



Episode 164 – Claire Irvin

Intro: This is Brand USA Talks Travel, elevating the conversation about international travel to the United States. Here's your host, Mark Lapidus.

Mark Lapidus [0:09]: As International Women's Month draws to a close, we're pleased to bring you this bonus episode. Now, here's your guest host, Brand USA's Chief Marketing Officer, Staci Mellman.

Staci Mellman [0:19]: Over the past month, we featured fantastic conversations with inspiring female leaders in the travel industry. But before I pass the mic back to our wonderful host, Mark Lapidus, I wanted to do one more episode with a woman I have come to admire over the past year. Joining me today is Claire Irvin, an award-winning journalist who is Head of Travel at The Times and The Sunday Times in the UK. Claire is an experienced editor, previously serving as the Head of Travel at the Telegraph, and in various editorial leadership roles at glossy magazines, including She, Grazia, and Company. Claire is also a regular travel commentator on Sky News. Hello, Claire! I'm so happy to see you.

Claire Irvin [0:56]: Hi, Staci. Thank you for having me.

Staci Mellman [0:59]: It's so great for you to be with us today. Can you tell our listeners a little bit about your current role at the Times UK?

Claire Irvin [1:06]: I am Head of Travel at The Times and The Sunday Times. We do operate as separate operations, but kind of together. So my role is simply, but quite complicatedly, serving our readers and our subscribers and our visitors with world-beating travel journalism, inspiring, advising, and supporting them as they spend their hard-earned cash on amazing travel experiences.

Staci Mellman [1:37]: So world-beating travel journalism. In your eyes, what makes a good travel story for The Times' readers?

Claire Irvin [1:44]: Well, firstly, we are a legacy brand; we're built on quality journalism, and that's where it starts and finishes, really. Within that, of course, there are multiple layers. There is expertise, there is experience, there is great storytelling. There's a bit of fun. Travel encompasses all the emotions. So there might be something a little heartrending, or there might be something bittersweet or slightly nostalgic, but some form of emotion. And there is creativity, because long on are the days where doing all of that was just about putting it in print. Now, of course, we are a digital-first operation; we have subscribers to serve; travel sits outside the Times paywall, so we have new visitors to serve and attract and engage. And then we have video, we have audio, we have social media and podcast as we are here

today. So it's never dull; it's always challenging, but in the most exciting and uplifting way, and what better subject to be doing all of that in but travel?

Staci Mellman [2:54]: I can only imagine the incredible stories that you're able to tell on all of those different platforms, and how they change shape across each one of those experiences, from video to podcast. It's really remarkable the breadth of the stories that you guys are able to tell.

Claire Irvin [3:08]: Yeah, and increasingly, it's also the starting point. In fact, I was talking to some public relations representative last night, and just saying, "Don't come to us with a story on a press release that starts across two pages of the newspaper. Think about what that story is, how it's going to look on your phone, how you would want to read or see or engage with that story on your phone, and then talk to us about that." Most of our stories are generated by our team, but it's just quite interesting when you're talking to people who aren't in that zone all of the time, but yet their role is to be plugged into that, how quickly we as a team have to meet new challenges, overcome new challenges. And then, of course, we'll uncover loads of challenges within that, and we're constantly, constantly moving. And it's really hard to keep other people up to speed with that, but that's what makes my team so brilliant. That's why I'm so proud to lead them.

Staci Mellman [4:00]: That's really interesting advice. I think we have a lot of listeners who are in the communications field within travel, and I think that the great takeaway there is to craft the emotional story about your destination or experience. That's going to make it a lot easier for journalists to want to pick it up.

Claire Irvin [4:16]: Yeah, and build the relationship with the journalist, because if you don't have that, you're on a hiding to nothing.

Staci Mellman [4:22]: So the publishing industry has gone through immense upheaval in recent decades. I'm curious about your opinion, and what do you think the future holds for news publications like The Times?

Claire Irvin [4:33]: You know, so I've been through the "print is dead, content is king, long live content." And there've been some fairly worrying, depressing times in that, I'm not going to lie. Managing the decline of magazine readers was a particularly depressing period of time. But ultimately, our job is, as I said earlier, to excite and engage readers. And if you are really passionate about journalism and storytelling and you're really good at your job, then there's always something to look forward to. So video is one of the biggest challenges to us at the moment: how do we do that differently? How do we do that appropriately? And how do we serve that up to our readers? So funnily enough, actually, I did TV and film at university because I thought, "Well, I can write. Who needs a qualification in writing?" But little did I know. And how ironic that it's gone full circle. I didn't use the TV and film for so long in my career, but things have moved on slightly since then. But particularly a legacy brand like The Times is world-renowned. I've worked for some amazing brands and some amazing companies in my time, but never have I worked for a brand that has such worldwide instant recognition and respect. And I think more than ever, that matters. The trust that our readers have in us to tell stories accurately, to tell stories in a trusted and tested way. And I think all of those users want to know that what they're reading is trusted, and there is quite simply no brand more trusted, I think, in media than The Times. That is something that will keep us propelling forward however our roles change.

Staci Mellman [6:11]: I think a lot about the evolution of AI. This is just my prediction, but I believe that the more that AI is out there, I think the more the important that trusted sources are going to be, because people are going to be very confused about what to trust and what they can believe and what's legit.

Claire Irvin [6:30]: Exactly. And there are trailblazers in the world of AI who would believe that they will be able to replicate the voices of even the best writers at The Times. But I sincerely doubt that that version of those voices will ever be as trusted as the real thing. They just won't.

Staci Mellman [6:50]: There's definitely a place for AI.

Claire Irvin [6:52]: Absolutely. Yeah, we use it. I mean, we use it already in the newsroom. We have a predictive text AI, right? Chatbots, we can use AI really usefully there, particularly in travel, when it's - people want to know facts and things that are easily disseminated and passed on. AI can work really well. But it's about the interpretation of those that journalism survives on.

Staci Mellman [7:16]: Absolutely. So this month, we've been doing this special International Women's History podcast series. I want to dig into some questions around female leadership and what it means to be a working woman. So despite some very prominent female editors at influential publications like the Wall Street Journal, the Financial Times, and The Economist, media publications continue to be a very male-dominated industry. So with only about a quarter of women in top editor positions, what have you found to be some of the biggest barriers to women ascending to the top?

Claire Irvin [7:51]: It's interesting, isn't it? Because obviously, that is a fact. But my own lived experience has been of amazing, trailblazing women as my bosses, right from - not the very early days, but certainly in consumer magazines, I have had female CEOs, I've had female editors. Obviously, I am a female editor myself. Yes, there have been men in those companies, and, nine times out of ten, running those companies. Now, of course, I work for News UK, which has a female CEO as well. I think, however, you are right, in that even if it is not a male person, those industries are run in a very male way, or have been. And I probably more consciously these days, when I set out, it wasn't consciously trying to reverse a male bias. I think instead, what you do is you spend an awful lot of time trying to mirror that behavior and fit in with the code to learn the language. I don't just mean the words. I mean the way that men can, in a gender-specific way, make decisions, lead meetings, ask for things.

Staci Mellman [9:03]: Especially in the news industry, where things are moving at such a fast pace, you turn into a male leadership style. But I think in your experience, you've just had a really great opportunity to learn from a lot of wonderful women who have blazed the path for you in your career.

Claire Irvin [9:20]: I've been given opportunities by some really incredible women, and I felt instinctively that it was my role to therefore pay that forward. And a select few of those women have remained mentors to me throughout my career. If not formally, they've looked out for me, I've turned to them for advice. And I am so endlessly grateful for that, because it's not just about gender; I didn't grow up in a connected environment. This industry does also rely on connections, friendships, the right schools. And I didn't have any of that. Those were the barriers I first was very conscious of. And operating outside of this London bubble, I didn't know how to infiltrate that. Actually, again, within that, there were ways of speaking, ways of behaving. And if I look back at the first 15 years of my career, I was a sponge for all of that. I wouldn't allow myself to stop learning, but I was also quite addicted to just soaking it all up and learning all these different behavioral codes, whether it was about male leadership styles or being a

member of a certain members' club or who you were socializing with, what brand your handbag was, all those things that you just don't think about when you're 17 and thinking, "I'd quite like to be a magazine editor. I can write. I don't need to do that at university."

Staci Mellman [10:41]: Right. I dug into a little bit about you in preparation for the podcast. You've been a champion for building diverse teams. I know you've brought a lot of people together from different races, ages, genders, and perspectives. I'd love to know from your perspective, what makes a great team, and what have you found to be the benefits of building a diverse team?

Claire Irvin [11:02]: Some of it was completely selfish. Having groups of different people is much more fun than having all people in the same background. But my job is to serve a really, really diverse readership, and I am not going to be able to with that. It's age, gender, sexual preference, ethnicity, whatever that difference is - I cannot hope to understand subtleties and nuance of language. I cannot possibly hope to have a fully developed creative idea. I cannot hope to be serving an entirely 360 view of the world if I don't understand parts of that. It's not easy to attract diverse teams in the media. You have to be very proactive about bringing people in. I would always recruit externally. I will always share those adverts on platforms that you might not think of necessarily were rich for a right for recruitment, because I want different voices. And I have... Time was, my magazine teams were full of girls and gays, if I can say that. And so I'd have to proactively go out. And it's about the right person for the job, ultimately. But to make sure that the pool I was looking at had lots of other representations in Broadsheetland. It is about ensuring I have women and a broad scope of ethnicity in my team. Actually, I have a female bias in my team. And - but hey, we're in travel. Women book travel. I don't apologize for that. They're there because they're the best people to do that job, but they also happen to be women. And long may that continue.

Staci Mellman [12:43]: I think it's a really good point when you have a lot of stories to tell, and you want to tell it from a lot of different perspectives. From my experience, it's the same when you're managing a brand, and especially when you're talking to consumers that you want all different kinds of consumers to be able to see your brand in different ways, that having a diverse team with different perspectives and different backgrounds is really important in shaping and stewarding that brand. How would you describe your personal leadership style, and how has your leadership approach evolved as you've advanced in your career?

Claire Irvin [13:12]: You would probably have to ask people who worked for me a long time ago to then come and see me in the workplace and tell me how it's changed. But I think I've always been very inclusive. I love my job, and I do tend to live a brand. Whether that's a failing or a strength, I don't know. Probably for my team, it's a failing. But I tend to get very enthusiastically involved in it, and I want everybody else to be, which makes me, on the one hand, probably very irritating, but also quite relentlessly enthusiastic and energetic about it. So you have to be a person to be able to deal with that, I think. So very inclusive and I hope fun, I hope understanding. But I do know where those lines are, and I expect other people to respect those. And so I can be tough and quite demanding, but not to the exclusion of work-life balance. I just mean demanding in the role. But I think what's quite interesting, I was thinking about this, is actually I've also had to draw back a little bit from being quite so involved in the team. Actually, one of my mentors said to me, "Just remember to keep back a bit of Claire." And I know what she meant. When you get to a certain level, you do have to elevate yourself above the team. You can't be the one who is involved in all the gossip. You can't want to know that or attempt to know that. You can't be the last person that drinks unless, of course, I am paying. You can't be everybody's friend, because you also have to be their leader. You have to be their mentor. You have to be the one

who finds... I mean, I'm a "come to me with a solution, not a problem," but inevitably there are problems, and I have to be the one who delivers that solution. Sometimes the solution isn't the one that anybody wants to hear, and you can't deliver that if you're too close to people personally. So the biggest change is that I've learned to draw back and maintain that distance, which is better for the team, and it's certainly better for me, and it's better for the readers. I do believe you can tell in media, you can tell when something is written by a content team or a challenged and motivated team, and you can definitely tell when it's not. I think you can really motivated teams create things that pulse with energy, and that's what keeps readers hooked alongside the quality and the content. So helping them maintain that pace is really important.

Staci Mellman [15:39]: One thing I love about you is your sense of fashion. When I see what you're doing on Sky News and when I've seen you in person, I want to talk a little bit about how you think your style has evolved as your career has advanced. And do you feel like there's been an increased expectation to look or dress a certain way, given the positions that you've been in?

Claire Irvin [15:58]: Gosh. Well, I would be an extraordinary person if working in fashion for 20 years hadn't influenced my personal style. And I count some of my fashion directors on those titles as some of my best friends. So they've definitely had a part to play in that. I've always loved a trend, possibly to my own detriment. Even growing up, I had different groups of friends. They all embodied different things. There were the casuals, there were the alternative crew. And I would experiment with those looks. Then before I got into consumer magazines, I was in business magazine. So I felt very... A lot of the 90s, it was still power suits. And I did feel pressure to be in a heel and a jacket when I was meeting clients. It would be a Converse trouser in the office quite often. But we're starting to push things a little bit there. As I said, I've mentioned earlier, I do love to live the brand. So I worked on teen magazines where there was no expectation to be formal unless you were in a board meeting. I just started to dress how I felt was right for me at that time, and learned to be slightly more selective about the trends I was embodying. But of course, as you get older, you start to realize what suits you, what person you are. I learned about the brands that I should be investing in. So even though I wouldn't say I've ever been anyone that spends a huge amount on item by item, I have got quite a big close of it. You develop a wardrobe that you can then mix up. And I'm not going to lie, I do like to dress well. I love fashion still. Hopefully, I've learned what suits me as a personality. I've learned what works on TV. I've had some help with that. Things like when I started to wear glasses, and I've got a phobia of contact lenses, so what am I going to do? And then just thought, "We're just going to run with this. We're going to embrace it." So I love a pair of specs. I do love to look great. And I think in a world, in an industry, where it's quite a personality-driven industry, it doesn't hurt to be well-dressed.

Staci Mellman [18:03]: When you think about the next generation of women who are starting out in their careers, what qualities do you think that young women should focus on to set them up for success?

Claire Irvin [18:14]: I think they should focus on... And this was advice from my parents as I was growing up, who hadn't got a clue, as I say, completely unconnected, had not a clue the world I was about to enter, and still look at it with a good degree of bafflement. But they said, "You can be anything you want to be." And they genuinely meant that. They had no idea of some of the meaner things out there. And you can, but you have to be focused and you got to work hard. You've got to work really hard. Don't expect everything at once. I mean, be impatient, but don't get frustrated, because you aren't going to jump through all those hoops straight away. I had some really good advice about 10 years ago from a man, he's in the travel industry, very senior in the travel industry, and was really interested in my mentors. We had a really, really great conversation around that. And he said to me, "Claire, you work in

a man's world and you don't have a male mentor." And I thought, "Wow, yeah, that's really true." And I do think that there is this, quite rightly, for young women starting out, there is a sense that they need women who are going to pay it forward. There are women who are going to support them. But as with, I've done a lot of work with an organization called Every Women, for example, in the UK. And they have always long been advocates of bringing men in on that journey. But it had never occurred to me that I should forge those relationships with men as well. And so very quickly, I did that, and I have two or three now, as I said earlier in the podcast, to help disseminate information in a male world that's been delivered in a male way - unwittingly in a male way - to somebody very female. So I would say, find your champions, but be inclusive about those champions. Make sure you've got champions in the same way you create a team. And also, don't just focus on your own strengths and weaknesses in terms of getting you up the ladder. Something I didn't mention, actually, when I was talking about the diversity of teams, which is one of the most key things that I've learned in my career, is about being confident enough in your strengths and cognizant enough of your weaknesses to build team around those. So my Deputy Head of Travel at The Times, and The Sunday Times, is the yin to my yang. We are complete opposites. I have people on my team who do a job that literally I am so admiring of them every day because I wouldn't have a clue. And that's exactly as it should be. And a lot of my team are really ambitious, and are quite rightly snapping out my heels. And I celebrate that. They will challenge me, they will disagree with me. And we have a lot of creative tension alongside a lot of fun, which does make it tough, but it makes it as tough for me as it makes it for them. But we get to the best solution. So I would say, just work out who you are, what you're about, the weaknesses as well as the strengths, because you'll need to know those as you grow and if you do go into management, if you start to create teams.

Staci Mellman [21:22]: That is fantastic advice. Thank you. I've been ending some of the podcast with a series of rapid fire questions, and I wanted to see if you would be willing to give it a go. They're fun.

Claire Irvin [21:32]: Yeah, absolutely. That sounds fun.

Staci Mellman [21:34]: What is something that is always in your suitcase when you travel?

Claire Irvin [21:37]: Marmite.

Staci Mellman [21:38]: What is your go-to band or artist when you're struggling to decide what to listen to?

Claire Irvin [21:43]: Fleetwood Mac.

Staci Mellman [21:44]: If you can travel back in time, what period would you go to and why?

Claire Irvin [21:47]: Oh, '70s, 1970s. It's my era. Love it. It's disco and glitter. And Studio 54, I would really want to go to Studio 54.

Staci Mellman [21:57]: I'm curious about your last trip, next trip in the USA. Is there anywhere that you really wanted to visit, but you haven't yet?

Claire Irvin [2:04]: Last trip, next trip is the same place, Palm Springs.

Staci Mellman [22:07]: Oh, wow. Okay, great.

Claire Irvin [22:09]: I went to Palm Springs in November. Totally fell in love with it. So I'm taking my husband back in May. And I'm taking the family, the kids adore the States, but we haven't done near enough of it. So we are doing an LA to San Diego road trip in the summer, which I am so excited about. We're all really excited. Lots and lots of debate going on at the moment about the itinerary, what we're going to be doing. So, yeah, super excited about that.

Staci Mellman [22:36]: Last question here. What inspires you?

Claire Irvin [22:38]: My kids inspire me, and my husband. And I don't just want to be a great role model and a lovely mom, but I want to be part of creating a better world for them. And I know that sounds really twee, but something that really plays on my mind a lot is how we've slightly cocked things up for our kids. And being in travel, of course, you appreciate the impact, or the importance, and the beauty of our world, and the importance of preserving that in some way for them, whilst also being able to explore it to its full. And I must be getting old, but that is starting to really bother me.

Staci Mellman [23:18]: I can't tell you how much of a pleasure it has been chatting with you today. Thank you for sharing your experiences with us. Just been unbelievable to spend time with you.

Claire Irvin [23:27]: It's so lovely spending time with you too, Staci, as always.

Staci Mellman [23:31]: And to our listeners, we appreciate you tuning in to our special podcast series in celebration of International Women's Month. If you like what you've heard, let us know and share our podcast with your colleagues and your friends. And I'll sign off for now.

Mark Lapidus [23:44]: And that concludes this special series of Brand USA Talks Travel celebrating International Women's Month. Staci Mellman spoke with five trailblazing women leaders in the travel industry. If you missed any of those episodes, you can catch up now in our podcast archive. And that's Brand USA Talks Travel. Thanks for listening.

Outro [24:02]: Your feedback is welcome! Email us at podcast@thebrandusa.com or call 202-793-6256. Brand USA Talks Travel is produced by Asher Meerovich, who also composes music and sound. Engineering by Brian Watkins. With extra help from Bernie Lucas, Nthanze Kariuki, and Casey D'Ambra. Please share this podcast with your friends in the travel industry. You may also enjoy many of our archived episodes, which you can find on your favorite podcast platform. Safe travels!