

[Snap Judgment intro]

Glynn: Hey, Snappers. We know you enjoy your storytelling in the bright light of day, but if you also like your storytelling crafted in the dark of night, this is for you. Because right now, we're hiring two freelance story scouts for our incredible sister show, Spooked. In our efforts to bring you more supernatural stories from around the globe, Spooked is searching for someone who has lived in or has deep cultural knowledge of the Caribbean or the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the American South, Southeast Asia, or West Africa. This amazing story scout will find and pitch original first-person stories, and work closely with the Spooked team and work closely with me. Is this person you? Do you know someone who might be interested? For more information, go to snapjudgment.org/careers.

[music]

Glynn: Recently, maybe it's the War on Drugs that morphed into a war on black and brown people, or the War on Terror, that morphed into a war on black and brown people, perhaps locking kids in cages that morphed into-- Look, I don't know which straw broke the camel's back, but it felt like, all of a sudden, friends of mine, dear friends from different parts of my life, started looking in earnest to relocate away from the United States, to protect their kids and live somewhere else. Somewhere, they didn't have to carry so heavy a burden of racism, of oppression, of fear, of economic insecurity. Instead of talking a big game about how they're going to move some day, they just left, scattering to foreign shores, sending that cheery Facebook messages and actual postcards.

For a long while, I thought it was just my circle, because my friends are all strange, wacky people. But it turns out that this thing is far bigger than my tiny band of misfits. Today on Snap Judgment, we proudly present In Search of a Black Utopia. A search for a better life, perhaps much closer than you imagine. Please make sure your seat backs and tray tables are in their full upright positions and all carry-on luggage is stowed under the seat in front of you. Why? Because you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[music]

Glynn: Now, former Snapper Adizah Eghan, once a Snapper always a Snapper, she's doing big things now for VICE News Reports, which takes you into the story as it unfolds. Adizah too, she's been hearing these rumblings about people taking off, leaving the US of A. But instead of simply waving farewell, Adizah, she decided to investigate this movement by taking a trip of her own. I want to give a bit of a language warning. This story has black folk talking about their actual experience, the N word, other real people language does come up. Adizah, take it away.

[music]

Adizah: Last summer over Labor Day weekend, I was minding my business at home when I got a text from my sister. She was in Tulum, Mexico for the weekend. She sent me a video that her friend recorded. It was of Megan Thee Stallion. They ran into her at a restaurant in Tulum. *WAP* had just

come out. In the video, Megan is wearing a short blue wig and lime green bikini. She's mouthing the words to her song and twerking.

After watching that video, I felt I started to see Tulum everywhere.

Female Speaker: Mexico.

Female Speaker: We are international, honey. We are in Mexico. We are on vacation. We are in Tulum.

Adizah: I would see baycations in Tulum.

Female Speaker: Me and my boyfriend are going to Mexico to celebrate our fourth year being together.

Adizah: Birthday trips to Tulum.

Female Speaker: [crosstalk]

Female Speaker: Hug right there, girl. Look at the glow. [unintelligible [00:05:09]

Female Speaker: Look at the--[crosstalk]

Female Speaker: I'm really having so much fun in Tulum. I'm having a great birthday, guys.

Female Speaker: Yes.

Adizah: And Tulum on the Black Travel accounts I follow.

Female Speaker: Good morning, guys. It is time to explore Tulum.

Adizah: I saw people going out at night.

Female Speaker: [crosstalk] -we drank, we danced, like we danced our asses off, y'all.

Adizah: People relaxing at the beach, or sitting by the pool.

Female Speaker: And all that good stuff, but we're sitting here by the pool.

Adizah: Whatever they were doing, they were having a good ass time.

Female Speaker: My heart is just warmed from being in Tulum.

Adizah: I started to wonder, what did all these people know that maybe I didn't? Why Tulum? Instead of sitting in my house and asking all these questions, "Why does Tulum feel like it's so hot right now? Why does it feel like that's where I want to go?", I decided to go to Tulum.

Female Speaker: Low-key, not even low-key, kind of high-key. It's kind of like a Black Renaissance right now.

Female Speaker: It is time, it is past time, justice must be served.

Female Speaker: Black Lives Matter movement was a lot. People needed a different environment for their health and mental health.

Female Speaker: We are saying now that Black Lives Matter. So, if you can't own that as your own truth, your voice needs to be silenced. You need to sit down somewhere.

Adizah: This is VICE News Reports. I'm Adizah Eghan.

Female Speaker: What are you doing?

Female Speaker: I'm feeling myself. I'm feeling my energy.

Female Speaker: So weird to be carrying radio equipment on the beach.

Adizah: Around the time that I got that video of Meg Thee Stallion in the summer of 2020, I was feeling confined and a little depressed. I was in need of some relief. I had a friend who told me that what I needed was to take a break, an escape. She also mentioned Tulum. She said there were lots of black people moving there. They were working remotely and getting together on the weekends. I pictured some sort of a black utopia. I was intrigued. So, I went to Google. [keyboard clacking "Black people Tulum."]

Adizah: And I typed in "Black people Tulum."

Female Speaker: Right. We are live and we're going to give people time.

Adizah: I found a website, several Facebook groups, and Facebook Lives featuring black people who had moved to Tulum, Playa del Carmen, and Mexico in general. They were people who left in part because of the political and social climate in the US. It wasn't the first time that this had happened.

Female Speaker: I just want people to understand that this is a continuum. Mexico has always been a place for black people to seek refuge.

Adizah: Going back as far as the 19th century, I found stories of enslaved Africans seeking refuge in Mexico. I knew of the artists who spent formative years in the country, Lorraine Hansberry, Audre

Lorde, and Debbie Allen. Audre Lorde wrote about how seeing other brown faces in such great numbers was an affirmation.

The whole idea of escaping to Tulum was so much bigger than having a drink on the beach or shaking my ass on a yacht, because I knew that Tulum offered wellbeing. It's a place for self-reflection, good vibes, and healing. All things that I desperately needed. There was nothing I wanted more than to find a black utopia. I was still scared of COVID, but by this point, I knew how to protect myself and others.

Test. Test Okay. Cool. I'm in there. I'm here. Okay. So, we're in Mexico. I have my rental car. I'm just going to put the recorder on the dashboard and look up some directions.

Tulum is located in the Yucatán Peninsula, on the Caribbean Sea.

Yes, the AC is going on.

It's a two-hour drive from the airport in Cancún which, since the 1970s has been the main hub of tourism in this part of Mexico. But it wasn't until the 2010s that people began to flock Tulum, which had been a sleepy fishing town with dirt roads, ruins, and bad internet.

It's Wednesday, and I am in Tulum, Mexico.

Before I came down, I joined the Facebook group for black people in Tulum so I could figure out where people were meeting up. And I found out that there was an event that Wednesday.

That's that. So, off to Welcome Wednesday.

My name is Adizah.

Female Speaker: Adizah?

Adizah: Adizah, yeah. I was just coming here to get some tacos. I was actually going to-- the Black in Tulum was having a Welcome Wednesday, and so I wanted to go meet some people there. And then, I saw this group of beautiful black people. And I was like, "Let me just ask them."

I made a quick stop before Welcome Wednesday at a vegan taqueria. While I was eating, I could hear bits and pieces of a conversation from a group of black people sitting next to me. They were talking about traveling. So, I walked over and I told them that I was working on a story documenting black people who are coming to Mexico. One of the guys told me to pull up a chair.

Why don't we just go around really quickly and you can just say your name, where you're from. And then, maybe one thing brought you to Tulum.

Most of them were from the States, DC, Maryland, Virginia area. And they were all friends of friends who met down here. I appreciated their vibe. They were all warm and inviting. Yet, they didn't hold back.

Giselle: My name is Giselle. I didn't want to be in America. I never wanted to be in America. I don't want to live my life there. I don't have my family there. And I was sent here quite frankly. I didn't necessarily make a choice. I just knew that I wanted to leave and move.

Adizah: Their reasons for being in Tulum were all different, but they were aligned in a way. They all expressed a pressing desire to get out of the United States ASAP.

Faris: My name is Faris. I'm coming to Tulum because America is a cult and I want to be anywhere else. And it was also my birthday.

Male Speaker: Preach, brother.

Adizah: Happy belated birthday. Tell me more about America being a cult?

Faris: We're lied to about nutrition. We only have two choices between politics. We care about dumb shit like sports, we treat that like a religion, award shows and we just pick a new celebrity to worship every year. Everything is about money.

Adizah: So, how does that tie back into why you're specifically in Tulum?

Faris: Because to me, it's like why not Tulum? It's more so just anywhere but America.

Adizah: Then, one of the guys asked me why I came to Tulum. Immediately, I thought about how I wanted to experience this black utopia.

Female Speaker: The police don't bug us black people, which is awesome.

Male Speaker: This place is like this, because in Colombia, there's a lot of black people going there too. So, it's not just Tulum. I think folks who are smart enough are kind of wise enough to America and starting to get the fuck away, distanced themselves from or relocate, you know what I mean? But it's not just Tulum. It's South America, Africa, for sure. Yeah.

Adizah: Someone at the table mentions repatriation. Members of the African diaspora have been seeking ways to repatriate or just leave the United States for generations. But a lot of people right now are calling it a Black [unintelligible [00:13:59]].

Faris: So, why I think black people from the States are coming to Mexico is because niggas do what niggas do, that's my answer for others. [chuckles] That's a good answer.

Female Speaker: You can live lavish in Mexico, [unintelligible 00:14:17] some shit that you will be struggling with-- [crosstalk]

Adizah: I pushed them on a question that comes up for me when I travel, and has also been coming up ever since I've been thinking about Tulum as this place of refuge. How could they reconcile their need to leave America with the fact that they were enjoying Mexico because they had an American passport and American dollars?

Faris: But it's like they treat niggas where I'm from too. In my home country, Sudan, they kill each other.

Adizah: Faris told me that it was give and take.

Faris: I don't want to say I don't care, but I can't not enjoy my life because of it.

Adizah: If this was the first conversation that I was having fresh off the plane in Tulum, I knew that these questions were destined to crop back up while I was here. But first, I wanted to go to Welcome Wednesday. I wanted to have some drinks and meet some more people. A few of the people at the table had heard of Welcome Wednesday too, and they decided to come check it out with me. We walked the two or so blocks to a hookah lounge up the street. There was a bunch of black Americans there. A short woman with a shaved head was standing at a table outside greeting people at the door. As soon as we walk up, she starts up a conversation with this guy named Santiago from DC.

Nubia: Exactly. So, how are you enjoying Tulum?

Male Speaker: I love it here. I might relocate for a couple months, do you feel me?

Nubia: What do you do?

Male Speaker: I do e-commerce and I trade cryptocurrency.

Nubia: Oh, you're on some whole another level shit.

Male Speaker: All type of stuff.

Nubia: I love it.

Male Speaker: Yeah. What about you?

Nubia: Best gig right now.

Male Speaker: Crypto?

Nubia: Yeah.

Male Speaker: For sure, yes.

Nubia: It's huge.

Male Speaker: It's the future.

Nubia: A lot of black people don't know a lot about it.

Adizah: Eventually, the group of people from the taqueria leave, and I find a place to sit at a table outside. The crowd here is different.

What brought you all to Tulum?

Kendrick: Well, I've been here nine months.

Adizah: Oh, wow.

That's when I meet Kendrick. He's a photographer from Atlanta, and he describes his vibe as black luxury, black entertainment. He told me he lost his job in the States because of the pandemic. He was at home watching a lot of news when he got the idea to look for countries that were accepting American tourists.

Kendrick: What brought me down here, just being from Atlanta, born and raised there, especially after the whole COVID thing started, Tulum popped up on Airbnb. Never heard of Tulum, didn't know Tulum existed, didn't know what a Tulum was, so I booked to stay here for a whole month. Then, the George Floyd thing happened in the States. So, I had no desire to leave this tranquility of Mexico to go back voluntarily to madness. They were setting my whole city on fire, kids are getting tased in cars. A lot was on the news every day. If it wasn't those raising COVID cases, it was burning the Wendy's down.

Adizah: After a couple of weeks, Kendrick said he signed a one-year lease on an apartment.

Wow. How did you feel when you signed the lease?

Kendrick: It was, honestly, one of the scariest feelings in the world, because I feel like where I differ from a lot of people is when I came to Mexico, that was my first time out of the United States. First passport stamp, first time leaving. Period.

Adizah: Okay, thank you. Cheers.

Female Speaker: Cheers. Black girl magic. Yes. Sorry, y'all. [chuckles]

Adizah: In a few short hours, I had walked up to strangers at a taqueria. I met a group of people who were down to show up to Welcome Wednesday with me and who also invited me to a party at their hotel that weekend. I accept fresh passionfruit cocktails and listen to stories of people meeting folks on the street and doing business with them a few weeks later. It felt like I didn't know which discovery I was going to make next while I was here, but it was all exciting. And I was at the beach.

What?

Male Speaker: I'm like, [unintelligible [00:18:40] black spots all here.

[crosstalk]

Adizah: That night, I went back to my hotel room and I felt really good. It was nice to be out on a warm night to find my people and to socialize with black people who were just happy. People who had found some sort of mental respite in what has been a year of so much grief. I was surprised by how many people I met who were extending their trips or straight up moving to Tulum. People kept saying that Tulum was a vibe. But I just thought perhaps this is what a black utopia feels like. To be honest, I wish I had discovered this sooner.

[waves splashing]

Adizah: Oh, there's two dogs. Hi, doggie. [petting]

[waves splashing]

Adizah: I'm standing in the ocean right now. I have waves coming up and crashing into my ankles. It's about 80 degrees. I'm looking out into the water and it's like a teal-green-deep-blue mix of all of those colors. It's gorgeous. It feels like I'm in a different world.

[background music starts]

But at the same time, it seemed there was a lot more to the vibe here than what was on the surface. It didn't take too long before my black utopia started to wash away.

[background music fades away]

Female Speaker: Let's make sure we're not in the colonial mindset. People talk about wanting to come down and, "Oh, the cost of living is so cheap, and I live in luxury." Are you giving back in any way? Or, are you simply taking advantage of the resources and labor?

[music]

Glynn: What is attracting black people to Tulum in the first place? Right after the break, stay tuned.

[music]

Glynn: Welcome back to Snap Judgment, In Search of a Black Utopia. Today, we're featuring a special spotlight from VICE News Reports. When last we left, Adizah Eghan was high of the vibe of Tulum, Mexico. She was trying to uncover why so many black folks have been heading there. It seemed for some, it's a good time. For others, it's a much deeper purpose, but has she found her black utopia?

[music]

[waves splashing]

Patricia: Mexico abolished slavery in 1829, in United States in 1865. So, we had the underground railroad to the south. Black folks in the south crossed over the Rio Grande and were able to be free in Mexico. And then, when the oil companies and railroads and all kinds of industries were being built in Mexico in the 19th century, early 20th century, black folks came down to work.

Adizah: I met Patricia Talley right around the time of my trip to Mexico.

Patricia: Even back in Marcus Garvey days, he had a big contingency here in Mexico. So, yes, historically, folks have come down and found a comfort level. And now, you're seeing this big movement today to find a sense of freedom, a greater sense of freedom.

Adizah: Patricia has been living in Mexico for 24 years. She's in Guerrero, where a lot of Afro-Mexicans live. And like me, she also started to notice that there were a lot of black Americans moving to Mexico and coming down to Tulum during the pandemic. And she had a request.

Patricia: I'm asking these African American communities, wherever they are, to be supportive of the Afro-Mexican movement.

Adizah: Patricia writes about the diaspora in Mexico, her publication called Imagine Mexico. She focuses on how African descendants are the third root of the country's indigenous and European heritage.

Patricia: A one-drop rule, if you applied that to Mexico, I bet everybody be black, or just about. [laughs]

Adizah: If I could bring it back to Tulum, there is something here that many black Americans are connecting to. Tulum's history dates back to the Maya and their descendants who have lived on this land for about 800 years. Back then, Tulum was used as a major trading port. People say the Mayan ruins are one of the few energy vortexes in the world. Meaning that, there's so much energy in and around the ruins that you might say, it's on a higher vibrational plane. That's why people sometimes say they've been called to Tulum.

Male Speaker: Man, we're in Tulum, at the Mayan ruins, just climbed off the mount-- I mean pyramid got to the top.

Adizah: A couple years ago, Nipsey Hussle came down here and filmed his video for *Victory Lap* at the Mayan ruins.

[*Victory Lap* playing]

Adizah: In a way, Nipsey fits well into the story of Tulum's tourism ascent.

The story of Tulum reflects the story of many tourism spots before it. The exclusivity, the word of mouth, the boom, the overexposure. I heard from people who lived here that back in the early 2010s, Tulum was a vacation spot populated by mostly Mexicans, some Europeans and Argentinians, lots of models, photographers, and restaurateurs. Then, the boho-chic American started coming, the Coachella crowd. From that point forward, Tulum was on the map. In 2015, New York Magazine's *The Cut* called Tulum the Williamsburg of Mexico. To me, that means there were a lot of white people there. And even if there weren't a lot of us, I can almost guarantee that there were some black people in the mix. There always are.

Nubia: When I first got to Tulum, I was one of maybe five black people, so I didn't know any black people that actually lived until at the time.

Adizah: Nubia Younge was the woman with the shaved head greeting people at Welcome Wednesday. She's lived in Mexico since 2019, a year or so after Nipsey's video dropped and right around the time when *The Cut* pretty much declared Tulum dead. That same year, French *Vogue* stated Holbox, an island just a few miles northwest of Cancun was the new Tulum. But according to *The New York Times*, the new Tulum was Laguna Bacalar, a lake south of Tulum, Cancun and Holbox. They needed a new Tulum because climate change, greed, and waste were starting to destroy the original one. So, it's interesting to me that the pandemic supercharged Tulum's tourism ascent for Americans. The number of American tourists to the state where Tulum's located increased 23% in one year.

Nubia: Back in June, Tulum was quiet. It was beautiful, it was peaceful.

Adizah: Mexico and Tulum went into lockdown in the spring of 2020.

Nubia: You didn't hear any construction. There was nothing going on. It felt good for a little while. It felt good.

Adizah: Nubia began meeting up with friends. She was working as a travel writer, and what she calls an expat coach at the time.

Nubia: I was like, "Let's do brunch."

Adizah: Her brunches grew fast. So, she created a Facebook group, Black in Tulum.

Nubia: Hey, everybody what's going on? This is Nubia, the creator of Black in Tulum.

And that group started with 25 people on July 27th of 2020.

You guys, this has been an amazing two months, less than two months. And we are over 4000 people in the group and it is just amazing.

And here we are in March-- We're in March of 2021, and the group is over 13,500 people.

Adizah: Black in Tulum now has 16,000 members, and Nubia and the group she created have become a major factor in drawing more black Americans to visit Tulum.

Nubia: It has grown organically through word of mouth.

Adizah: But then, things started to change.

Nubia: I will say the unfortunate truth is that some people came for the right reasons and some people came for their own reasons.

Ryan: In August, the town was starting to smile a little bit more.

Adizah: Ryan arrived in Tulum in the summer of 2020, just in time for one of Nubia's early brunches.

Ryan: And then, the seasons did change and so did the individuals.

Nubia: I honestly attribute the change to the celebrities, to be honest with you.

Adizah: The opening of Tulum of lockdown coincided with a moment last summer during Labor Day weekend, when my sister sent me that video of Meg the Stallion.

Turns out that lots of videos of Meg were taken when she was in Tulum.

Nubia: That video is circulating everywhere and that's the representation that they're seeing of black people in Tulum, and that's not the representation of black people in Tulum.

Adizah: And they really had an impact in certain circles.

Nubia: Please do not come down here trying to just turn up because Tulum is a real chill vibe. It's a bohemian real cultural-- I would say earthy crunchy vibe. It really is.

Adizah: I just want to interject and say, by this point, Tulum was known for its party scene. People would go to parties on the beach, parties in cenotes, and dance to trancy electronic music.

Nubia: It is a jungle. Period. It's a jungle.

Adizah: But from what I could gather, there wasn't much hip hop or twerking. But when the Megan Stallion video went viral, that seemed to indicate to people that Tulum was close, Tulum was open, and Tulum was a good time. But Tulum was about to be overexposed.

Nubia: And then, it just seemed like a flood of celebrities. Next thing you know, Cardi B was in Tulum. Trey Songz. Chris Brown spent like a month or so in Tulum.

Rashid: We saw like Meek Mill tweeted about it and said, "Tulum is the way." I was like, "Oh shit, Meek Mill?" Oh, man. [chuckles] Damn, I'll don't fuck with Meek Mill, but damn.

Nubia: So, of course, if you're seeing your favorite celebrities in this place, what happens?

Adizah: The wannabe celebrities start coming.

Nubia: Honey, the wannabe Instagrammers start coming.

Adizah: A guy named Rashid from Oakland, who's been living in the area for the last eight years, told me, he had never seen anything like this in Tulum.

Rashid: That's when the Miami All Star Weekend kind of vibe--

Adizah: And what is that vibe? [crosstalk]

Rashid: I'll just give you an example. I got do-rags at the house. I've got to do-rags, but I never seen here all white linen-- He looked like he just came from the South Beach, all white crews with a do-rag on. He had the uncle sandals on, barbecue sandals. I was like, "Okay. Oh, yeah, Tulum is on the map."

Nubia: What Tulum is not, it is not the new Miami, okay?

Adizah: I found all of this pretty amusing and kind of absurd. But there was also something that was precarious about this conversation. What I feel is being implied is that some of these tourists lack respectability. Now, I'm not saying that if some racist shit went down, nobody would be out there marching. But what I am saying is that I often feel black people, we can be most critical of our own.

It was Ryan who said something that got me thinking more deeply about the implications and assumptions that were being made here.

Ryan: I see a lot of people trying to find something when they come here. They're trying to find either love. [chuckles] They're trying to find happiness. They're trying to find clarity. They're trying to find comfort. The people that are coming here are trying to escape. They're trying to release just like we were.

Adizah: We all need to escape. We need freedom. We need to release. And when you start to judge how people who are coming here to escape release, then who are you saying is worthy of being free in the first place? Who defines what freedom looks like?

[music]

Glynn: When we return, we'll explore what if freedom looks a little bit different depending on where you're situated, when Snap Judgment, The Search of a Black Utopia continues. Stay tuned.

[music]

Glynn: Welcome back to Snap Judgment, In Search of a Black Utopia. My name is Glynn Washington, and today's episode features investigation from VICE News Reports. Producer, Adizah Eghan, she was just getting into what freedom looks like in Tulum, Mexico.

[background music]

Adizah: Hi.

Male Speaker: Hey, how are you?

Adizah: Hey. I'm good. How are you?

Male Speaker: Good. Thanks for coming by. Good to see you.

Adizah: No problem. Good to see you too.

That Saturday that I was in Tulum, I went to a party on a rooftop at a place called Hotel Macarena.

We're on a rooftop right now. I don't know, there probably like one, two, three, four, five six, seven, eight, nine--[crosstalk]

It the same party that the folks at the taqueria invited me to.

I won't lie, I feel a little awkward. I'm the girl with the microphone.

And at first, it was beautiful.

Male Speaker: What's the odds of me being called a celebrity at Tulum?

Adizah: That's good [unintelligible 00:36:31] length[?]. The other day--

But while I was there, I also walked over to the perimeter of the roof that we were on just to look at the view. I saw the road that I drove in on. It was an unpaved dirt road with buildings on the left, and jungle as far as I could see on the right.

[song playing in background]

Across the street from me is just all jungle. But I'm sure if I were to come back here in a year or two, this would be developed, there would be construction, the road would be paved, there'll be another hotel here because one thing I've noticed since being here is that--

The longer I stayed, the more I understood the hold that tourism had on the land and the people who live here.

Female Speaker: We don't have a good infrastructure in Tulum. There's actually none, sadly. They'll keep on selling and building big buildings. Do we know where that dirty water is going? No.

Adizah: I heard often about how the infrastructure in Tulum was being pushed to its limits.

Female Speaker: Sometimes, when there is big storms and stuff like that, all of the poops, it's floating.

Adizah: One businessowner told me that the problem wasn't just the tourists, but the greed of those who are letting this happen.

Female Speaker: More money, more money more money, but more money will not preserve your heritage.

Adizah: Tulum's population in 2010 was 28,000 people. It has more than doubled, not counting temporary residents and the millions of tourists coming in. Last year, the President of Mexico announced that they're building an airport in Tulum. A city that's expected to have over 200,000 people within a decade. And while all of this development has pulled in all kinds of immigration to Tulum. The city hasn't been a place of refuge for all.

Reporter: Victoria Esperanza Salazar was a refugee from El Salvador, a mother of two teenage girls, working in hotels in Mexico's resort town of Tulum. Now, she's the face of protests against violence towards women and police brutality.

Adizah: The murder of Victoria Salazar made it very clear that we couldn't say there was no racism or xenophobia in Mexico. The local police in Tulum were constantly abusing their authority. Things got so bad that the state government decided to step in and remove the local police, leaving the state

authorities in charge. Having a US passport and US dollars protected you in a place like Tulum. It helped make the vibes good.

But it turned out that the vibes weren't even that good all the time. I discovered some fissures, stories of people not supporting each other's businesses, friendships ending and toxic relationships. I listened. But ultimately, I felt regardless of where these people went, their problems were going to follow. I didn't feel it was my place to make the call, if they were better off here or in the States. But what did seem clear to me was that there's no one size fits all for self-determination. I wanted a black utopia, and I feel I discovered a bunch of people who were struggling along on their own twisted path. And that's where talking to Patricia who really clarified things for me.

Nubia: There is a woman, her name is Patricia Talley. She did reach out to me at one point and she said, "Nubia, I would love to bring you and some of the Afro-Mexican community to the table because they're angry at the fact that black Americans coming here and exuding their privilege." So, I politely declined, because I'm not an activist, nor am I an advocate for all black Americans. I was very careful to not get and cross those lines when I don't know enough.

Adizah: Patricia has positioned herself as a source of information and a bridge between black people in America, black people traveling to Mexico, and Afro-Mexicans. Even though she's halfway across the country, she went to Nubia because, as the founder of Black in Tulum and as an expat coach, she felt like Nubia was a leader.

Patricia: Maybe you don't want to be an activist. But guess what? Had we not been activists in the United States, you wouldn't even have the opportunity to be coming here.

Adizah: She's part of the civil rights organization, Mexico Negro A.C. They were the group behind the movement to count Afro-Mexicans in the 2020 census. After the census, Patricia says she learned that African Americans are the largest number of foreign-born African descendants in Mexico. I liked that Patricia wasn't just judging these folks from across the country. She lived that life. Patricia is a generation or two ahead of all these black Americans moving to Mexico. She seemed to have some insight. So, I came to her with all my big questions.

We've been talking about African Americans specifically, but you just said your goal is to lift people up. What does that look like for the diaspora?

Patricia: I do know, in terms of globalization, that we would have to change our USA philosophical mindset to truly be partnering.

Adizah: Patricia was in corporate banking and then the food and beverage industry. But in both careers, she hit what she called the cement ceiling. So, she turned to academia and traveled to Mexico to do research. She decided to move to Mexico indefinitely with her husband.

Patricia: And ended up opening up a Chicks Fried Chicken restaurant.

Adizah: It was called Chicks Fried Chicken?

Patricia: Uh-huh. I could fry some chicken. My daddy was vice president of the operating company for Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Adizah: So, you have the recipe.

Patricia: I got the recipe.

[laughter]

Adizah: She says it was the first time she ever felt a sense of freedom as a black woman, which reminded me of what Audre Lorde said about finding it exciting and affirming to be around so many brown faces.

Patricia: And I was sitting up in a bikini with an apron on frying chicken and make an apple pie.

Adizah: Patricia went on to teach English in Mexico, and she became a dual citizen in 2018. I have this question, why is everybody moving to Tulum, but it's really this greater question of why people are moving to Mexico, and they're moving to Mexico and they're starting businesses, and this is really your experience.

Patricia: Somebody told me, "For African Americans, the American Dream is a nightmare." Whoa, [chuckles] that's a powerful statement.

Adizah: I'd imagine too, it might feel good to exercise a little bit of that privilege and not accept [crosstalk] somewhere else.

Patricia: Oh, yes. Oh, honey, I'm Professoressa Maestro Pati. I can't get people to call me by my first name, Patricia. Forget that. I'm maestro. So, it feels good. [chuckles] It truly does to be respected and honored. Once again, that's the privilege of having had an education that many don't have access to. It's the privilege of having US dollars that people don't have access to. So yeah, to be able to sit back in my backyard and sit at the pool and watch the mountains and listen to the birds, and I don't have to worry about things.

Adizah: Mm-hmm.

There are marketing companies who research black travelers. According to them, the intent for African Americans to move and travel abroad is only going up. I think our ancestors were onto something when they decided to leave the US. But what I gather was the most important from those journeys, was the unlocking of a new state of mind.

Patricia: I think every generation is still searching for that freedom. There's still the quest for that. Wherever it may be, the commonality is that people are looking for a better life for themselves, for their kids, for their grandkids. Historically, that has not been our experience in the United States. If folks can find an easier path, then that seems like that's what they want to do.

Adizah: Let me ask you, you've been in Mexico for 24 years. You've been upfront about the benefits, the happiness, the freedom, the privilege, but do you feel free?

Patricia: I feel freer. I will never be free from the memories. But I have a pathway for me to live a more comfortable and satisfactory life. I've got extended family here, I have a community here, I'm respected here. Freedom is a state of mind and being able to do things without barriers and be able to be judged by your character versus the color of your skin. I am closer to that freedom than I've ever been before. Closer is good.

[music]

Glynn: Big, big thanks to Nubia Younge, Patricia Talley, and all those in Tulum. This episode was produced by Adizah Eghan and edited by Kate Osborn and James T. Green with help from Annie Aviles and Stephanie Kariuki. The original score is by Kyle Murdock.

[music]

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And know, this is not the news. No way this is a news. In fact, to get away from all those crazies in your town. You can pack up and move to Tulum, only to discover all those crazies had exactly the same idea at exactly the same time. And you would still not be as far away from the news as this is, but this is PRX.

[music]