

Expo Superfans

ARCHIVE: San Diego Comic-Con overlaid

NOON SALIH: Comic books have their comic geeks...

ARCHIVE: BTS concert in KSA

NOON SALIH: South Korean K-Pop boy band BTS has its Army...

And World Expos have their...superfans.

MUSIC

JASON GRIFFING: Hi, my name's Jason Griffing.

CESAR CORONA: I am Cesar Corona.

JASON GRIFFING: I consider myself an Expo fan, Expo fanatic, superfan - whatever you want to call it.

CESAR CORONA: I consider myself an Expo superfan.

NOON SALIH: Jason and Cesar have each visited multiple World and Specialized Expos throughout their lives, including Expo 2020 Dubai. With each Expo, they travel the world over the span of a few days - without even setting foot on an airplane. But it's more than just a trip for them - it's an experience.

JASON GRIFFING: I've got a lot of curiosity in my life. I seek out what's behind the closed door. What's going to happen in the future.

And that's what Expo is about. I mean, you're seeing what's going to happen in the future. What are we doing to solve problems? That sort of stuff just, really gets me excited. So, yeah, I'm a fanatic about it. You know, I follow them. I wanna see where they are, where they're going to be, where they've been. I want to see past ones and the history of them.

So, you know, it's not just about travel and an exciting destination and something that's happening then. It's, it's following it across the years and the history of it.

NOON SALIH: In this episode, we hear from these bona fide Expo superfans, as they share with us their favorite stories, the work they do to keep the legacy of Expos alive, and why you should become an Expo superfan yourself.

Get your Expo passport ready!

I'm Noon Salih, and this is Inside Expo, an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai, where history is being made.

[INTRO STING]

NOON SALIH: Do you remember where you were in 1982, 40 years ago?

JASON GRIFFING: God, you're going back into the memory vault.

NOON SALIH: Well, Jason remembers. He was a high school student in his home state of Connecticut, USA, hanging out with his friends like most high schoolers do. At the time, the 1982 Specialized Expo was being held in Knoxville, Tennessee.

JASON GRIFFING: We just saw it advertised on TV. It's like, Hey, come to the world's fair, you know, it looked really cool.

ARCHIVE: 1982 Knoxville Expo Commercial

JASON GRIFFING: So we piled in a station wagon and drove from Connecticut straight to Knoxville and we're planning on staying in a campground, which ended up being, being a parking lot from a.. an amusement park.

And we decided it was going to be more comfortable just to put the seats down in the car. And since it was a station wagon, sleep in the car, which we did.

ARCHIVE: President Ronald Raegan delivering a speech at the Expo's opening

NOON SALIH: The 1982 Knoxville World's Fair, recognized by the BIE as a Specialized Expo, opened its doors on May 1st and ran for 6 months. Under the theme, "Energy Turns the World," the Expo's main symbol was the Sunsphere, an 81 meter steel tower with a gold globe on top that still stands today.

When Jason arrived, he knew something special was unfolding right before his eyes.

JASON GRIFFING: What really just blew me away, you know - technology is progressing so fast and it doesn't seem like, although things improve - you know,

an iPhone X to a 13, you know, what's the big difference between them? Yeah. There's some differences. But back in the eighties, when things changed... things changed.

NOON SALIH: These changes included something you might've actually used to play this podcast episode - the touch screen! Which was publicly showcased for the first time at the Expo. Remember, that was 40. Years. Ago.

That desire to know what the next big change was, brought Jason to the 1984 New Orleans World's Fair, also a Specialized Expo. It was also a turning point for Jason's fandom.

MUSIC

JASON GRIFFING: The Japan pavilion stated their world's fair was gonna be in 1985 in Tsukuba, Japan. And I'm like, wow, they're all over the world! It didn't dawn on me that they were held around the world because I had only been to two in the United States. So then, you know, doing some study; reading about Expos, wow. They've been happening since 1851? You know, the first one was in London? Wow, the Eiffel tower was built for a World's Fair? The Atomium, the Space Needle, the first ice cream cone, the first Ferris wheel? All these things that have, you know, their first was at a world's fair. I just was like, man... this is incredible!

What sort of stuff can I see coming up in the future by attending these events?

NOON SALIH: And right then and there, an Expo Superfan was born.

Now, it would probably take us... 4-hours to take you through all the Expos Jason has attended, but we wanted to give him a chance to tell you which ones he's been to. So...we put 40 seconds on the clock - one second for each year since 1982 - and asked him to name each Expo he's visited.

JASON GRIFFING: Okay. 1982 Knoxville, Tennessee. 1984 New Orleans, New Orleans in the USA. 1985 Tsukuba, Japan. 1986 Vancouver, Canada. 1988 Brisbane, Australia. 1992. Seville, Spain. Let's see, '93 - 1998 Lisbon, Portugal. 2000 Hannover, Germany. 2005 Aichi, Japan. 2008 Zaragoza, Spain. 2010 Shanghai, China. 2012 Yeosu, South Korea. 2015 Milan, Italy. 2017 Astana, Kazakhstan. And 2020 Dubai.

NOON SALIH: And with 2 seconds to spare! If you were keeping count, that's 15 Expos in total. According to our research, that places Jason high up on the list of people with the most attendance at Expos. Right under "Expo Grandpa" Ronald Skiles - a 74 year-old American who has visited 16 Expos.

JASON GRIFFING: 40 years, yeah! You're making me feel old, that's what you're making me...

MUSIC

NOON SALIH: Mexico City, Mexico, 1998.

CESAR CORONA: I was studying Portuguese at the university.

NOON SALIH: Cesar Corona, our second superfan.

CESAR CORONA: In that class, I received a magazine with a pamphlet about Expo '98 Lisbon. And I had a fresh memory of Expo '92 Seville. So I thought, well, maybe there's a way for me to participate with the Mexico pavilion so they can actually pay for my trip. And so I got to go to the Expo in Lisbon, but not with the Mexican pavilion. I went with the Mexican restaurant.

ARCHIVE: Expo '98 Lisbon Promo Video

NOON SALIH: Expo '98 Lisbon, another Specialized Expo, opened its doors on May 22nd and ran for 5 months. It had the theme, "The Oceans, a Heritage for the Future" and, according to Cesar, was one of the most entertaining and spectacular Expos he's been to. But that wasn't what made him a superfan.

CESAR CORONA: Just those days before the Expo starts, before it opens when you see everyone from so many countries working to get their pavilions ready and their restaurants and their shows ready. And because they have some free time too, you start interacting with a lot of people. I became very good friends with the Turkish staff in the restaurant, which was purely first Turkish people I met in my life.

Some of my colleagues became very good friends with people from Angola, Capo Verde. It was such a nice experience to see people interacting with individuals from other countries that we never get to interact with. For me, it was like seeing all the wealth of humankind in one place, at one time.

NOON SALIH: And from there, Cesar started his Expo superfandom journey, even dedicating his life and his passion for photography to Expos.

CESAR CORONA: I decided to change careers at college. So I was doing electronics engineering. I went for International Relations and then I decided to focus on Expos. And then this is what has brought me to Expos not only as a visitor, but also trying to research and learn from them.

NOON SALIH: Cesar has since visited a total of 6 Expos: 1998 Lisbon, 2000 Hannover, 2010 Shanghai, 2012 Yeosu, 2015 Milan, and Expo 2020 Dubai. He went from working at the Mexican Pavilion's restaurant, to becoming a pavilion host. He then established research projects under the University of Southern California Centre on Public Diplomacy and the BIE, before finally attending Expo 2020 Dubai. This Expo meant a lot to him.

ARCHIVE: Al Wasl Dome Water Show Ambi

CESAR CORONA: Dubai learned a lot from many different Expos. I think they took the best of many Expos. So, this is the best trip of my life. When I got to the Expo site, I felt like a fish who had been out of their medium and they are brought to the ocean.

It wasn't only the place, it was also walking around and seeing again people I met in past Expos. I ran into some people I didn't know were there and all of a sudden I see them in an event and... I think for the very first time I felt, this is my world. This is where I belong.

ARCHIVE: Al Wasl Dome Water Show Ambi

NOON SALIH: Even though Expos are regulated by the BIE, each one has its own flavor, its own culture, its own identity. So it makes sense that each superfan will have a different experience with Expos. Jason and Cesar are perfect examples. First up, their Expo rituals.

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JASON GRIFFING: My goal is to visit every single pavilion. And I manage my trip and planning of my trip to make sure I'm going at a time where I'm going to be able to go there, every single pavilion.

CESAR CORONA: So I have two rituals. The first one is, it's a very solemn moment for me when I first see the Expo site. I'm usually in a taxi or in the metro.

And I have this feeling that the Expo site is going to appear somewhere. So I just, when I go with someone, I try not to talk. I try because it's a very important moment for me.

And my second ritual is visiting the Mexico Pavilion first. After that, I try to be organized. I never do it because there's always something in the way, like something more interesting happening. Just ... let it take me at least for the first few days. Enjoy it, take it. Later, you'll go take photos and be more organized, but live the experience.

NOON SALIH: Next up, Expo collectibles. Expos offer their fans lots of souvenirs and memorabilia. Most famous of which, of course, is the Expo passport which made its first appearance in Expo Montreal, 1967. Visitors collect pavilion stamps in these passports as proof of them traveling the world at the Expo, including limited

edition stamps like the Golden Jubilee or the Al Wasl stamp at Expo 2020 Dubai. Expos also have coins, clothing, watches - you name it. But our two superfans have their own special ways of preserving their Expo memories.

CESAR CORONA: I still have, I mean, boxes with newsletters from before the Expo. So in preparation to Expo, and then I kept collecting the - they had a newspaper at the time, everyday, you would see what happened and what was happening.

What I did in Lisbon, one of my uniform shirts which had the Mexico pavilion logo on it. I used to collect stamps, which was very hard. I keep it very carefully. After that, I decided to, instead of a shirt, find a map or a poster and then collect stamps there.

And I think for Dubai, I tried the same. I did that on a Expo map, but I just brought it everywhere. So it's kind of like falling apart right now, which also tells a story. I mean, I'm going to frame it!

NOON SALIH: Jason, on the other hand, gets a guidebook, a hat, a t-shirt, a physical ticket, and a coffee mug from every Expo he visits. By the way, he doesn't drink coffee. But his favorite collectibles are actually a little unexpected...

JASON GRIFFING: My favorite thing, souvenir of Expos, is the mundane and the things that people don't think of as souvenirs. I have a can of soda, a Coca-Cola can from the 1982 Expo that says "Official Soda of World Expo '82." I have, of course, I got two Pepsi cans from Dubai that say "Official Soda of Dubai Expo." Little things like that. In Milan, in the Russia pavilion, they were serving little appetizers in their pavilion and they served them in these little bamboo boats. Well, I saved the bamboo boats.

NOON SALIH: Our superfans also visited different legacy sites...

JASON GRIFFING: Whenever I travel somewhere like, oh, was there an Expo here?

NOON SALIH: But if they could go back in time and visit an Expo that took place before they were born...

CESAR CORONA: I think I would visit the very first one - London, 1851.

JASON GRIFFING: Yeah, you know, if I could go back in time, and I hate to say this because it seems so patriotic, is the 1939-40 World's Fair in the United States is one of the ones. And mainly just because technology was just evolving so fast right then, so much was being presented - you know, the television and...even on the same level, 1958 in Brussels. The Atomium, what an incredible building! I've gone and visited it, of course.

NOON SALIH: And finally, each superfan has their own story where the Expo becomes more than just a trip to a new country.

ARCHIVE: Expo Shanghai 2010 Promotional Video

JASON GRIFFING: Shanghai, 2010. I was waiting in line at one of the pavilions. It was probably about 98 degrees. I went during one of the highest times, and waiting in line and there was a kid next to me, high school or college. I don't know, he was around 18, 19, 20 years old, something like that. Jin, his name's Jin, and we just started talking. We went through the pavilion together. We found out we were both, you know, at the Expo for the day.

So we just went around the Expo for the day together. We met another girl at some point and she hung around with us and we spent the whole day at Expo. Well, we exchanged phone numbers and whatnot. And I found out he was living in Suzhou, which is a beautiful city in Shanghai known for its gardens and whatnot.

And he said, you know, if you'd like to come up to Suzhou one day, come up, you know? So I went up to Suzhou. He took me around, you know, some of the gardens, took me to a great place to eat. I mean, the Chinese are extremely hospitable. And we had a great time that day. And since then we've walked through his whole portion of life with marrying his wife, Nico. And now he has two kids and he graduated school and he's an architect and he's designing all these beautiful things over in Shanghai and has gone to another Expo himself. I got him involved in the Expos, and we haven't met at an Expo again, but you know, that's the sort of lasting cultural things that makes the world smaller.

ARCHIVE: Expo Yeosu 2012 Opening Ceremony

CESAR CORONA: I'm going to talk more about one photograph I took that was really a unique moment. So this was at Expo 2012 Yeosu. I think we, the Secretary-General of the BIE, Dimitri Kerkentzes and I. We went for lunch and our office was right in the international pavilion. Well, there was an international population building with - like four different sections and right in the middle, every now and then they would have a stage.

Usually there were smaller shows. So crowds were very manageable in that area, but that day we came back and we couldn't enter our office. I mean, the crowd

took every single space possible and we didn't know what was happening! It happened to be the Korean singer, PSY.

“Gangnam Style” was the song at that time. Fortunately for me, he wasn't singing that song at the moment. I thought, well, this is my opportunity to take pictures because this crowd, I mean, at this level, you don't see that frequently. So I managed to take some pictures and then there was a bridge connecting two of the international sections right above the stage. I was able to get to the edge of that bridge. And then I took a picture from right above the stage when PSY was singing “Gangnam Style.”

ARCHIVE: PSY performing “Gangnam Style” at Yeosu 2012

So you see this - it's like a carpet! Just people covering every single space. And then in the middle, one of the symbols of the Expo, which was a sculpture of a family. When you first see the picture, it's all these people - and all of a sudden you start seeing that sculpture kind of emerging from there.

Just that crazy moment that I was able to document. I treasure that picture.

MUSIC

NOON SALIH: These experiences are proof of Jason and Cesar's Expo superfandom. A fandom that goes beyond just visiting Expos. They now collaborate on ExpoMuseum.com which is an online home for Expo history and Expo superfans around the world. The website was founded in 1998 by the late legendary superfan, Urso Chappell.

CESAR CORONA: This is a project owned by different people, and more and more people are joining. The idea is to become a hub - first, for people interested in Expos, mostly from the fan and the visitor side of it. But eventually we want this to also become a resource for countries participating and for countries who want to organize an Expo or who already are organizing an Expo.

NOON SALIH: ExpoMuseum.com is not to be confused with the physical World Expo Museum, which now exists on the legacy site of Expo 2010 Shanghai. During their visit to Expo 2020 Dubai, Jason and Cesar connected with the leaders of the World Expo Museum, discussing which items should be brought back to the museum from Dubai. They talked about preserving everything from the wayfinding signs to recycling bins. But perhaps one thing will be a beautiful reminder of the triumph that is Expo 2020 Dubai, and a symbol of the challenging period in which it was held.

JASON GRIFFING: One of the things the World Expo Museum thought would be a great time capsule sort of piece of where society was during the Dubai Expo was the fact that everyone was wearing masks. And most of the, if not all of the, pavilions have face masks made with their logo on them.

So they were doing a little, they're planning on doing a little collage display of all the masks from all the different pavilions around the site. And I did that too. I went around to a couple of pavilions, commandeered some masks for them and brought them back to the Expo Museum Pavilion for them which made them very happy.

MUSIC

NOON SALIH: So...what is it about Expos that makes someone a superfan?

CESAR CORONA: It's 170 years of evolution. I mean, they are older than the modern Olympic Games, older than the FIFA World Cup. The first Olympic Games in the US happened inside an Expo in 1904, which is hard to believe now. Expos - they tend to touch people at a deeper level.

Expos tell us their purpose, educating the public. Its education is leaving something in the people's minds. And that learning is going to be unique to you, but that stays with you for years, if not for the rest of your life. And sometimes that has an effect on people around you too. When you see other countries and you compare that to your own country, you see your country with different eyes. You start finding opportunities to improve things, and also opportunities to value your own country more. Sometimes you see, well, this country shared this, but we have something like this too, and we're not talking about it. So I think the legacy that imprints in humans' minds is what's more valuable about Expos.

JASON GRIFFING: It's seeing again, the differences we have aren't that great and differences are good! Differences don't have to be bad, you know? But the commonalities are what really makes us see as a world that we're in this together. We do need to make some decisions and as one we can make those decisions. And by knowing each other and working with each other, we'll be able to do that. And I think Expos really bring the world together.

NOON SALIH: To our listeners and especially those who haven't had a chance to visit Expo 2020 Dubai or any other Expo yet... we hope that this podcast and Expo 2020 Dubai's broadcasting tools, like Virtual Expo and Expo TV, have given you the chance to call yourself an Expo superfan.

NOON SALIH: Inside Expo takes you behind the scenes at Expo 2020 Dubai, sharing our stories and others across the 170-year history of this global event. Learn more by visiting VirtualExpoDubai.com.

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