



The Athena Wellness Podcast
Episode 141 – How to Become a Professional Traveler with Heather Markel
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[00:00:05] Kathy Robinson: Welcome to the Athena Wellness Podcast, the show that invites you to take a seat around the community fire and listen to stories that inspire. I'm your host, Kathy Robinson, author, coach and founder of Athena Wellness, a company that's dedicated to supporting you on your journey to live more wholeheartedly.

[00:00:30] Kathy: Hello and welcome. Thanks so much for joining me.

Have you ever dreamed of putting a few belongings in a carry-on bag and hitting the road to travel the world, leaving your 20-plus-year corporate career behind? Today's guest did just that in 2017. And today she's a professional traveler.

I'm joined today by Heather Markel, who shares her experience of living a nomadic life after age 40, and what it's like to travel solo, relying on her inner knowing and the kindness of those she meets along the way.

Here's what we cover:

- The benefits and challenges of the nomadic lifestyle;
- The impact the Great Resignation has had on full-time traveling;
- How to stay well on the road;



- How traveling changes our spirit and enhances our connection with others; and
- Powerful lessons learned along the way.

We end this episode with our Dose of Inspiration segment where Heather shares some of the things that are lighting her up these days. And as always, I'll put links to those items and Heather's website, where you can learn more about full-time travel.

And now onto the show. I hope you enjoy the conversation.

[00:01:53] Kathy: Heather, welcome to The Athena Wellness Podcast. Thank you so much for joining me today.

[00:01:58] Heather Markel: Thank you for having me. I've been looking forward to this.

[00:02:01] Kathy: Wonderful. So please, share a bit about who you are and what you do.

[00:02:05] Heather: Nowadays, I am a-- I call myself a professional world traveler and a full-time travel coach, as well as a speaker and an international bestselling author, as of recently.

[00:02:17] Kathy: All right. Tell me, what brought you to do the work that you do today?



[00:02:22] Heather: Well, [chuckles] I started out in corporate America and I spent over 25 years there in telecommunications doing sales and marketing and customer service. I knew for a long time I didn't belong there but had no idea where to go because I didn't see other jobs that excited me.

The thing that I love most in the world, which was, of course, traveling and meeting other people, you didn't do that as a job. So [laughs] I spent a long time struggling with what I wanted to do and what I should do, and ultimately realized I can't fathom another 20 or so years waiting for retirement.

Ultimately, I felt a pain in my chest, that became the catalyst for me to decide to choose myself and go for it.

[00:03:20] Kathy: A pain in the chest can bring you moments of clarity, right?

[00:03:23] Heather: Yes, it can. If you don't deal with it in the moment, as fast as you can, it can become worse, so I decided not to do that to myself.

[00:03:31] Kathy: You have probably the coolest title on LinkedIn. When I look at your profile, it says Professional Traveler. I love that.

[00:03:38] Heather: Yes.

[00:03:39] Kathy: I'm curious, you said you were in the corporate world for 25 years. How did that experience help with the transition to being a full-time professional traveler?



[00:03:50] Heather: I don't know that it helped apart-- Well, I'll tell you what, the big thing it did was allowed me to save up [laughs] a lot of money to be able to do what I'm doing. I will say I'm very thankful for-- I think it's a combination of having a work opportunity that gave me the funding, but also--

That comes with diligence on my part because I could have also chosen to just throw it all away and drown myself, as we do I think in-- When you get unhappy, at least in America I've found, we drown our depression in shopping and eating out and doing expensive things to make ourselves feel better. I'm thankful that I didn't just throw out all my money doing that, only some of it. [laughs]

I guess at the end of the day, I also developed skill sets that, now that remote work is an acceptable thing. I have a skill set in many different areas that I think can lend itself greatly to changing what I do at any time and doing what I do as well.

[00:05:00] Kathy: I think I found that as well. I was surprised at how much of the skills that I used in my day-to-day that I use now in my new life. They were much more transferable than I had anticipated, which is wonderful. It's great. That you can see it's more of this arc of a life rather than these two separate things. There's some continuity there.

How long ago did you leave the corporate world? What year was that?

[00:05:26] Heather: I quit in 2017.

[00:05:28] Kathy: 2017. So that was before what we're dubbing now as the Great Resignation. You were ahead of your time.



[00:05:34] Heather: Yes.

[00:05:35] Kathy: I'm curious, do you see an influx of travelers on the road as a result of the Great Resignation?

[00:05:43] Heather: I am chuckling so much because I had the hardest time quitting. Pre-Great Resignation, I, along with many others, thought I was crazy.

I had dinner recently with two friends, a couple months ago, we've had two dinners in the past few months. The first dinner, one of them announced he was quitting and last week the other one announced he was quitting. And I'm like, "Oh my God." [laughs]

I just found out a friend I met in New Zealand just quit. It's just like everybody is quitting. In fact, she actually, the friend in New Zealand, has quit and is now going to be traveling and figuring out her next steps. There's absolutely a huge influx.

I have a Facebook group as well with almost 4,000 people in it and there are definitely more and more people that are part of the Great Resignation that are going over to travel as their way to seek out their next steps.

[00:06:34] Kathy: Do you think it's because it's more acceptable now? To your point, in 2017 when you were leaving, you weren't-- It's not like you were 22 and you tried it for a year, you said, "You know what? I'm going to go backpacking across Europe." This was a big adult decision. Do you think that part of the reason now is that there's more acceptance of decisions like this?



[00:07:00] Heather: Yeah, I do. I think when I went out, and this is to me is a viewpoint that might be shifting now. We looked at quitting your job to travel as something millennials did and Instagram influencers. I certainly did. When I looked around at, "Who could help me and be a guide? I want someone to hold my hand into this lifestyle," and I didn't have anyone because I didn't see me. I saw younger people. Everybody was like, "You can't do this now. You're too old." I'm like, "What?" [laughs]

Yes, it is more acceptable. What I love, too, is now, first off, that I can be the guide for the people wanting to start this lifestyle. But I'm also seeing a lot more people over 40 that are doing this. It's really reassuring because it is something and we've paved the way for people to actually find more meaning, purpose and fulfillment in their life and do something.

It's no longer so crazy to use travel to do that. Travel is a beautiful way to do it. Yes, I absolutely think that it's gotten more easy and more permissible, and that is a great part of why it's happening.

[00:08:12] Kathy: I love that you saw the opportunity in trying to solve your own problem. You didn't see somebody like you out there, so you decided to be that person, which is very entrepreneurial. I love when I hear stories like that.

But you did mention you were over 40 when you started this. I'm curious, how did the real day-to-day match up to what you hoped it would be? If you can talk about some of the benefits and the challenges that maybe you anticipated or maybe didn't.



[00:08:44] Heather: Yeah, so, I went into it like anyone else. You come out of corporate, you're used to one and two-week vacations, and now, all of a sudden-- When I first stepped out, I had to come back for jury duty six weeks after I left. I had this six-week block to travel, which I thought was eternity. Naturally, I decided two weeks in Costa Rica, followed by two weeks in Peru, followed by two weeks in Argentina, and that would do.

[00:09:10] Kathy: [laughs] Naturally.

[00:09:12] Heather: Yes. Then I was like, "Oh, but I kinda like it in Costa Rica. Why am I going to just run off?" That was the first decision of like, "Oh, I can actually stay in a place longer. Oh, that's cool. That's different."

I think there's an important moment for new travelers. Two weeks in, you realized, "This isn't a vacation." I certainly went into it, "Everything is new. Everything is wonderful. How cool. I'm discovering, exploring." Then I hit this wall myself.

The Universe conspired perfectly because I had gone into-- I chose Costa Rica as my first place and before I knew what happened, I had pre-booked the first two weeks, all the travel, all the tours, all the places to stay.

I thankfully stopped myself thinking, "Whoa, I was supposed to try this thing called 'go with the flow travel' and I've ruined that, so stop." My very last night of pre-planned travel, I ended up in Corcovado National Park sleeping in a tent, which sounds really glamorous but I shared it with some giant cockroaches that I just, "Look, if you stay out of my way, I won't kill you."



[laughter]

[00:10:40] Heather: So, I was trying. I've met this lovely couple on one of my pre-planned bus rides and they were staying in another town. I was trying to meet them and I just couldn't figure out how to meet these people without a dangerous overnight bus ride or paying lots of money to fly there.

And I just broke down. I'm like, "If I can't figure out how to meet these two people, I'm obviously not cut out for full-time travel." I sat down. I was like, "I think maybe I should pack it in, go back to New York, ask for my job back and just know that I tried."

So I had this pity party. And at some point, this other voice came in my head and was like, "Heather, instead of trying to choose your destination and get there, why don't you see where you can get and go there?" And I was like, "Huh, that's very wise."

But by looking at just what was right around me that I could get to, boom, problem solved. I just gave up on going with the destination I planned and I let the destination appear. That changed everything for me and opened up full-time travel.

From then on, I was like, "I'm in." [laughs] Because it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter where I go. Maybe I was planning to go left and I went right. Who cares? It was a different experience.



[00:12:13] Kathy: Mmmhmm, wow. That is a great, great question. I was going to ask you when you hit your groove but it did happen fairly early on even though it was at a point where I'm sure if you could have chosen that experience you wouldn't have, but it gave you quite a bit of insight. To your point, you actually heard your own wisdom come through which I love.

[00:12:34] Heather: Yeah, that's been amazing to actually have the-- You asked about some of the benefits and disadvantages of travel.

One of the benefits is living in the present moment because I think we spend so much of our life, especially working, pulled in so many directions, there's no present. Being in that present moment is where all these beautiful epiphanies lie, and your own wisdom, and that voice of everything that you need. Yeah, that's one of the greatest advantages. Yes, it's beautiful

And there are disadvantages like you do have to pack and unpack an awful lot. You have to plan. As much as you don't have to pre-plan the whole thing, you do need to figure out when you're done in one place, where are you going next? How are you getting there? How much does it cost? I do spend a fair amount of time figuring out where the least expensive place to stay is or is there a house sit. That kind of stuff can grate on you after a while.

[00:13:38] Kathy: You've said that this isn't a life for those who are running away. It's for those who are running towards something.

[00:13:45] Heather: Yes.



[00:13:45] Kathy: Can you share a bit more about that?

[00:13:48] Heather: In my experience, you've heard the expression something like "You take yourself with you wherever you go," or something.

Let's say that you're someone that really doesn't like your boss and your colleagues are terrible, you have this whole situation going on around you, you're falling out with your best friend, and you think, "Oh, my God. I just want to get away from all this drama. I'll just go full-time travel."

What will happen, inevitably, is you'll recreate those same relationships with other people. You won't mean to but you will because the thing about full-time travel is if you're just running, you're going to keep running.

I found the first year really tough. I do feel that full-time travel is the ultimate adult vision quest. I am someone that as a certified coach and someone that has invested in lots of therapy and self-development work that I did the tough work of when I encountered the parts of myself I didn't like, I knew there were two paths. One path was, "Can I accept this about myself and just accept this?" I can see this as a limitation or whatever but this is it. I'm 5 foot 2. I'm not going to be 5 foot 5. I'm going to have to find a way to live with that.

If it was something that I didn't like, for example, I realized that I had a self-respect issue at the beginning of my travels and that was really tough. And I was not willing to accept that about myself. So that meant I had to go look at why.



It starts out as "Why do I keep attracting the *same damn person or a situation?*" Then it becomes "Why *do I* keep attracting that situation and person?" Then it becomes "What *am I doing* that's attracting this to me and what do I need to shift to have a different outcome?"

And so you need to go through all that and be brave enough to ask yourself those questions if you want to actually change anything because running isn't going to.

[00:15:57] Kathy: That's beautiful, Heather, that was very well said. Thank you. Thank you for sharing that.

I'm curious what a day in the life is like for you. I'm sure it's different, those outer experiences change. It feels there's a delicate balance between logistics, which can take a long time. It's just very practical things that you have to do with this balance of allowing the experiences to unfold. How do you manage that?

[00:16:25] Heather: Yeah, I feel like no two days are exactly the same. Look, if I have a deadline for an article I'm writing or I have a client meeting, then those days might be similar. I'm looking for, "Where's the Wi-Fi? Where am I going to get the work done?" Ideally, it's outdoors somewhere and enjoying other people's company somehow.

Otherwise, I like to just go outside and feel into the experience because I think allowing my heart to take the lead is an important part of my experience. So I kinda try to just breathe in and be like, "What do I feel like doing today?"



Or if I'm in a place that maybe has an activity, like a cooking class, like Thailand. I was in Chiang Mai and I'm like, "Of course, I'm actually taking a cooking class." So I did that. Or if there's an activity that I know I want to do, then I might figure out, "How do I do that activity?"

Otherwise, I like just seeing what happens. It might be nothing. It might be going for a walk and absolutely nothing happens. Sitting in a cafe and just watching people go by. It might be meeting a local and discovering some wonderful new location that I would never have found or heard about without them.

I've just been amazed because I'm not a planner anymore. I don't go and rigorously read the guidebooks about where to go and how to do this. I just kinda arrive.

I remember when I was in Thailand, I went to this tiny town south of Bangkok. I took a bus. Finding the right bus when you don't speak Thai, it was quite an adventure. It was called Prachuap Khiri Khan. When I arrived, the bus stop was in front of a grocery store. There wasn't even a bus stop. It was dark and it was pouring rain.

It was myself and one other woman who got off the bus. She looks at me and she hands me her umbrella. I had one so it was good. And then she looks at me and she clearly doesn't speak any English. I don't speak Thai. She points to me. She puts her head against her hands like, "Are you trying to find a place to sleep?" I said, "Yes." She pointed me to somewhere.



So you don't even need language skill a lot of the time. I've found people in every country to be so beautiful and wonderfully helpful. Somehow, I find my way to places to stay and people that can show me around. It's just been beautiful. That's been part of my experience day to day.

[00:19:17] Kathy: That's incredible trust in the Universe to provide. That is an amazing story.

Tell me a little bit about how you support yourself on the road. You said something about coaching. You said something about writing. What is your business model?

[00:19:31] Heather: So it takes so much less money to travel full-time, especially than living full-time in New York, for example.

Part of it is a savings strategy. I think it's important to consider money that you have as part of the process. And then money that you make. Yeah, I do travel writing. I have an ongoing gig with a specific travel company. I'm constantly writing for them. It's called TravelAwaits.

And then I do my coaching. I do a blend of the full-time travel coaching and business coaching. I also do odd jobs here and there. I'm willing to say yes. So if I can roll my sleeves up and get paid for it. And payment, by the way, can look like income and it can also look like trading in kind.

So for example, when I was marooned in New Zealand for a couple of years, I stayed in one location for almost a year. They gave me lower rent in exchange for



me doing some work for them. Sometimes payment looks like savings instead of money in your wallet.

[00:20:41] Kathy: You said something interesting before about the beautiful people that you meet around the world. I think it's worth a moment just to dive into that a little bit.

So I'm curious to know, how does a woman from New York get treated around the world as she travels on her own?

[00:21:03] Heather: I've been treated wonderfully. And I do believe in karma. I've made an effort to be kind and I think when you're kind you'll often be treated with kindness.

In the city, I used to be a Big Apple Greeter. So I would volunteer and take people from other countries around New York for free and they would discover parts of it that they might not have otherwise. So I do feel I'm very sensitive, too. When I see someone with a map that looks lost in New York City, I always try to help them. So I try to create the karma that will allow me to have good experiences elsewhere.

Also, I find it interesting that travel is the thing that breaks down walls and barriers because when you travel, you see that people live differently. Let me tell you, I've been in places where people are a lot less wealthy than we are and they live-- they're probably happier. I'm like, "Wow." You see that you don't have to be wealthy to be happy.



And I find it intriguing that the pandemic, what has it cut off? It cut off travel, it cut off our comfort level with exploring and being around other people. And so what I'm really relieved about is that more and more people are now getting out there and starting to travel again, so that we can get back to hopefully remembering that we are at the end of the day human beings on this planet trying to survive and we can help each other do that.

[00:22:38] Kathy: Yeah. I'm curious, how do you stay well on the road? It's hard enough when you're in one location to try to get your exercise and eat well, how do you manage that?

[00:22:52] Heather: Well, pandemic aside, because let me say staying indoors did not do anything good for my waistline, but I do a lot of walking. One thing that's magical about travel is I think just because I personally just love exploring new places. When I'm home or "home" or in a place I know, I feel it's this giant effort to get 10,000 steps logged in a day. I'm constantly looking at my watch, "Did I do it yet? Oh my God!" When I travel, I'm like, "How did I get 25,000?!"

[laughter]

[00:23:25] Heather: So walking becomes a big thing. I used to go to the gym a lot, I used to do a lot of sports, which on the road is harder because I don't have the time to join a gym and all that.

But the other thing, there's wellness in terms of fitness and then there's wellness in terms of staying well. What I love and I've mostly loved is just learning about the



infinite wisdom of nature as I've traveled. And how nature can keep us healthy in so many ways, just like there's the maintenance. But then when I was in South America and I got altitude sickness, it's amazing how each country has its own herbal remedies and you meet little ladies that tell you about this herb. Then the pharmacist tells you about this.

Though I had Western medicine with-- I do carry some generic Western medicine with me just in case, but I love learning about what local people do and trying that. It takes longer but I used all local remedies for altitude sickness and avoided taking whatever that Western medicine is that you have no altitude sickness at all if you take it but it has other weird side effects.

So I think it's a combination of just figuring out, just making sure you're out there walking a lot and also just knowing that nature has your back.

[00:24:51] Kathy: Cocoa leaf tea worked for me when I was in Peru. I didn't have any Western medicine and boy, that can really do a number on you.

[00:25:00] Heather: Yes, absolutely.

[00:25:02] Kathy: I'm curious how nomadic living has changed you in mind, body, and spirit. How are you different today than you were in 2017?

[00:25:14] Heather: So I feel my life pre-nomadic living, the goal was money. I had to make as much of it as possible. I never had enough of it.



Then, it's funny. Since I started traveling, I remember this moment where everything's around money. And then, now, my life revolves more around experiences. And I feel much more tuned into myself and connected to myself and the Universe and all that.

I remember coming home, this was about six months into my travels. And I still had my apartment at that time. And I needed to do some errands. And I was done with my errands. It was evening coming on early, late afternoon.

And I'm like, "I don't feel like going to the park. I don't have any more errands that I want to do." I looked around and I'm like, "Oh my God. All there is to do is go shopping but I don't want anything. So was my whole life about shopping?"

Then I'm like, I guess I'll go home. Then, of course, I watched more television and I suddenly realized I craved potato chips, which I never did on my travels. I'm like, "Oh my God," learning how subliminally I've been manipulated to do certain things in comparison to now shutting off the television, seeing the world, being in the world.

I find in America, it's a lot easier to spend time on your phone and your computer all the time. That's again, back to presence. I felt like I was constantly connected to technology. And now I feel more connected to myself. I try to make more of an effort not to be on my phone all the time and connect with people and the eye contact with my eyes to other people's eyes.



So yeah, I think there's just been a lot of growth in terms of being more altruistic, being more compassionate, understanding and just realizing who I am. And that who I am is not-- that whatever person I was in corporate, that was another version of myself that, okay, but it's just not the version that I feel has peace and harmony and can bring more goodness to the world. Um, goodness is not a word but anyway. Just make the world a better place. So I think I'm more tied into that since I've become nomadic.

[00:28:01] Kathy: What's on your horizon? What are you looking forward to? Where are places that you're really looking forward to visiting that you haven't been to yet?

[00:28:10] Heather: The next trip is Europe. This trip I'm visiting some friends and a host family that I haven't seen in years because of the pandemic. What's really cool is everyone I know is going to Europe this summer. There's a really good likelihood that I'll meet up with various people all around Europe, which is really fun, including a couple I met in New Zealand, Americans that got stranded there, too.

So my plan right at the moment is Europe, possibly visiting a friend in Reunion Island. Then next year, I would like to get back to Africa and South America again and see some other places that I didn't.

[00:28:54] Kathy: Wonderful, lovely. Heather, we wrap up these episodes with something we call a Dose of Inspiration, just a quick Q&A for our listeners to get to



know you a little bit. I'm always curious of what our guests have either read or listened to lately that they've really enjoyed.

[00:29:10] Heather: Funnily enough, when I read a lot of the time and at the moment, because I've been back in the US longer than expected and reading becomes my way to disconnect. So I like to read fantasy things. I'm actually reading the latest *Outlander* series. Then I read-- there's this series by Adele Abbott, which is a private investigator who's a witch and it's just completely silly. It's such a great way to just not take it too seriously.

[00:29:40] Kathy: A little escapism.

[00:29:41] Heather: Escapism. The third series actually I've really enjoyed lately is *Godwinks*. There's a few different *Godwinks* books, which talk about coincidence in your life and also in love and all that stuff. So that's very interesting.

[00:29:54] Kathy: Is that nonfiction?

[00:29:56] Heather: *Godwinks* is. I guess it would be more nonfiction. It's actually real-life stories that the author interviewed different people on the "coincidences," because we know those don't really exist, that brought them to opportunities and meeting the love of their life and things like that. So, it's really interesting.

[00:30:15] Kathy: What has been one of your favorite synchronicities or coincidences since you've been on the road?



[00:30:21] Heather: There have been many. One that is just, I don't know how this happened. When I was in New Zealand and I had to make a pivotal decision, the pandemic was declared, New Zealand was locking down and I had to choose whether to be locked in and unable to leave or go back to New York where it was the epicenter of COVID at the time.

Once I chose to stay, I had no idea where I would live and I was kind of panicked. So I went for a walk to clear my head and I found myself in a beautiful sculpture, garden, nature walk kind of place. There was an introduction to the garden at the gate, which I read and there was a man's picture on it.

I went into the garden and I'm walking around and I see the man whose picture I had just seen walking around in real life. So said, "Wow, didn't I just see your picture? His very first words to me were, "You did. Are you by chance looking for a place to stay?"

I have no idea how that happened [chuckles] and that's how I ended up living there for almost a year.

[00:31:31] Kathy: Wow. That's a wonderful story. I love it. Last question is what has you feeling optimistic about the future?

[00:31:40] Heather: Well, that people are getting back on the road and traveling, it's just really inspiring and that the Great Resignation frankly, that I'm really looking forward to what new way we will approach work and wellness and with a much bigger focus on wellness and being human in the process of working.



[00:32:00] Kathy: I'm looking forward to that as well. Of course, our listeners are going to want to get in touch. What's the best way for them to find you while you're out on the road?

[00:32:11] Heather: Sure, the best way is just come to my website, which is heatherbegins.com. From there there's contact form, there's my Facebook group link and all kinds of things and all my socials, so feel free to reach out.

[00:32:25] Kathy: Wonderful. Such a lovely conversation. Thank you so much for joining me, Heather. I really appreciate you being here today.

[00:32:31] Heather: Thanks for having me. It was wonderful to be here.

[00:32:37] Kathy: Thank you so much for joining me today. I know there are many ways you can spend your time. Thank you for choosing to spend it with me. Until our paths cross again, be kind to yourself and show your Warrior Spirit some love.

If you know anyone who could benefit from today's episode, please pass it on. And many thanks for supporting the show by subscribing and leaving a review. It means a lot and it helps others find their way to our circle.

If you'd like to access the show notes, have a question you'd like addressed on a future episode, or would like a transcript of this episode, visit www.AthenaWellness.com/podcast.

Until next time, be well! [music]

[00:33:40] [END OF AUDIO]