

She Goes_Home_V1.0

Aminatou: Hi there. Welcome to the podcast from *On She Goes*, a travel site for all women of color. I'm your host, Aminatou Sow. For those of us who are citizens of the world, the question "Where are you from?" is not always an easy one to answer. I talk to Heben Nigatu and Natasha Nyanin about the connection between travel and home. Plus you'll hear from filmmaker Mitra Bonshahi and more jet-setting women. First up, let's bring Heben into the studio. Heben cohosts one of my absolute favorite podcasts, *Another Round with Heben and Tracy*.

[PLANE SOUNDS]

Aminatou: Well, Heben, you were born in Ethiopia. How old were you when you moved to the United States?

Heben: I was five years old.

Aminatou: Really? I didn't move to the States until I was 18, so like, it's like I don't even have a memory from five. What was that like?

Heben: I mean, I don't really either. Besides like photos and stuff.

Aminatou: Is there like a photo of that day or that like kind of era that really sticks out to you?

Heben: Oh man, yeah. One of our first days in America, probably the first one because I have this balloon and I'm just looking so grumpy. Like okay, what's good with America, why are we here? And my sister was next to

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me with like a balloon and a smiling face with flowers. Like, America, let's go!

Aminatou: What was your relationship like with Ethiopia when you were growing up?

Heben: I feel like there's the classic kind of pushing away from everything your parents force on you. So like, culturally, like not wanting to do stuff. And then there's the phase where you're like, you're exploring and you're interested and you actually want to hear some history. And then you come to appreciate it, and you're like oh, I gotta go back to the homeland, buy some stuff, read some books, learn about Ethiopian jazz.

Aminatou: But when you were growing up, you like ate the food and it was very much a part of your life?

Heben: Oh yeah, absolutely. I mean, I feel like Northern Virginia, DC area . . . for those unfamiliar, Ethiopians run that town.

Aminatou: 100 percent.

Heben: So yeah. There's just a point where I went to a 7-Eleven in DC, and they had like, our food, our injera. Like that's how pervasive we are as a people. So I was definitely, like, all up in it. I felt like that was my normal.

Aminatou: When was the first time that you went back to Ethiopia?

Heben: The first time was in middle school. I was probably like 13, you know, those angsty years.

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Aminatou: Did you feel, at that time, like you were going back home? Or did Virginia feel like home-home at that point and you were going back to the home of your parents?

Heben: Hmm, I don't feel like I had a strong sense of, like, one place was my home. It felt more like a trip to visit people than like longing for the homeland and finally make it, you know? But I do, as I get older, feel more of the, like, homeland-y longing. Not to live there but just the fondness and even a nostalgia for it.

Aminatou: I don't know where my home is; for me, my home is always like where I live right now. Because I grew up like—my parents were diplomats, we traveled everywhere. I always joke that home is where the Wi-Fi connects automatically. Like, that's where my home is. That's where my home is.

Heben: Yes, listen, listen . . .

Aminatou: And so, you know, I don't think about home in that sense, right? Where I'm like, it's a place that I have to settle down or it's the place that my people are from. I'm just like, who knows where life will take me.

Heben: That's beautiful. I think the first time I came to New York was the first time I had the feeling of, like, this is home.

Aminatou: What was it about New York?

Heben: I don't know; I had been there like a day.

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Aminatou: It was like, you saw an Elmo in Times Square, and you were like, this is it.

Heben: This is it! Yeah, it was just one of those classic, starry-eyed-kid-coming-to-the-city kind of things. Even my family used to joke all the time when I was a kid that she's going to go off to New York, do her little thing, whatever.

Aminatou: I know but, I don't know, I think that's beautiful and kind of prophetic, in the sense that like, you are an ambitious person and your family recognized that but also that's probably the first place that you moved to that you had chosen for yourself, right?

Heben: Yeah, oh, I hadn't thought about that.

Aminatou: Like, that's where you decided you wanted to go. It wasn't like your family made you or you had to go on this weirdo side trip. Like, you are the captain of your own ship now.

Heben: Yeah, that's beautiful.

Aminatou: Heben, where can people find your work?

Heben: You can find me on Twitter @heavenrants, which is a thing that I do regularly. All of my social media is the exact same because like, who has the time to think of original things per medium?

Aminatou: Heben, you are a delight and a treat; thank you so much for joining us.

Heben: Oh my god, Amina! Thank you!

Aminatou: Bye.

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Heben: Cheers!

Aminatou: That was *Another Round* cohost Heben Nigatu. Now it's time for another round of the "three Hs" with Melissa Valle. This episode she's keeping us healthy.

Melissa: When it comes to staying healthy, water is essential. You want to make sure that you're hydrated and feeling good on vacation, not queasy and unsettled. Therefore, knowing exactly where it is safe to drink the water is key. Do the research before you travel. In some countries, you shouldn't drink the water under any circumstances and need to stick to bottled water. Be aware of ice in your drinks, swallowing water when brushing your teeth, and other things we may overlook in our routine. In other countries, the water may be safe enough to drink using a bottle with a small filter, such as the Bobble, which I found really helpful abroad.

Aminatou: Thanks, as always, for all your guidance, Melissa. Now filmmaker Mitra Bonshahi takes us to Iran.

Mitra: I cannot be the voice of a culture and people that I don't know. I'm Mitra Bonshahi, and I'm making a short film called *The Exiles*, and it's about my personal experiences in Iran when I traveled there three years ago. At times I felt strange documenting Iranian people, and I didn't want to come up with some sort of idea or stereotype or put my perception onto a

country that I don't know. I decided I wanted to travel to Iran because I had only been there once before, and that was when I was nine years old. And then the second time I was 31 years old, and there was a huge gap. My experience of Iran as a nine-year-old was, I don't wanna say traumatic, but my experience was not the best. So I went during my summer vacation with my mother and my sister, and at the age of nine you have to start wearing the hijab. So it's the head scarf. And that to me was very . . . it was just very different, and it was something that was hard for me to accept. I didn't like going outside and playing and having to cover my head. The summers are very hot there, and I'd have to wear long pants and long shirts, and it felt very restrictive. I was at a formative age where I could realize all these things but not really understand why they happened or the history of the country or how most people didn't want this to happen. Those things hadn't yet formed, and I didn't have that knowledge. So I just thought of it kind of as a not-so-fun place. So I didn't really want to go back. Once I started seeking some more knowledge and learning more about the country, I realized my perceptions as a nine-year-old were, first of all, carrying over to my adulthood, and secondly, pretty wrong. So I think I waited until I was at an age where I could deal with all these . . . this internal conflict and external conflicts. The first place I went was Tehran,

which is the main capital. It's a crazy, bustling city; it's like maybe 10 times more intense than New York City. There's a lot of traffic and there's a lot of smog, and I remember not knowing how to cross the street because they don't necessarily have crosswalks. My two aunts would help me and lead me as we sort of swerved in and out of all the cars that would race by. I was there during the elections of 2013. It was the election where Ahmadinejad would be done, so people were very excited about him leaving office because he had really messed stuff up. The day the results were announced my cousin and I were in Tehran, and we were out and about at a café, and we found out that Rouhani, who was one of the presidential nominees, who was pretty moderate and he was a reformist, he won. And when we heard that, we could hear people out in the streets. So then, my cousin at the time was only 15, and I was in charge of her, and I was like, we need to go out into the street. People were marching towards one of the squares, one of the major squares in Iran called Vanak Square, and they were marching and singing and sort of singing songs of protest. Singing about not wanting the hijab anymore, singing about wanting political prisoners freed, and we joined them. And we kept on marching, and I remember in that moment it felt like now I really knew what and who Iranians were. And it was a really beautiful moment to just

be there, out with everybody. And everybody was on the same page, and there was just this air of hope and of change and . . . and there was also the sense of freedom and expression that I hadn't seen before. So I felt really, really lucky to be there and to see the people of Iran, how they haven't been seen in Western eyes or even in how the government wants Iran to be portrayed. So that was a really, really touching moment, and I just remember tearing up, and my aunties were tearing up, and my cousin was, and it was very beautiful. When I returned home I felt like things had changed. My idea of my family in Iran and being Iranian totally changed. They made me feel at home, and they showed me around, and they showed me the Iran that they knew and that they loved, and the Iran that was different to them too, after the revolution. I think Iran, to me, is not quite home yet, but I don't think I know what home is anymore, which I think is better. I think it's better not to be rooted in just one place, and I don't think I was ever rooted just in the US, and I don't think I was rooted ever just in Iran. But now I feel like I have roots in both places.

Aminatou: You just heard from Mitra Bonshahi. Keep an eye out for her upcoming documentary, *The Exiles*. We've gone all over the world with Ashley and Rosie. This time, they're reminiscing over one of their favorite vacation spots: Whistler, British Columbia.

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Ashley: Rosie decides that we have reached the time in this, you know, relationship—

Rosie: Lesbian relationship.

Ashley: Yes. That we are going to be skiers.

Aminatou: Wow.

Rosie: No, we were going to be snowboarders.

Ashley: That we were gonna be snowboarders.

Aminatou: Okay!

Ashley: She was like, “Babe, we’re going to Whistler.” And so we decided that that’s what we were going to do. And to get to Whistler you either fly into Seattle or you fly into Vancouver. And then drive, you know, to Whistler. So I think we flew into Vancouver. We get in, check in, and we’re like, you know, and the thing about skiing is that you can tell who skis and who doesn’t. It’s like the one . . .

Aminatou: Automatic.

Ashley: Automatically. Like, there is no faking it. Right? Like no amount of “I bought my goggles and threw them against the wall to look like they’re broken in.”

Aminatou: It’s not like the pool where you can sit on the side of the little—it’s like . . .

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Ashley: You know. Either you're getting in the chairs that go to the top of the mountain or you're on the bunny slopes. There is no . . .

Rosie: There's no faking it.

Ashley: Yeah, there's no faking it. And the cool thing about people in Canada, it is true, they're super nice. So no one was gonna assume that we don't ski. So it was very much like, "Oh hey, which mountain are you going to?" And we're like, "You know, we haven't decided yet." [LAUGHS]

Rosie: Whistler or Blackcomb, wait, wait.

Ashley: So we decided we were going to take a class. We were like, that's probably a little classier than grabbing the equipment and just looking foolish. So we decided that we were going to take a snowboarding class. We meet our instructor the next day, and she's like 22; you could tell she probably had just finished smoking, just very like, "Hey, guys."

Aminatou: Oh yeah, snowboarding instructors, all stoners.

Rosie: From Australia.

Ashley: Like "Hey, I've been here for seven months; it's cool, just put your snowboard on." I'm like, "Oh." And so, you know, we're trying to get up on the snowboard, and it's evident that it's not natural to have two feet strapped to one board.

Rosie: It is not.

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Ashley: It is not.

Rosie: I may or may not have worn the appropriate belt, let's just say that. And my pants were constantly falling down. So much so, that I was spending most of my time on my ass in the snow, right? And so my ass was getting numb. At one point I could not tell whether I was mooning the whole mountain, because my ass was numb.

Ashley: She was mooning the entire mountain.

Rosie: So I leaned back at Ash and was like, "Babe, look at me, I'm standing up!"

Ashley: I'm like, "And your pants are down."

Rosie: And she was like, "Your pants are all the way down, and your ass is hanging out. Like not just your crack, your ass is hanging out."

Ashley: So that's why Rosie wears overalls.

Rosie: That's why I wear onesies. To this day I wear onesie overalls whenever I ski.

Ashley: But listen, when one snowboard door closes, a ski door opens. So we went back the next year; we were like, "You know what? Snowboarding was not for us."

Aminatou: Wait, you took that one lesson, and . . .

Ashley: We just knew.

Rosie: We never went back to the mountain that whole time.

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Aminatou: I love this.

Ashley: Right, but the next year we went back and took a ski class and got it. And we were like, “Oh, bitch! You better see us on this mountain!” Like parallel turning, like we were like good. We were legitimately good, and we paid for the instructor for the whole week. We would go up on the mountain, and we’d always come down for lunch. And on this one day that we had our instructor and he was like, “Hey, you guys are ready to really ski a lot of the runs on this mountain.” And like greens in Whistler are like blues and some blacks elsewhere.

Aminatou: I’m impressed.

Rosie: Okay, just check. They’re not blacks, but they are blues.

Ashley: Okay, but definitely blues.

Rosie: I will give you that.

Ashley: So I was like, “Hey, you know, Steve, our instructor, what time are we going down for lunch?” He was like, “Oh no, we’re gonna ski over to a restaurant on the mountain.” I was like, “Oh.”

Rosie: Listen, all my life, all my life.

Ashley: And when we skied into that restaurant, like *skied into* the restaurant.

Rosie: Skied *up to*.

Ashley: I was like, we have made it.

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Rosie: Listen, all my life I wanted that moment.

Ashley: We had made it.

Rosie: It was, anyway, so now, that is, if you wanna catch us for Christmas, we are in Whistler.

Aminatou: I love those two women so, so much.

Nneya: Pack your bags, it's me, Nneya, and I'm about to take you around the world. This week, I'm talking about New York, New York. Have you ever decided on a place to live because it was a hub? Hey, crazy reasons have been chosen. I'm a native New Yorker, and I love that there are international flights coming in and out of this city every day. So if you're in New York for an extended layover, on your way to Europe, the Caribbean, or South America, here are three things you should do. Have a delicious pizza by the slice, yep, they still exist. They're a bit more expensive than they used to be, but they're so good, so fresh, and still have that scorching hot cheese that burns the roof of your mouth because you can't wait. I'm talking about pizza by the slice, and not that sketchy dollar joint stuff that you see in midtown. Old-school Italian pizzerias. Now to find those, you'll have to venture into real New York neighborhoods. I'm quite torn: I'm a Brooklyn girl, and my two favorites are Sal's Pizzeria in Cobble Hill, and Rosco's in Crown Heights. Check them both out and walk around the

neighborhoods while you're at it. Sign up for Citi Bike. Biking is a great and fast way to see New York City, and with Citi Bike stations all over, you never have to worry about parking. It will probably work out cheaper than Uber-ing around town, and you can save yourself a gym day. Because who really wants to do that when you're traveling? And if biking isn't really your thing, buy a MetroCard. Today I realized a friend in town from LA was buying a single ride each time he took the subway over the weekend. Buy the card; it's only a dollar, and each ride is \$2.75. Take a walk at dawn. Here's the secret: the city that never sleeps does slow down for a bit at that magic hour around 5am. It's starting to be light out but the sun hasn't risen. You might hear the purr of a street sweeper or see the occasional wanderer ending their night or commuters starting their day. But for the most part, the city feels like it's all yours.

Aminatou: That was Nneya Richards bringing you around the world. Natasha Nyanin is a storyteller and style icon. Like me, she grew up as a diplomat's daughter traveling the world.

Natasha: I grew up mostly with my mother in Ghana. My father and my stepmother, however, lived all over the world, so I would spend my summers and my Christmases and time off with them. So I got that fixed sense of home in Ghana growing up in my mother's household, but I also got to live in so

many different countries, and from that I got a transient sense of home, being in the Philippines and in Zambia and Zimbabwe and in the US actually, also.

Aminatou: Yeah, in what ways do you think that growing up between all these different countries made your childhood unique?

Natasha: At a young age, I was exposed to the culture of travel, I was exposed to different cultures, and I was exposed to the sense that home isn't necessarily the place that you spend the most time. It can be many different things at different points in your life.

Aminatou: Yeah. What's your definition of home?

Natasha: Oh, the definition of home. That's an interesting one. There's a quote from Gustave Flaubert, I believe, where he says something about a country just basically being lines drawn on a map, and that that's not his sense of home. His sense of home or his country is where he dreams. And I thought that was quite a poetic way of expressing something that I'd been grappling with. My definition of home is wherever I am in the moment where I feel connected to the place that I am. Whether it's for two hours or it's for, you know, 12 years, like I lived in Atlanta. It's a very fluid and transient definition but, essentially, it's just wherever I feel inspired.

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Aminatou: What's the experience of, like, being a Black woman that's not African American and living in the United States?

Natasha: One of the conversations that sort of come up with some of my African American friends, especially female friends is, there's a certain level of oblivion with which a Black woman who's not African American walks around the place and is not aware of ways in which one is discriminated against, or you know that sort of thing, because you don't come from a culture where you're a minority. Well, I come from Ghana, so I grew up as a majority.

Aminatou: Right, it's like everywhere we come from, everybody looks like us.

Natasha: Everybody looks like us. I remember one time, an African American friend came to Ghana with me, and she gasped when we were driving home, and she said, "All the people on the billboards are Black." And she was just so taken by that, it meant so much to her, and it was the first time that really sort of hit home for me, that I was in some respect lucky to have grown up in the way that I did.

Aminatou: How do you think that living all around the world has really informed your own sense of style?

Natasha: I think that one picks up different things from different places that they visit or that they've called home. Traveling all over certainly has made me

more interested in people, the importance of different art forms in different cultures, if you will. And in Ghana we joke that essentially you are allowed to follow three career paths: you can be a doctor, a lawyer, or an engineer. Or the fourth career path, which is a disgrace to your family.

Aminatou: Ah, then I am following the fourth career path.

Natasha: Oh, and so am I. I say all the time that I exist as a disgrace to my family. But I think that as much as the arts were a part of my upbringing, it was never a consideration that I could do anything with the arts as a career until maybe two or three years ago. I was working as a scientist at the CDC, so I think that living in Ghana probably limited my cultural outlook in that way and then moving to the US sort of expanded my horizons, career-wise.

Aminatou: That's amazing. Do you feel kind of like a chameleon adapting to new locations, or do you make your surroundings adapt more to you?

Natasha: There's a certain aspect of me that's unchanging. For instance, if I go somewhere where I should be wearing flats, I will probably still be wearing heels, so in that way my surroundings will have to adapt to me. But in general I think it's important when one travels and one is visiting new areas to be open to adapting, not just to the place but to the situation that one finds themselves in. I have a great story from Peru. I went to Peru on

my own; I speak not a word of Spanish. It was my first time in South America, and I was quite scared because I didn't know how that was going to turn out. But I was walking up to Maras, which is these ancient salt mines, and started to get a serious bout of vertigo. So I turn around and I ran into a man who was on a motorcycle and, for whatever reason, he struck up a conversation with me in broken Spanish, broken English, and I told him where I was trying to go but that I couldn't walk up the hill. And I'd never ridden a motorcycle before, and he said, "Well, why don't you hop on? I'll be your taxi." So I get behind this guy with no helmet, just completely—this is one of the things about traveling, you become somebody that you're not necessarily at home. I recklessly get behind this guy, and we drive through the foothills of the Andes all the way up to these salt mines. And it was the most beautiful experience that I could not have choreographed. And that required me to adapt to that situation. It was a big lesson for me. So I think a little bit of both, to answer your question.

Aminatou: That's great. You know, is there anything that you can't travel without?

Natasha: Oh, my goodness, lots and lots of luggage.

Aminatou: Really? Are you one of those people that you have, like, so much luggage?

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Natasha: Oh, I am, I am totally one of those people. I have so much luggage, and I never want to pay for excess luggage.

Aminatou: I mean that's like African woman DNA, right? It's like watching our moms unpack our bags like at the airport and rearrange everything.

Natasha: Total African woman DNA, but I travel with, besides the luggage, I think, it's probably my books and usually a book of poetry. I have a book with me right now actually, and I have a book called *The Art of Travel* by Alain de Botton that goes with me everywhere, and it's weathered, and it's been absorbed and read and re-read.

Aminatou: I have that book on my nightstand. I've had it for five years through like maybe six different apartments, and I still haven't read it.

Natasha: Have you really not? You absolutely should. It's really quite a fantastic book. It really is.

Aminatou: Okay. Natasha, you are a delight. Where can people find your work?

Natasha: You can find my work at my website; it's NatashaNyanin.com. My blog is the *Ecstatic Flash*, and you can also find me on YouTube, *The Ecstatic Flash Show*. And I'm working on a podcast that will hopefully be coming out very soon; it's called *Get Up, Get Dressed, Get Naked*.

Aminatou: Yes!

Natasha: Yes. Exciting stuff.

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Aminatou: Thank you so much, Natasha, it was such a pleasure to talk to you. I hope you have a wonderful day.

Natasha: Delightful talking to you; you do the same.

Aminatou: Let's bring it on home, team. All right, that's our show for today. Thanks so much for listening to *On She Goes*, the podcast. Don't forget to check out onshegoes.com for more travel stories, tips, and inspiration. I'm your host, Aminatou Sow. *On She Goes* is produced by me and Bari Finkel for Pineapple Street Media in partnership with Serita Wesley, Lizzy Harris, and Natalie Huizenga for Wieden+Kennedy Publishing. Special thanks to Jenna Weiss-Berman, Max Linsky, Emily Becker, Lindsey Mavis, Sarah Fink, Marmoset, and APM. Bye, y'all.

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