

Love What You Love Podcast

Episode 51: Iceland with Jewells Chambers

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Welcome to *Love What You Love*; I'm Julie Rose. I'm insatiably curious about people and the world around us, and absolutely in love with passion and unselfconscious enthusiasm. Every other week I geek out with someone about the thing that they love, and then I share it with you.

Welcome back! Or, Welcome! As I record this, it's Halloween weekend and the dark is coming early. I have a rough time as the darker days come on. I mean, I grew up in Denver and I live in San Jose, which are two of the sunniest cities in the US, so I'm already pulling out my lightbox. What I'm saying is that I would not cut it in the lands where winter is long and dark, unlike this week's guest.

Jewells Chambers moved to Iceland in 2016 and is the host of the popular podcast and YouTube channel *All Things Iceland*, which gives you the inside scoop on Icelandic nature, culture, history, and language through the eyes of an expat living in the country. In this episode, we talk ice climbing, how to deal with 23 hours of sunlight, interviewing world leaders, the challenges of learning Icelandic, her experience as a woman of color in Iceland, and so much more. Find out why Jewells loves Iceland and why you might learn to love it too.

Julie: Hello, Jewells! Thank you so much for joining me today.

Jewells: My pleasure. Thanks for having me, Julie.

Julie: This is so cool. I'm so excited to talk with you. You host the *All Things Iceland* podcast and have a really popular YouTube channel. I'm really interested to know, you visited there for the first time in 2013, what was that first visit like for you?

Jewells: Bizarre. [laughs] It was great, but... there were two sides to it. I was going with my then-boyfriend who later became my husband and I was meeting his family also for the first time. So, it was not just going to this new country but also meeting these people who were super important to him. And it was in December, so it was wintertime in Iceland, which is very dark, and I had no idea what to expect because, Gunnar, my husband, boyfriend at the time, was and is this person that grew up in Iceland, so for him... he also runs kind of warm, so clothing-wise he's just like, "You'll be fine," when you're picking winter clothes.

And there's certain things, for sure, that you need to keep in mind when you're visiting Iceland, in terms of layering or whatever. I was fine overall, but I was also just stunned at the landscape. Flying in... The flights are still the same in terms of getting in early in the morning, like 6 o'clock in the morning, so it's really dark, and it's still dark until 9, 10, sometimes up to 10:30 or so.

Julie: Wow.

Jewells: Yeah. I think the shortest day of the year is December 21st; the sun comes up at 11 and goes down at around 3. So yeah, it's very... It feels very intense, and I was doing my best to adjust to all of that while still also, you know, meeting these awesome people, and eating different types of foods and stuff. And it was just, like, a frozen wonderland. Not many trees, so when you're driving from Keflavík Airport to Reykjavík, which is about a 30-40-minute drive, you're seeing these lava fields that are covered in snow, and the water on one side... It's just really beautiful and I was pretty blown

away at how beautiful it is going, like, around the Golden Circle. There's this really popular spot that many people come to. It's kind of on everyone's bucket list to do the Golden Circle.

So, we went to Gullfoss Waterfall, and it was half-frozen, and I remember standing there and almost crying, like, at the power of the waterfall but also at the beauty, and just being in this moment where it was just so... I was just so awestruck by its beauty. And I think those moments really stick with me. And driving around Reykjavík, it's really a small city. It's the only city that Iceland has.

I was also shocked... I think this is the one thing I have to mention, that in Iceland it is not usual that they shovel the snow, like all the ice. So you'll find ice on the sidewalks unless they have heating pipes underneath them. So, downtown many of the streets have heating pipes underneath the streets that melt the ice and snow. But in other places there's lots of ice, so you're, like, ice skating practically, and it's really dangerous.

And I remember thinking, like, "Why would people do this?" In New York, all these people would be sued. [laughs] People would be falling all over the place. But Iceland's not this litigation culture like we have in certain areas of the US, so it was an eye-opening experience on so many different levels. And then the language too. So, there was a lot happening.

Julie: Wow. Now, had you visited other Scandinavian countries before?

Jewells: I've been to Norway, and funny enough... And this is not at all... I think back on my life like, "Was I just attracted to people in this area or something?" But in college, I had a boyfriend who was studying abroad, and he was from Norway.

Julie: [laughs] You've got a type.

Jewells: Yeah, apparently. I was like, "What is going on?" It was so bizarre. I'm not seeking out these people; it just kind of happened. I remember we met and we got along really well. We were just having a good time, and then he was like, "I have to go back to my home," and I was like, "Well, I'd love to visit you," and I went to Norway for two weeks. I think I was 20 years old, so... I'm 35 now, so 15 years ago. That was in the summertime. It was amazing. We didn't go to Oslo because I was meeting him in Trondheim, I think it's called. I'm not sure if I'm saying that right. I'm not very well versed in Norwegian. But I had an amazing time.

It was so beautiful, and fresh air, all these things. Even going to the market and buying bread was just, like, an experience. [laughs] You know, a young college kid. So yes, I had been to one before, but just a different country and different culture to a degree.

Julie: Sure. Now, where did you grow up?

Jewells: I grew up in Brooklyn; in Bushwick Brooklyn.

Julie: So... a lot different than Iceland. [laughs]

Jewells: Oh yeah, different than both of those. [laughs] Definitely, and not in a... Now Bushwick is a place where people want to live. When I was growing up there, nobody was flocking there to be in this neighborhood. It was actually quite dangerous in terms of, you know, drugs and different issues. My family, which I'm very, very, very fortunate... Like, every day I wake up and I'm so grateful that I had the parents I had in terms of

their caring about our education and being able to provide us with a great education, but also realizing that people in the neighborhood needed resources.

So, my dad was a teacher and my mom, at one point, decided to be a stay-at-home mom. And I say that she was a stay-at-home mom in that she didn't go to a normal job but she started an after-school program for the kids in the neighborhood so they could come and do their homework and they would eat also. She wrote grants to the government to get food stipends and stuff to feed the kids. And then she had a summer camp. So, as a kid, I basically grew up with an after-school program that I went to every day with the kids in the neighborhood, and then also a summer camp my mom ran.

We went on trips every day except for Friday, which was arts and crafts day. In New York City, you know? So it was just, like, insane because I had such a great childhood. And my parents were... You know, obviously, everyone has things they go through, but my parents created this bubble for us and many kids in the neighborhood, even though some of these kids lived in situations that weren't good; like maybe they went home to a crack house. I remember walking a kid home, literally to a home that had... I should say a building, that the windows were broken in, there were no lights, they didn't have gas because they hadn't been paying the bills or whatever. Who knows, maybe they were just squatting there. And this was his life, you know?

So, I'm just really grateful that my parents were able to create something where not only me and my sister were benefiting from, but everyone else. And a mindset of, like, "Go out there and see the world. Your whole life is not just this block in Bushwick," but New York City had so much to offer and so many different cultures, and it kind of felt like you were traveling around the world. I mean, you could go to Chinatown and you're transported. Or Little Italy. Different places.

Julie: Wow. My god, your mom is a hero.

Jewells: Yes. Since the age of eight... I think we had to write down who our hero was. My mom still has this, that I wrote down that she's my hero when I was eight years old. And it's still true to this day because I'm just like, "How did you do this?" And my dad was there with her. He worked a full-time job, and afterwards and in the summer he would work summer school so he would have extra money, and it really just funneled into these programs because they wanted something better for these kids.

My mom was from Rochester, New York, which she did have more of a privileged life, even though she had experienced some racism there. But my dad was from Bed-Stuy, which is near Bushwick, in the Brooklyn area. And he saw a lot of the destruction, and kids not getting love, or support, or safe places to be able to play, or eat, or feel like they have somebody who cares about them. So they both were just on the same page about creating this space. And I just... Hats off to both of them. It's amazing.

Julie: Seriously. Were there other ways that you were adventurous?

Jewells: Definitely. So, I went to a Catholic school from the age of 5 to 18, and that was mainly because those were the schools they could afford that they still felt gave us a good, structured education. So, that was kind of interesting as well. A lot happened. So many things you can learn in these environments. In high school, though, there was a trip to Italy, and my parents, they saved up all the money they could for me to go on this trip

because, my mom's words were, "You cannot learn about Italy in a textbook. You have to go there."

So yeah, I did travel for the first time... Well, my first international trip was when I was really, really young. I was four years old. My parents went to Antigua, and I don't know... We never went on vacations after that. I think maybe because they were spending all their time and all their money on these programs that they were running. But yeah, at 17 I went to Italy and that definitely changed my mind. And I thought to myself, like, "I don't think I should be living in the United States. I feel like I should be out in the world living in another country." I just always had this feeling.

Julie: Interesting. So, you ended up moving to Iceland in 2016. What prompted that?

Jewells: My husband. [laughs] Which is so funny because in college I planned to study abroad. I was studying engineering at RPI, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and that's where I have a degree from. And I had planned to go to Egypt, actually, and study; just to do a program in the Middle East, and learn Arabic, and study engineering there. I just had this... I don't know why I was just really drawn to Arabic. The language is beautiful. I took a course, even, at a community college nearby because my school didn't have it, in Arabic, because I was just, like, "This is such..." Like, the rhythm to it, and the sounds... I was already really attracted to languages too. But my dad, unfortunately, when I was 20, he died. I was in college.

Julie: Oh, I'm so sorry.

Jewells: Yeah, thank you. It's one of those things where, like, I can deal with it in terms of the emotions, but it's just so weird knowing that the person's not in your life anymore, and all the things you're experiencing, and you wish they could be there.

So yeah, I just put a hold on all of that in terms of going away and out of the country to somewhere unknown. Everything felt more risky in some ways, of leaving and being away from my family. So, I didn't pursue that and it wasn't until... Even after college I was trying to figure out my life and my way. Going abroad again just didn't seem realistic.

But Gunnar, who I'd met when I was in college through a mutual Icelandic friend - he was visiting that friend - we stayed in contact and eventually we ended up getting together. So, it took a while before Iceland came into the picture. I was going other places and visiting them, but Iceland was the only one where it felt like I could live there. And maybe it's because there was already an established community, his family and him.

Julie: He was in the US and he was just like, "I really want to go back home"? How did that work?

Jewells: He came over to the US at one point. He was still living in Iceland when I first met him many, many years ago in college. Then he moved because he's a psychologist and that's what he was studying. He's a psychologist now. At the time, he wanted to get a PhD in psychology, so he ended up going to Indiana because there was another Icelander... and all Icelanders do this. But there was an Icelander professor there who convinced him and his girlfriend at the time to come over to Indiana and be in the program.

And so they did, and they both ended up getting their PhDs, and of course, life happens, and they got married at some point, and a divorce. Life goes on. [laughs]

And it's so funny because I'm Facebook friends with him this whole time, and when he got married I was like, "Congratulations!" I just never assumed that this person would be in my life this way because we weren't really friends; we were just people who had met one time and thought we were, like, you know... we both thought the other was attractive, but there wasn't this, "I need to be with this person. I know this person is going to be my husband or wife," you know?

I think life just ended up somehow merging our lives together, which is really cool and I'm really grateful for it because he's been such a great support of all the things I like doing and I try to do the same. So, yeah, he did tell me he always planned to go back to Iceland because he wanted to give back to his community. There are not a lot of male psychologists.

And I think anywhere else, it's hard in general for people to seek therapy. There's a stigma around, like, either you feel like you're crazy or whatever else. I really believe that's changing now, of course, but it's taking some time. And especially when he was going into it, individuals in Iceland were not being recommended by their doctors, for instance, to go to therapists. Instead, a lot of people were just being prescribed antidepressants. Iceland has, actually, the highest rate of antidepressant use in, like, the EU or something... even though they're not part of the EU, but in European countries, because of this history that built up a bit.

And I thought it was really great that he wanted to come back and give back to his community, so I guess it's one of those things where I felt really comfortable. And he talked about Iceland so much and loved it that I was just like, "I'll move there," having never even been there. [laughs] I was just up for the adventure.

Julie: Yeah. What was it like to start a whole new life in a completely different culture, different geography, everything? What was that like?

Jewells: Most people would be really afraid, but I was so excited about this because it just... It's such an adventurous place and I felt so comfortable. I also felt really drawn to Iceland that it didn't feel like I was going somewhere that was going to harm me. I don't know why; I just had this sense of security. I also was very strict about one specific thing.

I made an agreement with Gunnar that I would not move to Iceland, physically, until I had secured a job in the work that I do; digital marketing specifically. Many people come here and they have to start over, and get jobs, maybe go back to school or whatever. And I was like, "I'm not doing that. I'm sorry." I appreciate that some people are really comfortable with that, or they go that route, but for me, I felt... because I am risk-averse... [laughs]

Julie: Really??

Jewells: Yeah, you wouldn't think so, but I try my best to calculate my odds of what's going to happen. And I felt like this one particular thing was the most important for me. So, I would be making my own money, I would have interaction with people outside of my husband and his family so that I could build my own friends and community. I knew that... the company I ended up working for was an outdoor adventure company, working in the marketing department. Part of my job was to go out and experience the different things, like being on a glacier, or going into the Highlands, or going trekking, or hiking, all these things.

So, this one thing I had been adamant about actually brought me into a situation that helped me to fall in love with Icelandic nature and really get to see it in a way that many people, maybe, don't see it who live here because they have different types of jobs that require them to stay more in Reykjavík or whatever.

And that was just such a great opportunity for me. So, I would say... it didn't feel scary. It was just sad, for instance, leaving my mom. Still, every day I wake up and it's an adventure. The same way... of course, I'm not exactly the same as when I started - and thankfully because all of us evolve - but the same feeling of, "Wow, I live in Iceland. That's so bizarre and amazing and I love it," is how I've felt since day one.

Julie: How serendipitous that you got a job with this adventure company. Was there one thing that you got to do where you're like, "Ah, yep. This seals it. I love it here."?

Jewells: There were a couple different things, but I'd say usually the challenging ones were the aspects where I grew the most, of course. There was a guy who was turning 40, he was a guide, he ice climbs. And I'd never even... I didn't know people ice climbed. [laughs] I knew people climbed on rocks but I didn't know you sought out places where ice was specifically over rocks and climbed that. It's just like, "Okay..."

So, he wanted to do 40 climbs in the year in which he would turn 40, which is kind of difficult because ice conditions can vary, and if the year is warmer than usual, the weather, whatever. And we had to... And this was my first summer working in Iceland, 2016. I had this idea of, like, helping him out with this, and going off and being... And I was, like, the producer of this project, which is not something I normally do but I was pretty excited about it. So, we had this guy who was a camera guy, and everyone else, they're all mountaineers. I am not. [laughs] I've not been hiking a mountain at all. I'm hardly going up the stairs. [laughs]

And they're like, "Okay, we're going to go up to this spot." It's near to Glymur, which is a waterfall. I think it's the second-highest waterfall in Iceland. But the spot wasn't Glymur, it was somewhere else, where you literally just park along the road and we just start hiking up. There's no path; it's just a bunch of rocks, kind of slippery, to this area where, if you're a hardcore climber you can read, like, the coordinates of where someone else had marked it. [laughs]

Julie: [gasps]

Jewells: Yeah, one of those, right? So, we're going, and I'm just, like, watching them as I'm doing my best to keep up. They're just walking up the mountain like goats. Like nothing. And I'm exhausted, I'm sweating profusely, and it's just, like... I'm almost to the point, like, "Why did I even come out here? I should've just stayed in the office."

But I was so proud of myself when I finally made it up there; really high... it was probably, like, 900-1,000 meters or something like that. For me, that was a lot, especially not having done anything. And when I get up there... There's a picture from long ago; I have to see if I can find it. The photographer took a photo of me and behind me was a rainbow.

Julie: Aww!

Jewells: Yeah, because it had been raining... It had also been raining a lot and everything, right? So I was like... It was one of those moments where you're always like, "I did this!" And on the way down was actually the hardest because it had been raining, it was slippery, and I didn't have walking sticks because I didn't know to have walking sticks.

But one of the guys gave them to me, and I was still... again, they were all down the mountain very easily. And I'm over there almost crying because I'm afraid I'm going to fall and hurt myself; I'm not used to doing this. But I made it. I didn't die and I have a story to tell, right? It was, like, this job that I was on. [laughs]

And that actually sparked in me that I did not want to be in that situation again. I wanted to be prepared for hiking mountains and I was going to seek out hiking mountains because I felt like, "This is something that's really awesome and is a skill that..." And I say skill, meaning like, physically it's good for you. But also mentally there's a high that I was getting from exerting myself this way and pushing myself that I just absolutely loved.

So, after that I was hooked on being outdoors, and getting more outdoors clothing, and certain types of boots, which led to, at one point, me and Gunnar going on a nine-day trekking tour in the Highlands where we trekked from hut to hut. It was with the company I was with as well, and because I worked for them I got to go for free and we paid half price for him. It was amazing. You just can't even imagine going out into uninhabitable land in Iceland, because the majority of it you can't live on, or in; the middle of the country. So most people just live along the coast. It's just insanely beautiful.

It's like, black desert, and there's rhyolite mountains with vibrant green moss all over it. It's just so beautiful. Different rivers... I didn't know what exactly to expect even though I saw pictures. But you really get challenged by the weather too because it was raining a decent amount and you're living in the most basic huts possible. Everyone's using... I think it was a group of nine of us all together. You really get to know everyone really well over nine days. [laughs] And I loved it. I was just, like, "Wow. This is the life. Part of my job is I'm out here hiking for nine days," [laughs] absorbing all the beauty and just getting the experience of being an outdoors woman.

Julie: Now, not everyone who's listening is going to really be super familiar with Iceland, so maybe we could just step back and maybe give an overview. You said the center of the country is not habitable, and how many people live in Iceland? What's the deal with Iceland?

Jewells: Geographically, if you look at it on the map, it's in the North Atlantic Ocean. Not as far up as Greenland, so only a very tiny bit of it is in the Arctic Circle. Most people think that Iceland is like Greenland that way, that it's just super cold all the time, which it's not. There are 375,000 people that live here; not a lot. And the majority of those people, like two-thirds or so, live in the Reykjavík metro area, so in the south of the country. And yeah, it feels really compact when you think about it, but it's not. It's nothing like New York City where there's, like, 250,000 people who are living on the same block or something. That's how it feels. [laughs]

So, in Iceland, in my opinion, when you talk about traffic, there's no traffic. You might have to wait five extra minutes or something in the morning. Like I mentioned, people live along the coast, and Reykjavík is the only city; officially the only city. There are towns, and there are bigger towns, like Akureyri, which is in the north, and it's called the Capital of the North. And Icelanders have the tendency to do this, like, "In the Westfjords, Ísafjörður is the Capital of the Westfjords." And it's like, that's because 2,000 people live there, where the other little, small towns might have 200 people. So it's like, "Okay, sure. The Capital of the Westfjords. Whatever." [laughs]

But the actual capital of Iceland is Reykjavík, officially, and that's the only city. And I think it's around the size of Ohio or something. It takes quite a while to drive around it. Most people also assume that you can easily just get to places in Iceland, like, in a day. Sure, you could, but do you want to really be driving 13 hours and you haven't even gotten halfway around the country because you wanted to go see all these things? I feel like it's sneakily large in the fact that there's so much to see and do here that, you know, if you tried to stop off and do everything you'd have to be here years to really, like, appreciate it all.

Because there's also different seasons, and in those seasons, you know, winter really brings a lot of interesting challenges regarding snow conditions. Even just this weekend there were some winter conditions in the south and people were sliding off the roads, lots of snow. Yeah, there was snow in the mountains starting in September, in the Reykjavík area, and then it goes away a little bit, and then it comes back. So, winter can be really tricky because you think that "Oh yeah, it's late October, according to the Old Norse calendar," but winter kind of just comes when it feels like it, I feel like. And then it leaves when it feels like it.

My first winter, it snowed in May, off and on for a week, and I was like, "No, no. Wait a minute. Winter's supposed to be over!" We celebrated the first day of summer... This is not a joke. The first day of summer is in April. Again, according to the Old Norse calendar. I always have to say this because it's still celebrated. It's an official holiday in Iceland to take off that day. It's usually not summery conditions. It's usually kind of cold and rainy, but it's the first day of summer. I think it's like a running joke at this point, even though the settlers, for them, it meant that the harshest of winter was over. So, we are going into this period in which there will actually be summer, but yeah, you have to take it with a big grain of salt when you say 'summer' in Iceland because the high is usually around 60°F. So, not summer in most places.

Julie: That's the high...

Jewells: Yeah. [laughs] You're like, "Wait..." [laughs]

Julie: [laughs]

Jewells: We have gotten up to 70. Like, 60 is a heatwave. 70 is, like, "Wow! It's Spain!" Like, that's when people... They'll start calling, I think in Ísafjörður, they call it Ibiza-fjörður, like Ibiza, Spain, to make these jokes about how warm it feels. And it's like, "This is hilarious." [laughs] You do your best to make it feel like, "Yeah, it's really warm," but it may be 17°C or something. I love it though.

Julie: So you were saying that in the winter you get, like, five hours of daylight. In the summer do you have, like, 23 hours of daylight?

Jewells: Yeah, it's pretty much all day in certain months. So, it's June, July, August. In July is when you have it all of July, and so there's no twilight hours. There's no twilight hours and there's no darkness, like actual night. So, it looks like... The same brightness could be at 2 o'clock in the morning as it is at three in the afternoon, just depending on if the sun is out or whatever. The sun only... It kind of goes below the horizon, but the brightness of it doesn't go away, and it just pops back up again.

Julie: So how do you deal with... On both sides, dealing with five hours of sun and dealing with 24 hours of sun. How do you deal with that?

Jewells: Yeah, it is an adjustment. My first years, first year or two, I was wearing a face mask, and you have blackout curtains. You're trying to black out as much of the light as you can. I now don't do that. In fact, there's been a couple of times where we slept with the blinds open, which I thought was kind of bizarre. I was like, "What is wrong with us? How are we able to sleep like this?" But it didn't seem to bother me. I know Icelanders who... Like my brother-in-law, he does not like summer in Iceland because of this. I mean, he likes summer, but the brightness really annoys him, so I think he wears a face mask. But it can vary from person to person.

In the wintertime, another adjustment, because it's not that every day is five hours, but it comes very quickly. Darkness, almost, like, is just on you all of a sudden. And then you have October, late October you're really feeling it. November, December, January. January is the most difficult, in my opinion, because there aren't really many celebrations. You have, like, Christmas and everything in December, so it kind of takes your mind off of it. But once you hit January it's like, "Wow, I spent all my money for Christmas..." and just going to work.

And it's like 11 o'clock in the morning and still dark. 9 o'clock in the morning and it's still dark. All these times. And the sun is going down... I go to work in pitch black. I come home in pitch black. And it's just how it is. And then the weather itself can be really windy, windstorms, snowstorms.

But I have learned coping mechanisms. I used to use a light to shine on me, like one of those daylight lamps. I didn't really like it. It felt like it wasn't... I guess maybe I'm sensitive to it or something, but it felt like it was making me kind of anxious for some reason. Some other people really like it. For me, exercise... Having a routine. It's weird, but in the winter is when I get really organized because my brain knows that winter is coming, if you don't get organized you just sink into thinking about how dark it is. The best thing is to get your mind off of it and just to, like... because it's there and it's not going to go away. But I make sure I always have a big project that I'm working on so that it really takes up my time. So right now we're moving, and we're doing construction projects. So that's helping a lot. [laughs]

Julie: [laughs]

Jewells: We're literally tearing out everything. I think the ceilings are coming down today or something like that. It's really intense.

Julie: Oh my god!

Jewells: Yeah. I don't know what we were thinking, but you know... [laughs] Apparently we've got money to burn, so... [laughs] I'm excited about the end result though. It's really nice to be able to do something like that. So we'll be moving, that's the other thing, in November.

Julie: Oh my gosh. So, that is a big project.

Jewells: Yeah, and I'll also have a podcast studio. So, that was a part of moving and having my own office, which essentially would just be the podcast studio. So, I'm really excited about that because then I can actually treat the room, and you know, take away all of the potential outside echo or whatever else that can affect audio. So, I'm really happy about this idea of having my own space. But also, just having a new kitchen... I'm going off on a tangent.

Julie: [laughs]

Jewells: Having a podcast is on my mind. I've been at Ikea shopping for kitchens. This is my life. [laughs] Exercising has been another big thing for me. Keeping my skin moisturized, getting outside when there is the sun. Because it's happened in the winter where I didn't see the sun for many weeks because it was, like, storming, and it was really cloudy, so you never physically saw the sun. It did get brighter in the day, but the sun was not, you know, present as such.

Julie: I mean, does everybody run out into the street when they see the sun?

Jewells: [laughs] Maybe. I mean, there are definitely people who, like me, when they see it they're like, "[gasp!] Wow! Okay, yeah. We're going outside right now." And this is the craziest thing, too; I love this though. My first summer, I didn't get it, but in summertime... again, because summer is not guaranteed in Iceland. Just because there's a high of 60 doesn't mean it will actually happen, or that it will be sunny, or that it will be, you know, dry. It can be very rainy. We've had very rainy summers that were kind of depressing, or very depressing, depending on who you ask. [laughs]

So, 2016, the summer was pretty decent, and people would leave work at, like, 3 o'clock in the afternoon, like, "All right, well I'm going to go hiking." And I'm thinking, "People are being so lazy! This is ridiculous! They're just leaving work." And Icelanders, like, if you have good weather in Iceland, you take advantage of it. And they kept telling me this, and I was like, "Whatever. I'm from New York." Summer comes, summer goes, it's all the same. It's not the same. Summer is not created equal in Iceland, so you take it if you can get it.

Since then, that summer after that, I learned... because in 2017 I think we had a really bad... It was 2017 or 2018, one of those years, we had a really bad summer. It was just so rainy and so depressing that people were just, like, trying their best to go on vacations to other countries because they couldn't handle it. It was too much. [laughs] So, yeah.

Julie: So, is weather... the seasons, and the darkness, has that been the hardest thing to get used to? Or is there anything else?

Jewells: Hard is relative for me because I think I just took on this mentality that Icelanders have. It took me a little while, though. So, say there's a windstorm and it's hurricane-strength winds. No one's saying, "We're staying in the house." Everyone's like, "Be careful out there!" Or, you know, "It's so windy today, hold your kids' hand so they don't blow away," type of thing. I mean, that's literally what they've said on the news before, right? And I was like, "What?? Why are we leaving the house?"

There have been literal windstorms where the bus... the glass on the bus, which was probably, like, plexiglass or something, it burst through that glass. This doesn't happen all the time, but it has happened. So in my mind, I'm like, "We're not going to work, right?" And Gunnar's like, "What do you mean? Of course you're going to work." [laughs] It's like, no one flinches unless you're blocked in by snow. And even then it might be, like, a delayed day or something.

And that doesn't happen in Reykjavík; that's more in the north. But my mentality really had to shift or else I would've... I would probably have been out of a job because I'm not showing up or something. And learning how to dress for it. So, it went from being, like, you know... in New York if the weather is severe or whatever, people were like,

"No, we're staying home," to, "We just make it work and we get there." And I was like, "Okay, fine. I will do that."

And I think working at this outdoor adventure company where people, a few of them had been to, like, the North Pole or Antarctica, really intense... Greenland during the winter doing expeditions. Like, you hear stories and you're just like, "Yeah, I shouldn't complain." [laughs] These people are almost, like, getting frostbite climbing mountains or something, and I'm over here being like, "But it's windy!" [laughs] So, I learned to just, like, "No, we're just going to go with it."

I'd say the language, if I had to think of something really challenging. As long as I've been here, even though I feel comfortable somewhat having conversations, I still get in my own head about it. Icelandic is difficult. There are many different... four different cases in which you conjugate, like, decline the different words, and verbs, and pronouns, all that stuff into. So, that really trips up a lot of people.

And talking can take you a little while because you're continuously in your head... unless you go to school full time for it, which I did not do and have not been doing. But you can get in your head about how best to say something in terms of correctly because one word can sometimes have, like, 30 different types of conjugations or something. It depends.

Julie: Oh my gosh.

Jewells: Yeah. It's like, "Why? Why would you do this?" It's a very complicated language because it's old. And I learned that older languages are complicated, and when a language evolves it gets simpler. So, any day now, when Icelandic gets simpler, I'll be very happy. [laughs] Probably not in my lifetime, so...

Julie: What are your strategies for learning? I mean, is it just exposure on a daily basis?

Jewells: Yeah, so I have a private tutor who's super helpful. A private teacher, I should say, because he is actually a teacher, not a tutor. And I speak to Gunnar in Icelandic, a decent amount. That helps. I've also been listening to a lot more podcasts. It used to be when I listened to podcasts, everything was just jumbly nonsense because they were talking so fast. But now I realize I do really understand it, and I was like, "Okay, that helps a lot."

And watching shows; I'm not a big TV watcher but there are some really great Icelandic shows, like *Trapped*. I'm not sure if you've heard of this one. They have a new season coming out, which is really exciting. It's like a crime detective show. The third season's coming out, and the first two seasons I can watch in Icelandic with Iceland subtitles, so that's when I... You really get the context of what's going on, the emotions and everything. So, even though I'm not a big TV watcher, I'm forcing myself... And the show is great. It has nothing to do with that. This is more, like, I don't find myself wanting to sit there and binge-watch shows. It's just not my personal preference in terms of spending time. But this one is really good.

I am reading... not as much as I would like, but when I do read I find myself needing to write down some words. It's more about my vocabulary. Like, I understand all the conjugations and stuff, but I need to expand my vocabulary a lot more so I feel like I can express myself more on a deeper level.

Julie: I presume that a lot of Icelanders speak English as well?

Jewells: Mm-hmm. Very well. So, it's also... that makes it difficult because you're like, "Um, I don't know this thing. I'm just going to say this in English. Is that okay?" And they're like, "Yeah, sure. Whatever." [laughs] And you do come across some people who are like, "No. You're in Iceland. Speak Icelandic." Not everybody. It's not... My experience has not been very many of those people. But when you do come across it, it is hard because you get very nervous and you're just like, "I don't want to screw up because I sound stupid." But they're like, "Nope. I'm only going to speak to you in Icelandic, so good luck with that."

Julie: Wow. [laughs] Many years ago, my husband and I went to Norway. It was interesting. We felt like the people there were... They felt... They were cordial but reserved with strangers. And you know, as Americans, we felt like, you know, over-enthusiastic golden retrievers. We're just like, "Hi! Hey!" And they're like, "Calm down." [laughs] So, do you find that Icelanders are kind of the same in general with how they act with strangers versus with people that they know?

Jewells: Yes, definitely. They definitely come across as shy; sometimes almost rude. And I mean, like, if you're so new and they really don't know you. I've seen them do it to other people too; they just ignore these other people in the room as if they're not even there.

Julie: Wow. [laughs]

Jewells: It doesn't happen all the time, but sometimes it happens and you're like, "Really? I'm sitting right here! This is so weird." So my husband's family, of course, because I was coming into the family, it's totally different there. Everyone was so nice, and welcoming, and inquisitive, and everything. But I've definitely been in situations where it felt like, you know, they were just feeling you out a little bit, waiting to see... But you know, they have friendships with people who they've known since they were five years old or something. And those people, they become alive. It's almost as if their switch was turned on and all of a sudden they're these super lively, funny people.

So, definitely there's a bit of, I would call it, shyness. Maybe you can call it reserved, to a degree. It doesn't bother me at all. I've found myself probably taking this on a little bit too. [laughs] But I had one of the founders of the company that I used to work for say to me when I first met him... and I don't know if he was trying to be this way, but he said that when he would go to the US, it was so weird that everyone was smiling at him all the time, and they were just, like, so happy. And not necessarily loud, but enthusiastic, I think is the word he used. "So enthusiastic and so happy all the time."

He's like, "And I don't know if they're actually happy." And I was like, "Okay..." And I'm over there, when I met him, I was like, "Hi! How are you? My name's Jewells." I was doing that whole thing. And he made this comment and I was like, "Is he trying to tell me that he doesn't like that I do this? Or is he just making an observation? I don't know what to think of this right now!"

So, there's definitely this idea of Americans. And on my YouTube channel, when I've done any interactive videos with Gunnar, my husband, people are like, "Wow, he's so softspoken and reserved." And I was like, "You know, off-camera..." Because he has his on-camera persona that is very reserved. And it might be because he's a therapist, a psychologist. But off-camera, if there's candy around or whatever, this man turns into a child, okay?

He's, like... He has a very, very loud laugh, like his father, who I didn't get to meet but this is what I hear about his dad. As well as he likes to make fart jokes. [laughs] He's a child in a sweet way. It's not something that's negative. So, I always think to myself, like, "People have no idea." Because they were like, "Jewells, you're so lively! You're so American! And Gunnar is so..." this. And I was like, "I really wish I could just capture him with a secret camera and show people, but that's obviously not right, [laughs] like, against consent or something. So, I won't do that. But you have no idea how different this guy is. So, I think that happens to a decent amount of Icelanders as well.

Julie: Yeah, totally. What would you say is the most overrated thing about Iceland?

Jewells: Ooh. That's a good question. Okay, I think the image of Iceland, albeit it's a beautiful country and it's amazing, it's often thought of as this Utopia, as if everything's perfect, and there's no crime, and there's gender equality... So, there's an image problem in that, like, it's not as realistic about what actually happens here. There is not gender equality in terms of it's not been fully reached this way, 50/50. And there's definitely, like, discrimination that happens, sexism.

Even recently, which has been really sad and quite surprising about the amount of hate that - it's a small group of people but it only takes, like, three people, really, to do this - who've been sending hate messages to people in the LGBTQ+ community. And yeah, so I would say it's overrated in that Iceland has real people that live in it that have issues that do things that aren't kind or that can be, you know, unsafe, or even end up killing somebody. And it can be scary. It doesn't happen on a scale that's like everywhere else; it's much smaller. But it's still real.

And I think sometimes when people come here, they sometimes have unrealistic expectations about Iceland or Icelanders. And that is something I try to bring a little bit more light to, because just as much as I love Iceland, I also don't want to come across as that person that's like, "Everything's amazing all the time! Of course you'll love it here!" No, it's not for everybody, for sure. But it's also a real place and let's just keep it to a place where there's balance so we can understand that there's the good and there's the bad. I think when you hear about the bad, it doesn't have to be discouraging. It can just be, like, "Oh, okay. Iceland actually does have issues." And it's kind of interesting to understand what, for them, comes across as an issue.

Julie: It seems like it's a pretty homogenous population, so what kinds of challenges have you faced there as a woman of color? And how are they different than the challenges you faced in the US?

Jewells: Yeah, it's very different. What's funny is that 15... I think it's at least 15% of the population are now people of foreign origin. So, yeah, it's changing. But a lot of them come from Poland. I think it's, like, 21% of the people of foreign origin come from Poland. And I think we're almost up to 1,000 Americans. [laughs]

Julie: Wow!

Jewells: So, it is a fascinating thing in that, even though it's homogenous in terms of, there's like native people, a majority of them are native Icelanders, meaning born here, have lineage in Iceland, there's still a lot more diversity that's coming in. And as a woman of color, as a Black woman, I often, you know, was not aware of what was happening in terms of discrimination because I didn't grow up here. And I've interviewed some people about their experiences and it blew me away.

I even interviewed this woman, Kristín Loftsdóttir. She's a professor at Háskóli Íslands, the University of Iceland. And she talked about... She's been doing research about racism, the concept of whiteness, and... I can't remember the other aspect of it. But still, like, just all of this. So, hearing from her, she is a white Icelandic woman, and what she's found in, like, in terms of all these topics, it was just, like, "Whoa. Okay..." There's so much underlying things here that I wasn't aware of. And yet, for me, I feel very safe.

Like, I don't have the feeling that if the police, for instance... My interactions with the police have been very positive. Whereas in the US, I'm like, "Mm... Okay. I don't know how this will go." And I've not really interacted much, but I've had enough family and friends who have that I'd like to avoid it if possible, you know? And that's really sad because I feel like this is supposed to be something where it's a community and you feel like you're being protected. And in Iceland, even though I'm sure the police... and I know the police have had some issues in terms of with refugees and how they were treating them and other individuals, I've personally interacted with the police and it was like, "Oh, this is quite pleasant." It was kind of weird. [laughs] Like, "I feel comfortable. You're a person! You're treating me like a person!"

So, I'd say that there's that aspect of it, and there's also... I've met some really amazing women here, people of foreign origin, Black women, people from all different walks of life who have been pointing out and bringing attention to discrimination or racism and helping Icelanders who are either oblivious to it or, maybe, part of the problem and not realizing it, or part of the problem and realizing it, to get a different perspective on it. And that has been, I think, so amazing to see this in action. It doesn't mean that some people fight against it, because they definitely do. There's always going to be some opposition when someone feels like they're being threatened, and they think they're superior in some way.

But on the whole, I would say that... and I know from my friends and talking to them, who are people of color or however they identify, that they feel a lot safer here. And that's been a huge part of my experiences, even creatively. Having *All Things Iceland* and starting it, at first I was really worried that Icelanders would think, like, "Why is this Black woman from the United States talking about Iceland?" You know what I mean? And then they were like, "No! This is great! Thank you so much for sharing your perspective." That's overwhelmingly been the messages that I get.

And I was just, like, "Wow, you make me feel so welcomed here, and..." this is just a gift, in a way, that you can get outside of what you know, or the history of a place where you're from, and your ancestors, and come somewhere, interact with people that you might've thought would automatically discriminate against you, and they're welcoming you. So, this, in a lot of ways, has broken a lot of energy that I had up that came from fear, you know.

And Icelanders have a tendency to stare [laughs] but they're not smiling at me. So, similarly when you were talking about Norwegians being reserved, and you just don't know. Like, flight or fight? "Are you telling me you don't want me to be here because you're staring at me?" And it's like, "Nope." They're just... sometimes really curious, and they're just like, "Do I know this person?" Or "Where you come from?" But they're not saying anything. So, these types of knowing cultural aspects of a place helps you to get a better context of what's happening. But there wasn't, like, a handbook or anything that helped me. It's just more of experiences and taking it from there.

Julie: What was it like interviewing the President of Iceland?

Jewells: It was amazing. He is lovely. He's literally... You know, when you talk about wanting to have someone who's the head of state for a country, in terms of relatability and making you feel welcome, he's the epitome of all that; him and his wife. I've had the chance... I didn't meet his wife in person, but I was hosting a book launch and she was part of the book launch live event, so I got to interview her as well some time ago. But with him, I got to interview him in person, and it was very laid back and he answered all of my questions. We talked for an hour and a half... an hour and 20 minutes or so.

And this is the President of Iceland, right? So, I was just, like... And we were just talking about the different things that I thought would be helpful, of course, for my audience to learn. And he was so open. I've heard from... every person I've talked to who knows that I did this interview, who's met him, was like, "Yeah, he's really nice." They'll even say, "This is the type of president we're happy to have and we love the fact that he is so down to Earth. This is how we feel our leaders should be."

And that gave me so much joy in my heart. It was a humbling experience, but at the same time, I didn't feel like I was out of my element, you know? I didn't feel like I was going to some stately affair where I wasn't comfortable. I felt very happy, welcomed, and at ease throughout the whole thing so that we could actually just have a good conversation.

Julie: That's amazing. I saw that post and it was like, "Oh my god! That is so cool!" So, is it true that you're only allowed to listen to Sigur Rós when you live in Iceland?

Jewells: [laughs] No.

Julie: [laughs] Just checking.

Jewells: If that were true, then I think a lot of people would go mad. We've got to have variety here, you know? [laughs] Yeah, there's so many artists in Iceland. It's amazing.

Julie: Sorry, I just had to throw that one in. [laughs]

Jewells: [laughs] But just for clarification - No. [laughs]

Julie: So, just to wrap up. If my listeners want to visit or move to Iceland, how would you recommend they get started?

Jewells: First, visit, for sure. I do know of at least one person who came to Iceland and didn't visit beforehand, and I just... I don't understand how you can do that. But to each their own. Visit in every season, and if you can spend an extended amount of time... wherever you're from, if you're not in the EU, and if you're not in Schengen Area country, then you would have to figure this out anyway in a different way because it isn't so simple to move to Iceland without having those other ties.

But, in essence, coming to visit here really makes a difference for you, and you can stay up to three months if you're not in the EU or a Schengen Area country. So, I would utilize that time. I think it's three months each time you enter the country, so really, if you're serious about moving to Iceland, come and just experience it, especially during the dark months of winter.

So, come during January. Come when nothing's happening. And I mean that because you can really get blinded by the festivities and whatever else. It's like, "No..." Come

and see how that feels for you. And of course, get an understanding from the immigration office, like, how you could get here.

I did make a video about how you can move to Iceland, so there's, like, work-permit wise, which can be kind of difficult as well. But if you have a spouse or you're cohabitating with someone, so if you have a partner but you're not married. And if you're a child of somebody that helps a lot. [laughs] There's certain aspects that allow you to be able to come, but it can be a little bit tricky if you're just trying to do it on your own.

I do think, though, if you're able to make any friends, that helps a lot. Icelanders, probably Norwegians are the same, it takes, really, a lot of time; and sometimes you'll never really break into their circle. Like I mentioned before, they have been knowing each other since, like, five years old or something like that. So, there is this bond between them where you'll never get those jokes because you just weren't there. It's just literally time. But it's not impossible. Icelanders are very family-oriented. Gunnar and I, we often are going to birthday parties or brunches on the weekends or whatever; that's just part of our routine, spending time with the family because that's expected and people really value it. Small community.

So, if you're going to come on your own, just know that that could be a potential barrier because people want to come and they want to be like, "Oh, I'm part of the society!" Well, it doesn't work exactly like that. It's not like an easy integration for everybody. The language, though, would get you really far. And learning it, for sure, will give you a leg up just in terms of people being more open immediately to you.

So, when I speak Icelandic on the phone, or even when I go to the store or whatever, it's a different vibe. Because that's their native tongue, so I think just in general people feel more comfortable knowing that they can speak to you in the language. So, even though I said it's difficult, it can really aid in helping you to feel more like you're integrating into society as you're living here and trying to settle in if that ends up happening for you.

Julie: Jewells, thank you so much for taking so much time. You've been very generous with your time. I really appreciate learning about Iceland, learning about you. I'm really grateful for the time.

Jewells: My pleasure, Julie. Like you mentioned, I could also talk about this for hours. [laughs] It wasn't hard at all. The time flew by! So, I appreciate you having me on. It's been an honor being on your podcast.

[clip from "Untitled 4 ('Njósnavélin')" by Sigur Rós play in background]

You can find Jewells on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [YouTube](#) @AllThingsIceland, and on Twitter @JewellsChambers. Her podcast is [All Things Iceland](#), and you can listen anywhere you get podcasts. Of course, I'll put links to everything in the show notes, as well as links to Jewells's favorite nonprofits and mine too. Huge thanks to Jewells for sharing her passion with us this week.

Just a reminder that you can find this podcast on Instagram @LoveWhatYouLovePod, on Twitter, @WhatYouLovePod, and the website is [LoveWhatYouLovePod.com](#).

All of the transcripts for *Love What You Love* are available for everyone on the website. Thanks to Emily White, transcription magician and proprietress of The Wordary. If you need transcripts, reach out to her at Emily@TheWordary.com. The music for *Love What You Love* is called "Inspiring Hope" by Pink-Sounds. A link to that artist is included in the show notes.

As always, thank you so, so much for listening. Let's hang out again soon.

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