

# The Just Word Podcast

## Transcript of Episode 5 – Money & Travel: The Ultimate Pairing

### Pat Bolland 0:19

Barry, you and I have a history I didn't know about before I contacted and reached out to you. And you used to work in television. Whatever got you from TV into financial planning, and especially into the travel aspect of it.

### Barry Choi 0:35

Ahhh, you know it's a lot of different things. You know, people have been reading the headlines recently, are probably well aware that Canadian media jobs are just like, non-existent anymore. So years ago, I was a director at a TV station. And they did a bunch of layoffs. And normally what happens when there's layoffs is people do more work for less pay, right. But in my case, as a show director, they canceled some of my shows, so I was actually doing less for the same pay. So in my particular case, I had a lot of downtime, a few of my coworkers had the same. So while my coworkers are going to the mall shopping, you know, watching sports, I was just really bored. And I just started reading about personal finance, I had some interest in it, I started reading more and more than I eventually started to decide blogging about it. And I was lucky enough to be able to transition from a media job into recommending personal finance full time.

### Pat Bolland 1:31

But you had an interesting spin on it. I mean, there's a lot of people that move into the personal finance and real estate, for instance, travel is something that's unique, I would say.

Yeah, so what's interesting about this is like, you know, I started a blog in 2014, so about seven years ago, and at the time, you know, there wasn't a lot of people talking about this kind of stuff. You know, Twitter was still relatively new. He was like, you know, even though it was like five years old. Social media, in general; blogs, there were a few that existed, some were good, some were bad. There weren't many books on finance, in general. So just getting from the financial space, there was some quote-unquote, competition, but not nearly as much as today. So what I'm getting at is I realized quickly that I need to do something different to kind of stand out. So why would people come to my site, as opposed to other people that have already been established? And I just happen to like to travel. And I happen to, at the time to spend as little money as possible on travel, so I started to blog about it. But full disclosure, I've quickly learned that spending as little money on travel as possible is actually not the best way to do things.

Oh, really? Oh, we'll discover that. But, you know, here we are at the, potentially, the tail end of a pandemic? And is it your sense, in the marketplace that people have a desire to travel? Or do you think they've thrown in the towel?

You know, I think there's plenty of people out there who are just itching to get on a plane, but they're just not willing to do so, until certain measures are taking place. The obvious thing being

a vaccination, not just for themselves, but for a lot of people around the world. For me personally, I'm not going to get on a plane to go international until the hotel quarantine in Canada ends. So would I fly domestic right now, probably no, but when I get a vaccination, I probably will. Right. So so I think a lot of people are ready to go, save that money. You know, a lot of other industries will say, oh, spend on a renovation instead, but for me personally, I went an entire year without traveling. And to me, all I did was to save that money. So when I am able to travel again, I may consider a more luxury experience or travel more if I can.

Yeah, I was wondering that because I have five kids and they love to travel, I would classify them as millennials. It will be the millennials that will that'll break free and finally go to something or will it be the boomers that start checking stuff off their bucket list?

Yeah, so there's two ways of looking at this. And I think you hit both demographics bang on. So let's talk about lot of boomers first. You know, I think for a lot of boomers, it was a scary thing, thinking that you know, this vaccination, or this covid 19 pandemic, it could kill you, it literally could, right. So a lot of people worried and now they start to realize that life is actually quite short. So when they're able to travel again, they are definitely going to check things off the bucket list. You know, my parents are in their mid 70s. They typically travel once or twice a year. And I'm pretty sure once they get their vaccines, they're gonna start traveling quite a bit. Again, just because who knows what's gonna happen. And the same thing with millennials. You know, for those who did not buy a giant house out in the suburbs, they've probably got money to spend, or maybe they've got employment now that allows them to work remotely. So so there's an opportunity for them to leave Canada to just see other things even if it's two week break. They're gonna take it.

Yeah, good point. And your point about the housing is interesting, because, you know, you look at cottage country, and the prices have exploded, people want to get out of the city. So I worry about travel getting booked up, if you will. And should people, even though we're still probably months away from free travel? Should they start planning now, for instance? And before they're, you know, locked out, if you will?

### **Barry Choi 5:28**

Yeah, I think it depends on your priorities. I think it's a good time to book travel right now, just because prices are so low. You know, for me, you know, I kind of look at the guidelines that the government are giving, right now, the assumption is everyone will be vaccinated by September, who knows that that will actually happen. But, you know, I'm booking a trip for, you know, the end of this year or early 2022. I can take advantage of any savings that I'm seeing, but only doing so if there's a generous cancellation policy. But at the same time, if there's a good enough discount, I don't want to tie up my money. A good example is this: Marriott bought what Marriott Hotels, you know, last year, they had a promotion 15% off gift cards, right? Doesn't sound like a lot. But to me, I'm like, I know, I will use these gift cards eventually. And the thought that Marriott International going bankrupt, highly unlikely. So I'm going to take this discount now. And then I'll use it eventually. So there's a lot of opportunities for people out there, or even things like group tour operators, right, a lot of group top tour operators, or even cruises, maybe cruises is not

something you want to book right now. But you know, I've seen discounts 25%, up to 40% off, and they allow you to change your dates. So again, it's one of those situations like, Listen, you might as well book now, yeah, you're gonna tie up your money, but you're guaranteed a discount. Is it worth it? Probably. But not everyone wants to tap 1000s of dollars. Right?

**Pat Bolland 6:51**

Yeah, very good point. Destinations, do get a feel of where people might want to go. Or, you know, it's one thing to fly from Toronto to Vancouver and Vancouver is a lovely city, it's another thing to go to Africa.

You know, I think it's a personal feel here. So there's so many different ways of looking at things that, you know, as a frequent traveler, I've been paying a lot of attention to what's been going on around the world. I cancelled five trips, due to the pandemic. But what I'm getting at here is, I see some destinations that really aren't taking COVID-19 seriously, you know, some places have already said, Hey, you don't need to wear a mask anymore, or whatever. And honestly, I'm not that interested in going to those destinations. I think Canadians will be very interested in say in the Caribbean, coming up. Number one, because they had relatively low COVID numbers to begin with. And a lot of the countries in the Caribbean, they're really vigilant about how they're treating COVID-19. The screening process, quarantine, ... it's safe to admit that they've done a much better job in Canada, they cut their numbers down, they've got a plan, they've already said, if you've got a vaccination, you do not need to quarantine. So to me, they really know, they really got the situation under control. So for me, as a traveler, if I'm going to go somewhere, I want to go to a destination who seems to know what they're doing. Right. But like you said, you know, sitting on a beach is a little different from going on a safari in Africa. But in the end, it comes down to comfort zones. Where are the countries that have taken really positive steps to control the virus? And more importantly, what countries are actually going to be open to the public. You know, Australia has already said they may not open to the public this year at all. A lot of countries in Asia have basically said nothing. They don't want to tip their hat because they don't know what's going to happen.

Yeah, I want to turn the conversation a little bit to your specialty, the financial component. I mean, you talk about discounts being available. But the other aspect of travel is loyalty and loyalty points and point cards and those kinds of things. And there's been a lot of change, whether that's Aeroplan or Air Miles in the last year or two years. What are your thoughts on those changes first, and then where do you see the best value for loyalty and points?

Oh, you know Aeroplan, just to give a little bit background for people who aren't familiar they used to be owned by separate company .. sounds weird that Air Canada didn't own their own loyalty program. But that was just the case because of bankruptcy issues, you know, a couple decades ago or whatever. So anyways, they they bought their own loyalty program back. They've got control, which was good for consumers, because now they can make it a fair program. Admittedly, when the changes happened last November, certain destinations cost way more points to fly to right. It's just a reality. It's cost of inflation, but at the same time, some destinations got cheaper. So what I'm trying to explain to people here is is every loyalty

program, no matter what it is, it could be airlines hotels, or even Shoppers Drug Mart, they have their sweet spots. And as a consumer, you need to know where you can get the most value where to maximize your points. So, you know, one good example with Aeroplan is you can get a much better value for your points if you're booking business class, as opposed to say, a flight to Vancouver. Either way, you're still getting something for cheap. But if you save up your points for the high-end redemption, the value is significantly higher. And a lot of people say that, hey, you know, collected points aren't really worth it. But ironically, the loyalty programs because a COVID-19 had to become better, because no one was flying. And people were like, what should I do with these loyalty points, everyone was trying to get rid of them. A lot of the programs got better because they want people to come back as soon as this pandemic is over. So it's a very interesting time to be a travel loyalty member.

Okay, if you had to sign up for a credit card now, though, where would you sign up? What credit card is the best value or what do you think?

You know, at any given moment, there's going to be like, up to a dozen cards that give you the best value points wise. You know, Aeroplan currently has a few clearance offers from both American Express and TD, they give you anywhere from 20,000 to 65,000 points, plus a buddy pass. This buddy pass allows the second passenger to fly for free, they only pay for the fees and taxes. But again, it also depends on the loyalty program themselves. You know, sometimes you might get a big signup bonus, but the points aren't that valuable. One good example is that BMO recently introduced a few different credit cards, they had these great offers. But then silently, like a month later, they sent out an email saying, Oh, yeah, your points aren't going to be as valuable come May. So it's like it's almost like a bait and switch. So the whole part of this loyalty game is to earn your points as quickly as you can, and to spend them even quicker. Because at any given time, the value could be reduced.

Yeah, the other thing that has popped up over the last few years, I'm sure they've been around for a decade or so. But I'd be checking into a hotel and the hotel and say, Hey, are you on our loyalty program? Are loyalty programs at airlines a better deal than hotels? Or are hotels a better deal? Where are you finding that?

Depends on the chain. So right now given the choice, I find Aeroplan to be very generous, especially if you're going for premium seats, business, first class, including with some Air Canada's partners, right? If you asked me this a year ago, I would have said, Marriott Bonvoy would be my number one choice just because you know quite often with airlines, you're not going to fly one specific airline, but hotels, they're all over the world. It's really easy to find the chain with Marriott who has I think over like what 7000 properties and 115 countries or something like that. But again, you know, I was talking about how Aeroplan increased your value on certain flights last year, while at the same time Marriott, they devalued a lot of their hotels, because what they did is they started charging more points for certain properties. So again, it's really that that game where you're constantly looking for the best value. So in my opinion, if you don't want to focus on one loyalty program, you should be signing up for multiple ones. But more importantly, you should think about what your ultimate goal is. If your

goal is to have this dream vacation to say, Japan on business class, then obviously you're going to try as hard as you can to get as many points as possible on Aeroplan. But if you want to stay on overwater bungalow in the Maldives, then you should be getting hotel points. Right. So, so think about your goal and start working towards that.

Yeah, fair. Barry, we started the conversation, you said that you wouldn't go the cheapest way always anymore. Why? What happened to you? You're going hey...

Yeah, so when I was in my early 20s, like, my goal is like ... a little bit of a backstory. Like my parents are immigrants. You know, they taught me to save money, save as much as possible. You know, when we travel, we stayed at the Super-8. We did road trips. We very rarely flew. Right? So I don't know, that mentality just stuck with me. So I was always looking for the cheapest flights. I'm not even kidding you. I would spend like 10 hours to save \$100 on a flight. Back in the day, I would literally search every single website every single hour. But when you break it down to an hourly, it's like my time is worth more than \$10 an hour. All right. For another good example. I like to tell people it's like, when I was in college, I saw a picture of Sagrada Familia. I don't know if you've ever been to Barcelona. I was actually ...

Yeah, took my breath away.

**Barry Choi 14:46**

Exactly. So here's the funny thing. I was 19 at the time, I was taking an art history class in college, just because I needed the credit to graduate. And I had never even seen anything like this in my life. Ever. Not even a photo, right, because you know, think about it. Google was still pretty new. This was early 2000s. Like, I don't even know where to begin. And I saw this picture of Sagrada Familia. I was like, I need to go here one day. And a few years later, I went, and I saw it. But the irony is, I was so focused on saving money. I didn't pay to go inside. I was like, I would just look outside 'cause it's free...

**Pat Bolland 15:19**

Oh, you missed out dude!

**Barry Choi 15:21**

why did it the second time I went, but on top of that, now that you've been to Spain, let like, you know, what's the most famous food in Spain? Tapas? Paella, right?

**Pat Bolland 15:32**

Paella ...

**Barry Choi 15:33**

Something like that .. Yeah, exactly. But again, someone in his early 20s, trying to be as cheap as possible. It was like, Oh, I'm just gonna have ham sandwiches. So I went all the way to Spain. I didn't have any tapas. I didn't have paella. And it was the most ridiculous thing because I was just like, Oh, I spent \$1 on my ham sandwich. When it's like, really, like I had a full time

job. Right? Like, realistically speaking, I was insane. I was there for three days. If I spent \$50. More on food, would it make a difference? No. And finally, on the same trip, right, I had flown from Barcelona to Ireland, I was visiting a friend at the time. And on my last day, it was Halloween. And we went to this party. And the original plan was, oh, we're gonna stay overnight, and then we're gonna go to the airport. But it was so loud, and we're just tired. So we decided to bail. And we took a cab to the airport right away. And that's with my cousin at the time. And I don't know why. We asked, my cousin and I actually discussed this, like, a few weeks back, we're like, why didn't we tell the cab to take us to a hotel near the airport, any hotel and just split the cost for the night. But we were so focused on spending as little money as possible. We ended up, like, sleeping on the airport floor and again, it's not like we didn't have the money, we're just being so cheap. So this is what I mean by like, you know, being as cheap as possible, doesn't make sense. Like, in hindsight, it's like, I should not eat out at home. So then when I'm on vacation, I don't feel guilty spending money when I'm eating out. Or, you know, I used to stay at hostels, and a lot of them were actually great. And I still would stay at certain hostels. But again, it's one of those things where if you can afford to stay somewhere nice here, you might as well,

**Pat Bolland 17:11**

yeah. Oh, I enjoy one side of that. I made that mistake once. So listen, you're doing personal finance. And you're what you're saying is save up a little bit more, so you can travel a little bit better? Is that your message to your clients?

**Barry Choi 17:28**

Yeah, to me, it's kind of like, like, find out what your passion is, regardless of what it is, you know, mine is travel. So my wife and I, from the very beginning, even before we had a child as we started to budget for it, and some people would say, it's like, well, that's a lot of money you're spending on travel, but you know, we budgeted for it, and now I was smart enough to not feel guilty about it. But I'm also smart enough to like, you know, not spend when I don't need to, you know, I talked about staying in a somewhere in nicer combinations. I'm not saying that you should stay at the Ritz Carlton every single night. But you know, there have been times where I'll say at a basic three star hotel, but for a night or two my wife and I will splurge in the city just to kind of like, go out on a bang. You know, when we had our honeymoon in Rome. We say that St. Regis for two nights, and then a regular hotel because we couldn't afford to stay at the St. Regis for an entire trip, right? So there's a lot of things you can do, regardless what your passion is, to save money, you don't need the best of everything.

**Pat Bolland 18:27**

Just before COVID maybe a year before COVID, I took a trip that I consider one of the best I've ever taken with with kids and family. And that kind of thing, to Morocco, loved it. The history, the desert, the mountains, it was phenomenal. I would put it up there in that category as one of the best. What is your favorite trip, or potential destination that you'd like to go see?

**Barry Choi 18:52**

Japan is still being the best destination I've ever been in my life. Have you been?

**Pat Bolland 18:58**

No, yeah, I want to, badly but ...

**Barry Choi 19:00**

So, the way I describe it is, is everyone's kind of seen Japan and in like, photos, TV shows these days, animation, right? And people see it as being this crazy place this futuristic city, being Tokyo. And the best way to describe it is it's 10 times crazier. It's, you get on the ground. And it's just a fascinating country, like most people land in Tokyo. And it does feel like you're in the future. Like there's so many people, but it's so exciting at the same time. Because the population density is so high. They have to build up, you know, as North Americans, we're used to seeing what's in front of us left and right. But in Japan, in Asia, you have to look up, but like so many of the things that are interesting are above you, and build dominance or whatever. But at the same time, you know, you talk about the bullet trains you've heard about there. You can go from the futuristic city of Japan to Kyoto, which was their ancient capital and literally have 1000s of temples within walking distance in a two hour ride. One of the best experiences I did in Japan is my wife and I stayed overnight at a Buddhist temple, at Mount Koyasan. And just to give you some reference, Koyasan is a mountain in Japan, and a lot of Japanese Buddhists, they do a pilgrimage there because that's where Buddhism started in the country. But as a tourist, it's very fascinating to stay in a Buddhist temple, like, you know, I'm not really religious, but it's just seeing the way of life. And then like, it's just, it's just a small little village and your experience how life used to be even 1000s of years ago.

**Pat Bolland 20:40**

Yeah, I'm with you on that. Japan. I don't know about the cities to be honest with you. And traditionally ...

**Barry Choi 20:45**

The cities are fun.

**Pat Bolland 20:47**

I like older venues, like I'd love to go back to Europe, and have been many times. I love Europe. I mean, do you have a place in Europe? You really like?

**Barry Choi 20:58**

Yeah, you know, you know, I'm very biased towards Amsterdam, you know, for some people. Yeah, you know, I see Amsterdam, you're laughing a lot of people instantly think of the red light district or whatever. But, you know, I have family in Amsterdam, my uncle raised his kids there... my mom came to Toronto, my uncle moved to Amsterdam. So I still have a lot of family over there. I've been going there on and off for the last 15 years. And it's actually a fascinating place in how it's grown. So yeah, you know, the first time I arrived in Amsterdam, 15 years ago, the red light district was very seedy. But the government has actually cleaned it up quite a bit. You know, now, it's very funny, because you'll see like, prostitute, art gallery and boutique shop, because they're trying to gentrify quite a bit. But beyond that, it's like, it's such a small aspect of

it. Once you get outside of the main tourists drag into the city and the community and the smaller towns and cities within Holland. That's where to me it's just I really like the Dutch culture. I like the way of life. When my my daughter was born, we went to Amsterdam, and we stayed there for like, two weeks. That's the longest extended trip we ever stayed in one destination. We rented an Airbnb where we really got to live like the locals and it was one of the best trips we had ever taken. And honestly, normally, I would go back to Houston every two to three years, and I'm sad. I missed it last year because of COVID.

**Pat Bolland 22:22**

Yeah, well, we've got our future in front of us, Barry. I wish you continued success and I know that our paths will cross again. I really enjoyed this discussion. Thanks.

**Barry Choi 22:34**

Yeah, anytime.

**Pat Bolland 22:36**

Okay. Great.