. You talked about the idea of – I think you used the word portfolio to describe something. But I think vagabonding – the principles of vagabonding apply to life in non-travel ways. It's been used as a text in social studies class, and it's sort of about another – tying into something else you were talking about earlier. You were talking about something that sort of constitutes what some people call the beginner's mind, which is part of the excitement of travel.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely, definitely.

Rolf Potts: We get stuck into being experts. I mean and online resources allow us to be sort of dilettante experts in everything. We can suddenly know a little bit about everything, when in fact, the beginner's mind is one of the most emotionally daunting and exciting parts of travel, where you just allow yourself to be a child again.

And in fact, I have some quotes in *Vagabonding* talking about how you go to a new city, and you're as dumb as a five-year-old. You can hardly read. You don't know – it's dangerous to cross the street. And this is a gift of travel, is that it allows you to have the vulnerability of being very young, but also the excitement of being very young, and the discovery of being very young.

And sometimes for all of the research you do back home, the coolest part of showing up in Bangkok or Buenos Aires, or Cape Town is just smelling the place, or going into – not into a tourist place, but into a supermarket, and realizing how different everything is. And it's that beginner's mindset. It's that wonder of

childhood stuff. And that can become a – it can turn into a cheesy metaphor, but it's a real thing. It's the beginner's mind that allows you to engage in a new way.

And so I think that ties into the idea of creativity in the stay-cation, which is a silly word for what is a great idea, which is taking that beginner's mind, taking that travel mindset, which I talk about at the end of *Vagabonding*, the idea of coming home and treating your neighbors as exotic tribesmen back home. And one thing – and actually one thing I'd love to talk to you about is the idea of appreciation versus achievement, because there's limits to achievement. I mean it's been – *The Four Hour Work Week* came out seven –

Tim Ferriss: 2007, yeah, seven years ago.

Rolf Potts: And I think there's an extent to which that ongoing success can be as meaningless as ongoing lack of success, and that you have to have a relationship with that to realize that appreciation becomes more important than achievement because there comes a point at which that you've achieved your goals, and how what?

And so I think achievement is a linear way of thinking, which is very American and important, and I'm a big believer in that. But appreciation is that more Eastern circular way of thinking, of being able to savor what you do have, and balancing that with your achievements. And so that goes back and ties into the creativity, the idea of coming back home. And I own a house on 30 acres of land in Kansas. And that's no accident. I'm close to my family. But it's also really, really cheap.

And instead of living in a fashionable part of a big city, I can – I mean what's happening right now is an example of it. I'm doing a – I'm going to go live in Brooklyn for a week, and do a little home exchange. And I have the option of living in – for short periods of time, anywhere, while at the same time, saving money and really building a relationship to a place, which is my quiet 30 acres in a sparsely populated part of north central Kansas. And I am extraordinarily creative there, not just because it's quiet, but because I can have sort of a quieter sense of discovery, sort of a walking pace, neighbor's pace sense of discovery in the place where I live.

This is another one of those silver bullet things. You were talking about how you enjoyed my writing. It is so tortured sometimes to write well.

Tim Ferriss: I'm very familiar.

Rolf Potts: One beautiful smooth reading, logical, inspirational paragraph of prose is the process of a day of labor and self-loathing. So just because I have this wonderful place to write and that I – that my creativity is enhanced by marrying my travel mindset to my home, doesn't mean that I just am sitting at my desk laughing in glee with my glass of wine, writing brilliant prose. It doesn't get easier. I guess it enables that tortured process to be fruitful in a way that perhaps it wouldn't have been otherwise.

I know that you have a very – Annie Dillard said that a schedule is a net for catching days. And I think that you're a believer in being very disciplined about having a writing schedule. I'm not very disciplined, but somehow it works anyway.

Tim Ferriss: Well, just because I'm a believer doesn't mean I'm a fantastic practitioner, right. But I think for folks who are wondering what it's like to be a writer, for most people – now I should maybe caveat that with the observation that I have extreme jealousy-slash-anger sometimes towards extremely good journalists who have daily or weekly deadlines because many of them, to my great upset, disagree that writer's block even exists. And they say, "I don't have the luxury of writer's block; I need to kick out 1500 words a day."

And they're exceptionally good at it. And it's just infuriating because my experience with writing is number one, it has not gotten easier, generally. People ask me like, "Oh, well, after the third book, you know, it must just get easier and easier." Actually, it just gets harder and harder because I have to – I feel like I have to ensure that I'm not repeating myself. But the most accurate sort of portrayal of my experience of writing is adaptation.

Rolf Potts: Right, oh, my God.

Tim Ferriss: And I actually – I think Nicholas Cage is amazing in it, but the movie is weird. I read the screenplay first, but just the idea that you sit down and you're like, "Okay, I'm going to do this, I'm going to do this." And you're like, "No, God, I should really wash my face, you know, like I should just – I should eat a donut. I need to relax before I start writing." All of these – like you will – at least Ayn Rand – I can never really – I don't know if it's Ayn or Ann, but let's just say Ayn Rand – had a book called *How to Write* -- I think it was *How to Write Non-Fiction*.

And there was a portion called The White Tennis Shoes, and I remember her saying the way tennis shoes is refers to the fact that if you sit down to write and there's a pair of white tennis shoes with a little blemish on it, you will convince yourself that you need to clean those shoes before you write; and that a writer will do anything to avoid writing. So that's my general experience.

I feel like a schedule, or at least a plan helps to – even if you don't fulfill that plan – for me, it's that – and I think this is actually a Winston Churchill quote, where he said that in effect, you know, a plan is important, not because you're going to follow the plan, but for the planning itself. And I find that having a plan for writing decreases my anxiety associated with writing, which helps me to write even if I don't execute that plan perfectly. But what is your writing process like? And I have some additional questions about travel, of course, but – and *Vagabonding*, I should say, rather. But what does your writing process look like? When do you typically sit down to write and why?

Rolf Potts:

Well, it's funny that you mention the Nicholas Cage character in *Adaptation* as something you can relate to, because that's like the least glamorous depiction of a writer, and you're going to compromise people's romantic conception of you as a writer. And my process is possibly even worse. I think because – I don't know, I think there's different neuroses attributed to writer, and mine is maybe a little bit obsessive-compulsive, that sometimes I could be the guy who writes two hours before breakfast every day, and sometimes I am. But sometimes I'm the guy who writes for 14 hours, and is most fruitful at hour 13.

And so, you know, my – if I wrote a writer's handbook – and I teach writing, and I try to instill discipline and ideas of discipline in my students because that's important because people can over-romanticize writing and think about the muse visiting them, and in fact, you need to be the one who creates this. But in practice, I'm sort of a bad example, that there's some days where I'll just sort of be just frustrated with myself. I'll have my spot on the white shoes problem. I actually bought the Freedom App, you know, the Freedom App that turns off the internet connection.

Tim Ferriss:

Oh, the Freedom App. I thought you said the Freedom Map, I was very excited. Yes. No, the Freedom App is cool. I agree.

Rolf Potts:

Yeah, and it's just one of those things where despite my good intentions, sometimes my monkey brain goes back to the internet

and I just have to be my own mother, and discipline myself. I wrote a screenplay in 12 days earlier this month. And so that's an example of – it was really – it was sort of a pulpy B movie screenplay that I did for fun, just because I had this idea.

And I would compromise my happiness if I didn't suddenly write this movie that was about zombies and giant dinosaur attacks. And I think that was almost part of resting certain parts of my intellectual brain, that it was just delightful to write a really pulpy story. But it was interesting. It's like I keep teaching myself lessons. When I wrote something low stake, when I wrote a B movie, a monster movie earlier this month, it gave me such an interesting creative perspective on my own processes, and the importance of just getting work out there, that I was able to write 90 pages in 12 days, whereas sometimes, I can be tortured over a 1500 word article.

So I think there's something worthy in the idea of Ann Lamott's idea of shitty first drafts, of getting the words on the page. Kurt Vonnegut said that there's two types of writers. There's swoopers and bashers. A swooper will go –

Tim Ferriss: I'm so glad you're bringing this up, yeah, please go into this.

Rolf Potts: You're familiar with the concept.

Tim Ferriss: I am, but I want you to explain it because this is so key.

Rolf Potts: Yeah, well, swoopers tend to be people who will blast through their first draft, and then they'll spend days if not weeks working on draft number two, and number thirteen, and number 67, until they get it right. Whereas, bashers, they go sentence by sentence. And by the time page one is done, then paragraph one has been rewritten ten times. And by the time they finish what they're working on, be it 1500 words or 30,000 words, it's pretty much done. They're not going to do a whole lot of rewrites. But that process has taken 20 times as long as a swooper will take, and means they're both legitimate creative methods.

And he suggests that maybe women tend to be swoopers and men tend to be bashers. And that might be statistically true, but I've met male swoopers and female bashers. And they're both creative ways. I am a basher through and through.

Tim Ferriss: I am as well, and I think of the two, I've never been a swooper, so I don't know how it feels, but I have to imagine that being a basher

is just the most torturous process of self-loathing and doubt. I just – it’s because there are days – I don’t know if you’ve experienced this, but you’ll be like, “Okay, great, I’m going to try to knock out whatever it is, a few pages.” And I will just agonize over the first two paragraphs for an hour. It’s so – God, it just like gives me anxiety even thinking about it. But yeah, anyway, I apologize. This is serving as a therapy session for me.

Rolf Potts: Oh, no, it’s actually – and hopefully people in our audience can take heart in this, but I’m in the exact same situation, that the last third of a story, or even a book, is the easiest to write because I have the first two-thirds to show that I’m not a complete incompetent, and that I have – in my office, I have different writing awards and articles about myself to sort of remind me that I’m not a complete incompetent, but that blank page that generations of writers have talked about is a real kind of anxiety, and getting started. And I have a really bad combination, which is that I’m a basher, but I’m also an optimist, and I think that if I completely gave way to self-loathing and pessimism that I would just throw something horrible out, and then I would have something.

But I’m just – I just have this blank page anxiety coupled with the optimism that I think I can do good. It just makes it that much harder to get started because I just can’t – I know that something is going to be good, but for some reason that first step is somehow at odds with my optimism. So it’s a weird thing, and I’m actually relieved to hear that you struggle with the same thing.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, yes, struggle is I think a very generous light word for it.

Rolf Potts: But we’re both successful authors, so I think that there’s something.

Tim Ferriss: No, hopefully, people take some solace in that. I think matters are not helped by the fact that I’ve tried for years to change my writing schedule so that I get good synthesis. I tend to differentiate between research and synthesis, or gathering up all of my material, and then putting it into prose.

It doesn't help matters that I've tried to become a morning writer, and I have friends who do this, where they'll wake up really early, and they kick out good prose in the morning. I've never been good at it, so I tend to get started in the middle of the night, when it's pitch black outside, and so I have those moments of acute anxiety

when it's just – I might as well be in solitary confinement in a basement.

So that probably doesn't help my psychological state much, but who knows, maybe some good has come of it. What are some of your favorite books or articles on writing itself, or just commentary? These could be authors who have written about it, but I'm just – I'm looking for things myself, quite frankly, to read. You mentioned Ann Lamott. I think *Bird by Bird* is a fantastic book. But what are some of your favorite books or commentaries on writing?

Rolf Potts:

Well, this is funny because I teach writing in various contexts actually.