



How Travel Empowered Nikki Vargas to Bring Her Life Into Alignment

A senior editor for Fodor's Travel and the author of the travel memoir, *Call You When I Land*, shares how globe-trotting saved her from committing to a life she knew was not for her, along with her hard-earned insights on learning from failure, and planning trips that foster introspection and growth.

Alicia Menendez: If travel can help you figure out who you are and what you want, then it has done that for Nikki Vargas in spades. In her new memoir, *Call You When I Land*, Nikki shares how her outward journeying, both as a young woman barreling toward a marriage she knew she was not meant to be in, and later, as an ambitious magazine editor whose publication soared, and crashed and burned, all brought her inward journey into focus. In the first part of this conversation, Nikki and I talk about what she has learned from failure, and why short-term shame is a small price to pay for bringing your life into alignment. And in the second part, Nikki puts on her senior travel editor hat and shares her insights on planning trips that help you answer life's most pressing questions.

Nikki, thank you so much for doing this.

Nikki Vargas: Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited to be on.

Menendez: Nikki, take me back to where you are in your life when you come to find travel as a way of revealing things to you about yourself.

Vargas: It was in my early 20s, I was on the brink of getting married to a lovely person, but just not the right person for me. I had taken a job that was a good job, but again, not the right job for me, and I just was going down a path that didn't look like me, and it didn't feel like me, but rather than kind of have the wherewithal to realize that and stand up, and sort of make a change, I had used travel at that moment in time to run away from everything. Every chance I could get, I was running away. Running away from my fiancé, running away from my life in New York, running away from my job, just running away from the person that I had actively chosen to be at that time. I went on a solo travel trip to Argentina, and it was a week before I was supposed to walk down the aisle and get married, and-

Menendez: Which was a tell already.

Vargas: It was a tell. I will say, people thought I was having a mental breakdown. Family was like, "Oh my God, she's running away." And I was, I was running away. It was the final running away. And so I ran away to Buenos Aires, and while I was there on a whim, I went to Iguazú National Park, and while I was there, it was the first time that I had stopped running for myself. I was completely alone, in this jungle, quite literally, and audibly talking to myself. Which is very funny now, because I was there this past August, and it is such a crowded park. So the idea that I was

roaming through this park, talking to myself about marriage, and love, and life is just very funny now to think of it.

But it was the first time that I allowed travel to not be a tool for running away from myself, but to be way to find myself in the context of this beautiful location. And I made the decision on that trip to call off my wedding, and to flip my life upside down. And that irrevocably redefined who I became as a woman, and the career that I had.

Menendez: I don't know that I've ever been invited to a wedding that was ultimately canceled, but you do such a beautiful job of detailing the levels of discomfort and shame that come with walking away from that decision, and needing to own that you have inconvenienced other people, that you have had people spend money that they will never get back, that people feel as though they are owed explanations, and that all of that pain and discomfort, and my hands are sweating just thinking about it for you, is not worth selling yourself out for.

Vargas: Yeah.

Menendez: The easier thing to do arguably would've been to just have gotten married, and then dealt with it on the other side.

Vargas: Yeah, I was asked that a lot.

Menendez: I think there are a lot of people who do that.

Vargas: Yeah. I will say, I was asked in the aftermath, "Why didn't you just walk down the aisle? Just do it, and divorce a month later." And at the time, and I don't regret that I didn't walk down the aisle, even now, I'm glad I didn't. When I wrote that chapter in my book, it was so difficult and also cathartic, because people knew, of course, that I had called off the wedding, but it was so brushed under the rug, and it was really the first time that I detailed what happens after you make that decision. And not just, to your point, the finances, and the inconvenience, but also what happens on an emotional level with yourself, where you punish yourself, and you feel like you're not allowed to grieve, because you are essentially the one that caused all this mess. And so it was very cathartic for me to go back and hash out some of those feelings in a way that I think I haven't done, even in the past however many years it's been, like 10.

Menendez: In some way the personal piece of this wraps up more neatly than the professional piece of this.

Vargas: Yeah, it's funny you say that, 'cause even writing it, I was like, "That is such a neat storyline." And then the professional one is something that I feel like I'm still in. So there was just no way to tie that up in a nice little bow the way that... I had had years to reflect on calling off that wedding.

Menendez: There's an alternate version of your life where you go on that trip, travel is life changing, you come back, and you begin writing professionally about travel, and it's a very straight line. It's not-

Vargas: Yeah.

Menendez: In part because this is one of the most competitive, and simultaneously dwindling fields that there is-

Vargas: Yeah.

Menendez: In the process of trying to figure it out. Because originally you end up in fashion PR, even though you don't like fashion, and you don't like PR, what a mess. You learn about media buying, which I actually think is sort of a helpful thing to know about, to understand, the way that targeted ads and such end up on your Instagram. And then there is some blogging, but there's always this nagging feeling that what you really want to be doing is creating something of your own.

Vargas: Yeah.

Menendez: Take me back to the moment where you realized that is actually a possibility.

Vargas: To your point, I was stumbling through careers very much the way that I had been stumbling in my life through love. There was a moment in time where I had finally, finally, finally broken into the world of travel writing and editing. I got my first on-staff job, and I am just one of those insufferable people that's skipping to the subway to go to work on a Monday 'cause I'm just so happy about this role. And I had this job for a few years, and then they did lay-offs, and I was laid off with a handful of editors from our team, and I was so devastated.

And I am unemployed at this time, and I'm interviewing here or there, and there's this moment where I'm interviewing for this startup out in Brooklyn, and while interviewing for the startup, I'm just basically tap dancing, fingers fanned out, telling this man everything I can do for him to make his dream a reality. And what I realized after that was, "What would it look like if I did that for myself?" So I started a publication called Unearth Women, and that was the epitome of everything that I've learned at that point, about myself, about my career. It took from every experience, including the ill-fated fashion PR, and the stint in media planning, everything, everything, everything that had shaped me up to that point, I poured into the concept of this women's travel publication that would aim to champion women, and unearth their stories globally.

Menendez: And again, this is where for our heroine, we're like, "Yes, it all makes sense now. It's all coming together." And for a while it just takes off. I mean, I love that you funded it through Kickstarter.

Vargas: Yeah.

Menendez: Feels like a simpler time. But just as quickly as it takes off, the money dries up.

Vargas: Yeah. Oh my gosh.

Menendez: And you don't really see a coming, which I think is the most interesting piece of this, that you feel like the rug is pulled out from under you. What is the lesson? What was the takeaway?

Vargas: Oh my God, I mean, that was... See, that's why that part of the story isn't as neatly tied up, because I feel like I'm still unpacking that in a lot of ways. But really, the takeaway was that I moved fast, and I was messy. And it came from this place of, "If I don't move fast enough, someone's going to beat me to it." In this case, there

was nothing like a mainstream, essentially a travel and leisure type magazine that focused specifically on the experience of moving through the world as a woman, and spotlighting women around the world doing interesting things, and shaping their countries and communities. Nothing like that existed at that time, and so there was such an urgency to just move, move, move, move, move before someone beats us to it, and to just run with the momentum. And I look back on that, and I wish that I had moved slower, and that to me is the biggest lesson.

Menendez: Tell me when you say you were messy.

Vargas: Yeah.

Menendez: What did that look like?

Vargas: Well, I think messy in the sense that I started that company, and took that role on as if I had joined an established company, and I was hired to be their editor. So I was focused, I'd like to think. My dad has this saying about a horse with blinders, that I was only looking straight ahead, and I wasn't looking around me 'cause I had blinders on. I was looking just at the editorial work, because that's what I wanted, and that is who I am. I'm a writer, I'm an editor, and that's what gives me joy. But as a result, I wasn't looking at the bigger picture. I wasn't looking at the finances, I wasn't looking at the marketing, the sales, everything else that is necessary to make a company successful. And in the end, when I look back on it, I wish that, not only had I looked at the bigger picture, but that I had also moved slower, and allowed myself to let things unfold.

Menendez: Just struck by the fact that you experience what I think a lot of people would call failures-

Vargas: Yeah.

Menendez: And you experience the shame that comes along with what is perceived as a failure, but you really do manage to keep it going.

Vargas: Yeah. Yeah, no, you're right.

Menendez: And I wonder what your council is. 'Cause it's a thing, we talk to a lot of people who have big wins, and there's a lot to learn from people's big wins. I would argue there's more to learn from the things that don't work out, and then incorporating those lessons into the next thing, whatever that may be.

Vargas: There was a lot of failure, between the wedding, between mistakes made with relationships and family, in career. I remember that when I sought out to first write, Call You When I Land, I read a quote, and the quote said, "An approximation of honesty won't cut it." And I held onto that while writing, because I knew that if I'm going to go on this journey to birth this book into the world, I have no interest in painting myself to be this flawless heroine. It's supposed to be messy. It's about failure, it's about growth, and what I have come to love and appreciate is that those failures got me where I needed to go. Something in all of those failures shaped me into the woman I am today, led me to the next thing. And I have learned to love them, I really have learned to love these failures. For as much pain, and drama, and shame as I felt at the time with them, I wouldn't undo any of them, because I don't think I would be the woman I am today.

Menendez: Let's talk a little bit about travel. I think a lot of us open our Instagram feeds, and this is now the season we're like, "How is everybody affording to go to Europe?"

Vargas: Yeah.

Menendez: What have you, being surrounded by people who love travel, and love to travel, learned about what it takes, provided you are not a trust fund baby, to make travel a part of your life?

Vargas: Yeah. I mean, what I have come to learn is that where there's a will, there is certainly a way. Outside of the stories that we put out into the world as travel editors and media, where we're constantly trying to arm our readers with ways to see the world on affordable tips, or destinations that might work for them, or moments in time that... Like off shoulder seasons that might be better to visit a certain place than at another time of the year. Ultimately, I find that it comes down to the travelers. So for example, what I came to appreciate as travel redefined itself post-pandemic was that during the pandemic, and subsequently afterwards, we saw that people began to redefine travel for them.

It wasn't suddenly a bucket list trip to a safari, and the Masai Mara, it could be something like a weekend getaway to the town right over from you. It could be a train ride to two cities away. It wasn't so much then about the big splashy high ticket item, it was about the act of moving out of your comfort zone, and allowing yourself to see someplace new, whether it's on the other side of the planet, or it's three hours away. And I love that that is where travel has gone, because it makes it more accessible, it makes it more inclusive, and it redefines the concept of traveling, which is travel is not about a five-star resort on Lake Como. It's about being in a new place, and discovering new ways of life, new cuisines, new cultures, and that doesn't have to be something that breaks the bank.

Menendez: Once you have figured out where it is you want to go, do you have a process you recommend for planning a trip?

Vargas: Do you know what's so funny? I have a little side story for you

Menendez: Yeah.

Vargas: A while back, I used this company that does a surprise trip. It's like one of those companies that you open the envelope at the airport, and you find out where you're going, and that's what it is, and I was doing it for a story. And what I learned is that I am terrible at surprises, and I love planning. So they sent you flight dates and airport, and then just weather. That's it. You don't know where you're going. And I was like, "How many United Airline flights are leaving LaGuardia at 7:55 in the morning?" And I narrowed it down to Denver, Colorado, and I happened to plan the whole trip before I got that envelope, which of course, I tore open right away, and it was Denver, Colorado.

So when I'm planning a personal trip, I am just a voracious reader. I'm reading all the stories, all the blogs, I'm asking friends, I'm reading everything, I'm watching everything about that destination to just try to absorb as much information about it, of what to do there, what to see, but also the culture, and what's going on there, what's the politics, just have a sense of where you're going. Then from there, I don't do itineraries per se, so much as I do just a list of like I wake up in the morning there, and I say, "What do I want to do today?" And I have a list of things

that I could do, that I know are awesome, that I already sort of researched and vetted, and that's very much my mode of travel.

Menendez: Nikki, for someone who is, as you have been in the past, using travel as a way of finding themselves, finding out who they are, what they want, perhaps someone who is going through a period of grief or loss and using travel as a way to process what has happened, how do you honor that in the course of a trip? How do you prepare mentally for that without putting expectations on the trip that you're going to somehow come back perfect and whole?

Vargas: Yeah, I mean, expectations certainly I think can get in the way of it. For my trip when I was in Argentina, I think the most important thing was that I was alone. I was completely alone. I allowed myself, without distraction, to confront myself. And I think that is what is key here, is that I found a moment in time where I could step away from family, friends, to-do lists, everything that I felt was clouding my vision back in New York, and I could just talk to myself, honestly.

I didn't go into it with expectations, and Lord knows, when I was in Buenos Aires, I continued to avoid myself. I didn't want to be alone with myself, I was hanging out with other travelers I had met at the hostel. I was drinking Malbec, and going to [inaudible 00:19:05]. I was having a ball, but I was not confronting myself. And then when I got to Iguazú, that's when I was like, "This is it. This is the moment of no return. If I don't talk to myself now, if I don't have this moment, this clandestine meeting with myself now, I'm walking down that aisle in a week." So if you're going to do it, just find time to be alone with yourself, whatever that may mean for you, and to really just confront the things that you may be running away from.

Menendez: Nikki, congratulations. Thank you so much for doing this.

Vargas: Thank you so much for having me on. I'm truly, truly honored to join the ranks of all the inspiring guests that you've had over the years.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua, and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer. Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you, email us at ola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram, or tweet us @latinatolatina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

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