



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

This week, we are gonna continue our series about guidebooks. And this week, we're looking at the life of a guidebook writer. Now, I'm gonna touch a little bit on the writing side. But we've got a whole webinar dedicated to how to do that writing, what the writing looks like both in format as well as content. And we'll talk a little bit about the content management systems that that goes into and how you set up your book. All of that is happening next week. So this is more the lifestyle, the schedule, the workload, the demands, is what we're gonna be talking about this week.

How many of you guys were on the webinar last week where we talked about the basic fundamentals of guidebooks, the different companies, the differences between those companies? Let me know in the chat box if you joined us last week. If you were not with us last week, I talked about the differences between companies like Lonely Planet, and Rough Guides, and Eye Witness, and Frommer's, and photos, and all of those things. So we've already got a whole hour on that. So I'm not gonna spend this hour going back into that because, last week, I very specifically didn't talk about the life of the guidebook writer, so I'm gonna keep those separate. So if you missed that, make sure to pick that up.

So specifically what we're gonna focus on today is four things. So we've got two disclaimers. One is the same disclaimer that I gave you last week that I'm gonna give you again. And you'll hear that in a minute. And the second disclaimer is around a bit of the grumbles and the frumpiness around the work of guidebook writing, and why that exists, and why it shouldn't necessarily phase you, but you should know about it.

And the next thing I'm gonna go into, there's a small typo in there, I apologize, is the five pillars of the life of the guidebook writer that you should keep in mind as you go into any engagement. And you should keep this in mind both in terms of whether you even decide to go off for one in the first place, whether you wanna do a contract before you move into doing a full book, and also how you negotiate those things in your contract, like, how much money you have for expenses versus pay, if that's all gonna be one lump sum, the deadline that you have on your book, they all really depend on these bits about how you will get your work done. So I'm gonna give you five things there to consider to keep in mind both if this is for you, and to set the terms if you do go ahead and do it.

And I just found out somebody who's new in the coaching program, we've got spots in our coaching program open this month, is actually doing a guidebook that I thought of applying for. So, guys, there's tons of guidebook work out there. It really turns over quickly in terms of the assignments these days, and you can get it even if you don't feel like you have a lot of background, and it will give you a financial cushion. She's basically set for, like, the next six



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

or eight months of full-time income just from doing this guidebook alone. So that's why we talked about last week was more than income side of it. So if you wanna hear more about that income side, I recommend checking out the past webinar.

And then the last thing that we're gonna talk about is the pitfalls of poor preparation. And you could say that there's pitfalls of poor preparation in any type of travel. But I'm gonna look at five aspects or facets, if you will, of ways that it can go wrong in guidebook writing specifically. And they're all different dimensions of the preparation. So you might totally excel at one and forget to do another, and that can make your life pretty hellish. So that's what I'm gonna talk to you about, all five of those different dimensions.

So I was just talking about magazines. Magazines are my background, vlogs, travel blogs, content marketing for clients is also my background, but something that is not in my background, and this is disclaimer number one of our webinar today, is guidebook writing. There was a guidebook I was thinking of applying for. I got busy doing the boot camp that we do at our retreat house where we've got travel writers that come up for a week, and we go out every afternoon on tours, and they practice their interviewing skills and idea generation, and then come back, and recap, and debrief. I got busy with that. And then someone who's now a coaching student of mine applied and got that guidebook.

So I have not written a guidebook yet. I've written a book, but I know a lot of people who not just have written guidebooks but whose entire career, if not currently but for many years, was built around writing for guidebooks. So the information that I'm bringing to you, guys, this week, it's gonna be different than how I often have examples for you guys from my own experience, but also my coaching, and people I've heard from conferences. This will be more the experience of others that I'm sharing with you. But because of that, I'm gonna bring you a lot of different perspectives, people who have written for different guidebooks companies, people who have written specialized books like biking in the Pyrenees versus a whole country book, all sorts of different things like that. So we're gonna look at it from that angle. So I just wanna have that out there. I have not written for guidebooks myself, but I have a lot of folks that I've talked to about this, including somebody I just caught up with the other day for this phone call about how that works.

So the second big disclaimer, and this comes with gold stars for whoever figures out where this quote came from, is how guidebook writing works and what you may have heard about it. So if anybody has spotted the source of this quote, like I said, gold star, the quote is, "Get with it girl, you are never getting off this train." So in this scene, which is from a popular movie based on a very popular book, somebody said, "Well, oh, I just have to do it now. I



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

just have to convince them for now. Like, I just have to do it.” And then her mentor, clue right there, says, “No, this is your life now.”

So this is from Hunger Games, by the way. I believe the last Hunger Games movie or the second-to-last Hunger Games movie, part one of two. This quote is about the moment in which somebody realizes what they’ve signed up for, right? We can think about it that way. You often get into things, whether it’s a whole career, or just an assignment, or working with a specific client. Without being fully cognizant of everything it entails. In fact, I would say it’s next to impossible to get into something new without being completely cognizant of what it entails because you’ve never done it before. How would you know?

So I’ve got another quote here for you guys. Oh, we’re gonna go to the quote right away and I’ll come back. Oh no, it’s too far away. Okay, hold on, let’s still go here.

So this quote is from somebody who has written a number of guidebooks, become known, in fact, for writing about writing guidebooks. This is my friend Leif Pettersen. He has a blog called Killing Batteries and a book about following Dracula through Eastern Europe, that’s his nonfiction narrative book that he put out self-published. But he’s also written a number of guidebooks. And he has been interviewed about writing guidebooks, and he has multiple posts on his Killing Batteries blog that you can Google about the work of the guidebook writer. And I pulled this quote for you guys because it really encapsulates that moment where you realize that you’re not getting off this train, and all of the things that you are unhappy about. So he says, “Guidebook research means enduring long hours (sometimes 10 to 12 hours a day, 7 days a week while on the road, less ideally but not necessarily, during write-up), extravagant jet lag and sleep debt, often undignified travel and sleeping conditions, and in many cases, resolve-testing solitude and loneliness both on the road and during write-up.”

Now, I know some of you who are on the call today, but not all of you. And for those of you who are on the call and have been travel writing for a while, you might find that you could just take out the noun there in guidebook research and instead write “travel writing”, and this whole paragraph would still make sense. Let me know in the chat box if you know what I’m talking about.

In fact, for instance, right now I’m here in the Netherlands for the UK’s biggest travel blogging conference. And I have had a series of flight issues the last couple weeks. Today I arrived, and my Airbnb was completely sketchy so I had to get a last-minute reservation at a hotel. I have been on buses that I had to take in the middle of the night for no apparent reason because they were scheduled earlier and I don’t know what happened. All of these things just



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

in the last couple days. So extravagant jet lag and sleep debt, often undignified travel and sleeping conditions. So many of these things also happen to leisure travelers, enduring long hours working also on the weekends. Especially those of you who have full-time jobs and you do your travel on the side, this is gonna look like you because you're putting in those hours on your blog or your other travel writing in the evening after your full-time job. So in so many ways, the things that strike people, that people complain about, that they get up in arms about, about guidebook writing are really tenants of travel writing period. They are tenants of what your life as a travel writer looks like when you are on the road as opposed to at home writing.

So I was talking to somebody recently about how, as travel writers, we really have two modes, unless we are location-dependent and live in the places that we're writing about all the time for long periods of time that are very comfortable. Our two modes are travel and normal, or, you know, life or home, or whatever you wanna call it. And when we are traveling, because we are either traveling on our own dime, or the dime of somebody who is trying also to stretch it as far as possible like a tours company, a hotel, a PR company, a casino, maybe an airline, that's so common these days, that happens, a tour company, whether it's us or them, whoever is paying for that trip, the goal is to get as much research, to see as many things as possible, or it's not work, it's leisure travel. So you can combine those things. I'm not gonna say that we, travel writers, are the masters of leisure because I hate that word, but you can combine those things where you are on a trip perhaps with friends and family, and you're doing work for your writing, or you can slow travel writing travel, which is still not as slow as slow travel.

But the inherent aspect of traveling as a travel writer is that you are cramming and seeing as many things as you can in that place. And I doubt that even if you aren't working on a guidebook, you aren't doing something, whether you're on your laptop physically or you're out exploring, that goes in the realm of your travel writing hours, when you wake up in the morning until you go to sleep at night. Most people aren't watching tons of TV on their couch when they're out traveling, most people aren't, you know, sitting in a cafe just reading a book unless it's specifically designed to soak up the ambiance or because they need a break or whatever it is. We are out there for those 10 to 12 hours a day. We are walking a lot. I used to clock, like, 14 or 15 miles a day often. We are sometimes jet-lagged, but often exhausted, and part of that is from soaking up so much new information. And we are more than your average individual encountering all of these different, like, annoying, horrible, effed-up, unfair things about the world that come up when you travel. And so, something to realize about the life of a guidebook writer specifically within the realm of travel writing is that, in many ways, it's not that different than other types of writing on the road. What it is different than is types of writing you do at home.



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

So I talked about these two dichotomies, there's the writing that you do at home, which is travel writing, and then there's the traveling that you do and you often need to be writing alongside of that. There was a press trip attached to the TBEX conference for travel bloggers specifically a few years ago where they picked the top, top, top bloggers in the whole industry, and stuck them all together in a house, kind of Real World style, except without the cameras. And they were in this house on an island that had sort of closed for the season. So a lot of the things they were supposed to be able to do weren't possible. They really had to fend for themselves. They would show up for appointments and they would just be canceled. It was really kind of one of these, like, all the things that can go wrong go wrong instances. And then you have a bunch of personalities that are in a house.

And a friend of mine who fortunately encountered this group during this period without having to be one of them told me that he was really struck by this couple. Their name is Deb and Dave from the Planet D. If you're in the travel blogging world, you might be familiar with them and their hours. Their professionalism, yes, but their hours. And he told me that they would be out all day traveling, taking pictures, interviewing people, getting quotes, doing their social media while they were out. And then they would come home, and then they would work until about 11:00, maybe later, depending on when they came home from dinner, fulfilling their obligations for different clients. They had clients like American Express, they had big brand-name clients. And they would come home after being out doing the research, and they would sit their butts in the chair, and they would do more work. And they certainly weren't only doing this on the weekdays.

So guidebook writing these days, to be honest, I think looks a lot like travel blogging. But there are easier types of writing out there. So what if you are doing travel copywriting? You don't actually even need to travel for that. You can do copywriting based on your past experience, based on research that you come up with online. You don't even really need to do interviews by phone. And even better, there's a lot less checking in with your clients. If you have a blog, you might think of your clients as your readers. If you are a journalist or some other type of freelancer, you would obviously think of your clients as the people who are paying you. But there's a lot less need to go back and forth on email, you have a lot more control of your own schedule.

Now, if you're a travel journalist, you might be traveling, you might not. You might be doing most of your research via phone interviews. This is very, very easy and possible to do in this day and age, especially if you specialize in writing newsy pieces, or profiles, or other types of front of book pieces. And one of the great things about that is that you could just spend a great chunk of your day, or most of your day as many of your days, talking to people about what they're passionate about, getting to have conversations with people who are excited



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

about something. And even more than that, you have the rush of getting paid to learn about something that you're interested in, that you had an idea about, and someone affirmed that that idea was interesting enough, that thousands or millions of people are wanting to read about it.

And then content marketing, so doing blogs, and social media, and things like that for companies, you get to exercise all sorts of different voices. It's not like the blog where you have to be this idealized version of yourself all the time. And as you're doing that, you're getting paid so well that you probably only have to work half-time. I've gone to conference after conference these days where full-time people say, well, of course, they do content marketing because, you know, that pays great. So this is a pretty known thing now, that the pay is there for content marketing.

So what's the pro about guidebook writing, that might be the next question. But it has elements of all of these. And that's actually one of the coolest things about it if you ask me, besides the pay and the stability which we spoke at length about last week. So when you're on the road, you get the journalism pros of getting to spend your day talking to people about what they're passionate about. But then you also get that pro that you put together this outline of your book proposal of what was gonna go in there, and the editor said, "Yeah. Great. Let's do that. Let's cover that," and you get to write about it. You've also got the copywriting pros, more when you go to the writing side, and I'll talk more about that, like I said, next week, where you get to just sit down, hunker down with your notes, not have to email people, not even have to, like, shower, whatever you want, and you just sit and write all day in your own little cocoon. But then you also have the content marketing pro where you get paid handsomely. So a lot of these things roll into guidebook writing. So there's so many pros that, in so many ways, whether you wanna say they outweigh those cons of what Leif was saying, about what the life of the...there's a little pun there, Leif is the guy's name, and life also is life, so what the life of the guidebook writer is like.

But the other thing is that...the idea of the nomadic travel blogger, right? This person who doesn't necessarily have a home base, they're here for two days, they go there to stay for a month, but they're really taking weekend trips here, here and there. You also get to do that as a guidebook writer, especially if you're doing a whole country. You will be on the road conceivably for four months maybe, researching this guidebook. So you also get to play at those lovely things of being the nomadic travel blogger without actually having to build up your own audience.



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

So these are some things about the lifestyle of the guidebook writer that are very appealing, that you might not necessarily have considered what goes into that, sort of, from that attractive standpoint outside of the idea that, you know, if you heard me last week, I said that the pay can be quite nice, but also that cachet of having the book credit to your name. The lifestyle also has a lot of attractive draws to it. And that's why, even in this day and age when you don't think, first and foremost, of, "Oh, I wanna be a travel writer. I wanna write guidebooks." You think, "Oh, I wanna be an Instagram influencer because that looks easy," right? Like, it's not something that jumps to people's mind, but it's a really lovely way to have a life as a travel writer.

But there's those five pillars that I talked about, right? So I wanna break each of those down piece by piece to really dive into what the lifestyle is like. So first of all, it depends a lot on your assignment. So a small recap from last week, we talked about how some companies, especially more established, larger travel writing companies, are more likely to assign newer-to-them writers to do a chapter in a larger book, especially as part of an update to a book that already exists. But there's some companies that are really lovely, including Rough Guides actually, but Moon Guide, which is out of Avalon which is out of Hachette, it's one of the big five publishing houses, they will assign you an entire book for you to do in your own voice with your own supervision over the whole book. Frommer's works in a similar way, though they're assigning many fewer books. Moon tends to have... I showed a slide with all the ones that they were looking for in the last webinar, but I think they've got about 20-odd titles right now that they're looking for writers on. That's huge, 20 titles. You go to Lonely Planet and that's, like, get in the queue and wait to see if you hear about, like, one thing.

So if you are new to guidebook writing, and especially new to a particular company, you have to think for yourself, "Do I wanna do a chapter where my commitment is low, where I can dip my toe in this life," especially if it's an update chapter, someone else has already done a lot of the writing in the previous version, and you are going through and making sure that things are still there, that they're still open, so you have a framework for your research, and you also have a basis for the writing about the region. Obviously, you're going to freshen it up, including the things about the attractions. But there's a lot less onus on you to be brilliant in front of your computer on a daily basis, and also to be brilliant in your research out there on a daily basis.

However, writing a book is gonna carry that cachet that just you wrote this whole guidebook. But it's a lot more work, and it's not just more work in terms of the writing, it's a lot more work in terms of the organization. So I said that, at the end of the call, we were gonna talk about the poor planning or poor preparation pitfalls. And not just booking your travel, but booking your travel in a cohesive order, figuring out when you're gonna file different



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

chapters for your editor, what makes sense, what chapters will be easiest for you to write first, what chapters will be harder to write, what chapters you'll really need good internet to do a lot of fact-checking as you're writing those up, when your editor will be getting back to you with edits, and where in the world you will be, and if it will be easy for you to work on those edits, these are all the things that you have to consider when you're working on an entire book.

So like I said, you might be just doing the research, forget about the book writing, for a whole book over the course of four or six months. There's somebody that I've coached who is in South America, and she's doing, a rather large South American country, their entire guidebook for Moon. And she's in the position where she, at the same time, has two book chapters that she's also doing for Rough Guides. So she's got two different guidebook companies that she's working on in the same span of time, about three different countries, and she's got a mix of chapters and books. So as she was working on her chapters, one of the things that she said to me was that the writing part of that was so much easier. It was just so much easier because Rough Guides, as someone that assigns individual chapters out, needs to have a cohesive voice throughout the book. So you learn what the voice is and you copy it. Whereas for her guidebook, she was figuring that out as she went along, how historical was she gonna be, how much was she gonna dig into food, and how much was overkill. That was something that was gonna be unique to her book and her voice, and that was a lot harder for her. However, she's not a veteran travel writer, she's only been doing this for about a year. And somebody who is a veteran travel writer, perhaps with a journalism background, they might find that idea of using their own voice faster than moving into the voice of somebody else. So there's a lot of different considerations here about how having a chapter or a book affects, like I said, your writing side, but also your research.

So in terms of how you plan your year, are you gonna fall down the rabbit hole of guidebook writing where you don't see your family, and you don't respond your emails for a month, or is that gonna be your day-to-day life for four or six months? What can you and your current life conditions support? You might say, "I have kids. There's no way that I could do a book." I have a friend who has written quite a few books for Lonely Planet. Well, he certainly did do more of them before he had kids. He also has been doing several since he had kids, particularly ones that are more niche such as biking in the Alps, or in the Pyrenees, or in the South of France, or something like that. Now, some of that is gonna be based on previous experience that he has, but he also has to get his butt over there and check for things, whether they're still there or not, get that kind of information you can only get on the ground, and get that in his book. So the way that he has done that is, while he does have two school-aged kids, he will take a very concentrated trip. And he will go to France, or Spain, or wherever that it is, and he will be there just running his butt off, getting the research done, for as little time as he can. But what happens then is that your deadline is built to include your research



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

and your writing. So that means when he gets home, he has a bit more time than other people might to get that writing done. So he can stretch it out when he gets home so that he's swapping off childcare duties in a more equitable way with his wife.

So that's one of the ways that you can still get a whole book done even if you're not young and untethered, and able to essentially become nomadic for six months or a year while you're working on a book and staying in the places that you're writing about. You can really do books both ways. So there's no right way, and there's no saying, like, "Oh, I couldn't do it because..." So some folks will even take their whole family with them. If you are in a situation, perhaps you already are a blogger and your family's nomadic, or whatever that is, you can travel slower as you're working on your guidebook and travel with your family, and split it up during the day when you're on the ground. There's some times when you go out together as a family to the attractions, and then you split up, and your partner will watch them for a while while you're doing the really haphazard, fast running from place, to place, to place.

Now, the concept of the running I kind of keep mentioning, and Leif also alluded to this in what he was talking about, is the running. So I wanna talk about what that running really looks like. So first and foremost, if you were to guess, you may have heard me say this before or read it online, but I'd love to hear your guess. What do you... I'll get to that question in one second, Artemis. What do you think... Let me know in the chat box. What do you think is a reasonable number of restaurants, hotels, and attractions to fit into one day as a travel writer out doing visits? You don't have appointments so you don't have a time table to keep, but you're just going from one place, to place, to place, to place. So let me know in the chat box. What do you think is a reasonable number of hotels, restaurants, and attractions to visit in one day?

So as you guys were putting that in the chat box and the answer to Artemis's question, she says, "Does it really pay enough that you could keep paying rent at home while you're out traveling?" Now this, I think, is a highly personal question, because not everybody would want to keep their apartment empty. Candy, is that a combined number for all of the above? Not everyone would wanna keep their home empty anyway. People might be efficient and find that to be wasteful. So I would definitely say that you could look at, for instance, doing your research over the course of, say, two or three months, and then take another two or three, let's say, three or four months to do your writing, and be looking at a contract for a full book that would be around, let's say, \$35,000. So that would be six months of income for \$35,000. If you map that over to a year would be \$70,000, but we're not taking out expenses and taxes. But again, you know, for some people, that sounds great, but it depends on where you live and your cost of living, of course. And like I said, not everybody would want to have



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

the kind of waste, so to say, of leaving their place empty if they were gonna be gone for that long in a stretch.

So a range of answers over here. Kay has got it very nicely split out once, I'm gonna look at her first. Three hotels, three meals plus a snack, two attractions in the a.m. and two in the p.m. We've got Robin with 8 to 12, Alicia is 10-plus, Lynne says 6. I hope this is not the Lynne who's about to take on a guidebook because then we... Okay, you're not the one that I know who's about to take on a guidebook because I was gonna say, "No, we really need to talk." Artemis says 10 to 20, Candy says 10. Great. So Kay has got it a bit right here with two attractions in the a.m. and two attractions in the p.m. I would say, you'd be looking at typically six to seven hotels, and probably at least that many restaurants that you would be stopping by.

So if you think about what a guidebook looks like on the page, and we're gonna look at this a lot more next week, but if you think about what goes into a guidebook, there tend to be more meal options than accommodation options, just because people need one place to sleep, but they need, you know, three, six, nine, however many days are there, places to eat. And then attractions also tend to be fewer than even hotels. So I think it's relatively reasonable to say you might visit four attractions in a day, but you would probably be looking at more like six to seven minimum both on the hotels and the meal side, because there's also gonna be ones that you don't include, right?

And then the one thing that I didn't even ask in there, which a lot of us don't even think about because us hard-working travel writers aren't necessarily going places to go to clubs, and booze it up, and drink our vacation away or our travel away, but you also have to visit the nightlife. You should check out jazz clubs, bars, you know, dance clubs, outdoor dance clubs. You know, if it's a Portland-style kind of craft beer bowling place, you also have to go and peek at those things.

So how does that make sense? How do you go to all these things? I've shown you guys in the past, in some of our webinars about press trips, some different, crazy kind of itineraries that I've seen pulled together. And one of the things that... I think I'm gonna pull one up for you, actually. I wasn't planning to so this is gonna take me a minute. One of the things that I think surprises a lot of people when I show them this one particularly long itinerary is that it's more or less just one day. And as a press trip itinerary, it looks absolutely batty. But on my own, if I were out traveling on my own, I would actually put way more stuff than is on this itinerary into my day, to be honest.



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

So let me hop over and show this to you. And I'm just gonna scroll up to kind of obscure who it's from and all the contact information. All right. So this is a press trip that was associated with a conference. This is a really common way to get on press trips, for those of you who are looking to get on your first one, is to go to a conference that has press trips attached. In fact, the TBEX is in Europe this year, is in the Czech Republic, and has, like, dozens of stunning, outstanding, amazing press trips. And that's another reason I go to TBEX, actually, is to explore places that I never would think about going and find the really amazing things that are going on there.

So in this conference, this is the first day. And the first day is not the crazy day. So we drive, we've got a museum, I've got another attraction with lunch, we've got an attraction, attraction, we have another attraction, we check into the hotel, another attraction, we eat, and then we're supposed to go somewhere else. So this has got a good, you know, like, six or seven, just, attractions, and then a couple meals in there. And, you know, maybe some of those things that I said were attractions are actually hotels. So that's got, like, eight or nine things in there. And like I said, that's not the day that's crazy.

Now, the next day, we've got a 20-minute tour of a theater with a 5-minute passing time to get to an aquarium that we're supposed to spend 15 minutes in. Then we drive somewhere else, and then we have about 35 minutes at an inn where we're also supposed to have breakfast. Then we leave, we've got 10 minutes to get to another place where we have a 10-minute stop in a cheese place. And then we have another 10 minutes to get to a fruit farm. And then we've got 15 minutes there before we go to visit a hotel. And then we've got 15 minutes there before we depart to visit another museum and explore downtown. So we've got 50 minutes to explore downtown, a sweet shop, and a museum, we've got a 20-minute passing period, and then we've got 10 points to hear about the ferry. Then we leave, we've got five minutes, it looks like...oh, no, sorry, we've got 15 minutes to visit another hotel. Then we've got 10 minutes to check out a dairy farm. Then we get a whole two hours for lunch. And then we get another 15 minutes to visit a photo gallery.

Now, as you may surmise, this tour did not work out as it was scheduled on here because one person could do this, but herding a set of 12 cats, and all of the people on the ground who wanna talk to them, by cats I mean journalists, of course, with their cameras who wander off, doesn't happen. But with one person, I would absolutely do this and more. So this is a really good example of what it might look like to have your day as a travel writer who's out in the country. Now if you're in a city, these things happen much faster. I might have 10 minutes where I walk down one street and take notes on seven different restaurants on that one street. I might have an hour that I go to a strip of hotels that are all in one area and spends five to seven minutes at each one. I might have 15 minutes when I go to a museum. And I walk



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

through that whole museum that they recommend a two to three-hour visit. I walk through that whole museum in 15 minutes.

Now, the question is, how does one do this? And particularly, I'm doing this as a journalist, right? I'm looking for ideas. I'm taking notes for later. How do you do this as a guidebook writer who needs to get a certain amount of information and get it down to write up into your book? So let me flip back to the slides for a second. How do you do this right? The question the pace on the one hand. What pace is comfortable for you? So I am able to do this pace, and get notes, and whatnot, in part because of experience, because I've been doing this for a while, and also because I've been on a lot of press trips where I got trained both by other journalists and by PR people who were good at moving guides along and moving us through a place, who were very polished at that.

But the other thing is that, you also have to decide what pace works for you to not crash. So for you, you might know that that whiplash of the separation between the writing life and the travel life is absolutely not for you, and it will send you into, like, a crazy bipolar spin of loneliness to be sitting there 14 hours a day writing a guidebook, oh my God. So you might know that that's just not for you. And so in that case, you can set it up so that you're doing your writing while you're there, and half your day is research and half your day is writing, and you might, you know, let your house on an Airbnb, or find a long-term renter, or whatever that would be for you in order to accommodate that, or you might decide that this guidebook assignment is the thing that lets you finally become location-independent and give up where you live entirely.

But the other thing to keep in mind is, who is setting the pace? So I mentioned this earlier... and I will upload that file for you guys as well. I mentioned this earlier, that you need to make sure when you're first setting up your guidebook contract that you think about these things, because if you're not careful, you can get...just by virtue of the fact that everybody wants everything, you know, now, now, now, now, you might get a contract that is not feasible for you, and think that it's the only option, okay? So with any editor, all the time... The file should be showing up now. It says "itinerary". I think you guys should see it over there on the side.

With any editor, all the time, you should always ask, you should always ask for what you need. Whether that's time, whether that's resources, whether that's money, you should always ask. And so the thing is that if you're not careful, especially if you're only doing a chapter, you can find yourself in a situation where your schedule feels really untenable. But you can also ask if you can have more time for an individual deadline. So perhaps the deadlines that



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

your editor has given you between chapters 1 and 2 of your entire book seem really close, especially because you know you have to do a big bunch of research in the middle, and you won't be able to sit down and write, or you could see that the entire timeline for your book isn't great, you could see that you'd really like to have more time to turn in the revisions, because you know you'll be traveling when you work on the revisions, whatever that is. So one of the keys to having a lifestyle as a guidebook writer, as opposed to being dragged along by being a guidebook writer, is to keep track of and keep control of the pace that you set.

But the other thing is... Actually, I'm gonna do the next slide first. The other thing is that you have to deal smartly with your research. So Lisa has got a question about itineraries that's relevant to the last section that we're going to talk about, which is planning pitfalls. I'm gonna hold off on that until then.

But Artemis had a good point that relates into this, which is talk-to-text. How do you deal with your research? Are you taking notes physically? That's probably the slowest way that you can possibly go. I take and a lot of people take and are very familiar with this now, I heard it mentioned at a big journalism conference I was at, is that you should not take notes on details when you are working on this type of work. If you are writing the Great American nonfiction narrative travel book, be my guest, sit in a square in Florence and write down how the air feels, and how it smells, and the sounds of the children. But if you are writing a guidebook, you take a lot of pictures so that you can look at the pictures, and both see and remember, and fill in those details later.

So I take two types of pictures when I'm taking pictures. I take pictures that are set up, that are lit, that are meant to be used. And then I take pictures that are intentionally crap. I have them on a bit of an angle or the light is crap, something like that, as an indicator to an assistant or whoever I might task with separating out those photos when I need to have a big chunk of photos for an assignment, as an indicator about which photos are meant for notes versus which photos are real photos. So this is a trick that I use. It also helps you yourself if you're just doing it yourself. But you take some that are just bad, that are clearly bad, that wouldn't be considerable as photos, as a note to yourself that those are notes. So what you can do is when you get home from somewhere, you can just quickly go through and just click, click, click, click, click in the preview viewer all of those ones that are clearly notes and dump them in a file that says "Notes".

So Artemis had the point about using talk-to-text, about using dictation. So this is a big thing that can become difficult in terms of notes and writing things up, is how do you get words successfully into text when you are traveling, especially in foreign countries when things are



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

non-English, or where the names are unusual? Even if you're in America, for instance, in the Northwest as well as the Northeast, a lot of things have Native American names. And I challenge you to say that into your phone and get what you expect to get out of it. So how to get information either from yourself verbally or if you're recording your interviews becomes a big challenge when you are doing guidebook work.

So as a result of this, I have developed what somebody called recently “the flying thumbs”, which is that I basically, over the years of doing this... I did not used to do this before I had this job of being a travel writer. I type so fast, and I have a phone that is optimized specifically for this. I type so fast that I can simultaneously transcribe what the tour guide is saying. Now, this is not a skill I uniquely have. Like I said, I did not do this before I had this job. It was something I developed because I spent years working in Italy, going on trips where I would take notes in Italian either on my phone, or on paper, or whatever it is, and not be able to figure out what it was that I wanted to use later. Either I would be chasing the tour guide around, and my written notes would be illegible even for myself, or I would have notes that I had written, like, half in Italian and half English, and I could read them, but there was no way that I could hand them off to somebody else and have them make sense of it because I wasn't translating what the guide was saying as I was writing it, but I was also writing my own notes in English, and it was just a mess.

So in order to affront, confront, successfully pursue the life of a guidebook writer, it is paramount that you are super on with how you will deal with your research, and we're talking about notes but I'm gonna get to other research in a second in terms of things that you would be looking up online and in books and things like that, because if you go into your first assignment, and you go out and do the research, and you don't have a good mechanism for that, what's gonna happen is it's gonna add almost twice as much of the time that you need to do your job just to go through those notes and figure out what it is, as well as transcriptions...or rather, recordings. So it's become very common these days for people to just put their phone on a table or hold it up in the air when you're on a tour. I've just been on so many retreats that we've had or tours that I've been on where phones are just shoved in people's faces, where people just start recording a tour without asking. So one thing that you have to know any time you are doing this type of research, especially if you're in other countries but even if you're American and you're in other states, is that the laws about recording people's voices in terms of consent vary considerably. And you simply cannot, should not, absolutely especially not when traveling under the name of a company, a guidebook company, simply turn on your microphone like that without asking.

Now, the flip side of that, and the reason that a lot of people say, “Well, I just do that because, you know, people might be weird if they're being recorded,” that's the whole problem, is that



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

they'll be much weirder if they find out later that they were being recorded. And weirder can become much worse than weird, it can become other things. But it comes down to the fact that you are representing a company or traveling under their name, and you have to also be mindful of the legal ramifications for the company that you're traveling under. So always, always check what are the laws regarding recording people where you're gonna be you're doing your research, if you want to go the path of recording people's voices.

Now, what do you do with those recordings? If you are a guidebook writer who's just walking around, and doing tours, and visiting hotels, you might get 10 hours of recordings every day. What do you do with those? Are you gonna do something with them? So there are some apps that you can use, and these are dependent on different phones, but I've heard several different ones by now. There are some apps that you can use, and I actually come more from brick-and-mortar companies that record their meetings where you can have your phone, your note-taking app, going while you're recording. And when you make a note in your note-taking app, it attaches the timestamp of where you are in the recording. This sounds amazing, I know. I don't use them so I don't have the names for them in front of you...or in front of me, but there's an increasing number that do this. So it's something that... You wanna look for something that attaches a timestamp to your notes, that's what these apps do. And like I said, they're very different from phone to phone to phone, and they're also different in terms of how they look.

And never forget, when you're out researching out all day, they are different in terms of how they drain your battery life. This is really paramount if you're gonna be doing a long day of research. You wanna be carrying at least two separate portable batteries for your phone. I also have a car charging battery for my laptop. There's a lot of devices like this where, if you're gonna be out researching on the road all day, you wanna invest in so that you don't have problems trying to buy them in a third-world country or somewhere where you wouldn't even know what kind of shop to go to to get these kind of things.

So I said I wanted to talk about one other sort of research, and I wanna make sure to circle back with that, which is the historical research. It's the book research. It's the primary source research into the culture, and especially political history of a place. This is a really important part of guidebook writing that I think a lot of travel writers forget. They think about, you know, collecting the destinations, and recommending restaurants and hotels, and writing about attractions. But you also have to write very factually, very honestly, and unfortunately, very succinctly about the entire history of a country when you put together a guidebook. So this is a place where I've seen people lose a lot of time on something that, in their guidebook, only takes up a handful of pages, which is that they start researching and they get overwhelmed by whether it's a civil war, a genocide, something horrible like that, or just a



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

sheer amount of history. They get overwhelmed by all of the different things that can go in there, and they lose the thread.

So when you are doing that type of historical research, especially if you are not a seasoned print journalist where you know for yourself what is the threshold of, “Where do I need to stop? How much research do I actually need to do,” I highly recommend that you do historical research well, well, well, well before you go out, before you go out on any of your travels. First of all, it will help you to ask the right questions when you’re touring, and going around, and doing your research on the ground. It will help frame the experiences that you’re having in a way that they need to be in order for you to properly collate what is a must-see for a visitor. But also the time lapse between having done that research, and then months passing, and then sitting down to write it, means that by the time that writing period rolls around, you won’t remember all the random details, and the diatribes, and the famous people, and this guy who, rather than make a statue of him, you know, they tried to do a mold, and it killed him, and he’s actually inside the statue. That’s totally made-up. But rather than all those interesting tangents and side stories, you will know the bones, you will know the thread, you will know the things that somebody really needs to understand to understand the place, because those are the things that you will remember from having been there.

So that brings me back to the slide that I skipped that I’m going to go back, which is “Writing on the Road (redux)”, because we’re gonna talk about writing at length next week. But first, a question. How many of you guys who are here live today have been out on the road, either as a blogger or as a person on a press trip, and had an assignment that you had to get done while you were there? Let me know in the chat box if you have been out traveling for work and also had an assignment, not necessarily related to the place where you physically were at that moment, that you had to get done during that period. Let us know.

Yeah, so mixed. So none versus, “I’ve had my own travel blog but no deadline,” “I’ve had assignments due while I was traveling.” This idea of can you handle writing about something that is not what you are currently doing and still keep present with the research you’re doing on the road is very tricky. And if you wanna get into guidebook writing and you have not... Oh, hi, McKenzie. If you wanna get into guidebook writing and you have not set yourself up yet with this challenge, I highly recommend you either get an assignment or you create a fictional assignment of some kind for yourself, and go try this when you’re traveling. It’s even better if you try it when you’re traveling with family because that’s a big pressure, and it’ll sort of replicate the pressure you might have on the road. But whether or not you can get the writing of the guidebook as opposed to writing up your notes, outlining, or something like that, but get actual chapters done when you’re travel writing or when you’re researching



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

your guidebook, has a huge effect on your timeline, on your sanity, on how much stress you're under.

So you can do the yo-yo where you are based somewhere perhaps in that country or not in that country, or the region that you're covering, or that state, or what have you, and you go out and research for two weeks, and you come home and write for two weeks. And then you go out and research for two weeks, and you come home and write for two weeks. You can do the yo-yo. I've seen people do it. For some people it's the only way, because in order to write something as comprehensive as a chapter, they simply would not be able to do that up against going out all day and seeing things, and experiencing them, and following the thread. So this is something that is very different for each person. And we're gonna talk much more about this in the next webinar.

But we are getting to the end of our time, and I really wanna talk to you about these pitfalls. So I've talked to you as we've been going along through the five pillars about different things that can kind of trip you up. And I mentioned that Lisa had a question earlier that I wanted to circle back to which was related to these. And it's a little bit down in the pillars... or in the pitfalls, but we'll get to it now.

So she says, "How far in advance do you make itineraries? Do you need to work this out before going there, or do you maybe make these as you go along?" Now, for any of you guys, whether for a leisure trip or a work trip, if you have ever gotten somewhere, wanted to see it like a travel writer, wanted to really go out and do a lot of things and see interesting things, and not have done that research in advance, you probably know what I'm saying when I say that that means that you will spend a stressful two hours every night or every morning, early morning, figuring out what it is that you're gonna do the next day, booking where you're gonna stay in your next destination, figuring out what the trains or buses are that are gonna get you from point A to point B, or if you have a car, the driving directions and what places you wanna stop along the way. So we're talking here about travel schedules in the middle of our pitfalls. And this is something that I have to say is one of the easiest to avoid and most fundamental ones that you wanna be on the lookout for.

Now, you might say, and be totally right to say, "Well, I don't know what's gonna be most interesting. I don't know how much time I'm gonna wanna spend somewhere. I don't know if it makes sense for me to do this, this, this, and this. What if I find out that I really need more time for Y?" All these questions are answered by your pre-research. Yes, there can be sirens, calls of different things on the ground, but you have a schedule that you have to follow to file your chapters. And you have a larger schedule for when you...how much time you think that



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

you're gonna take to write those off and when you need to be home from your trip, and you need to go in there and make some decisions and allocate things. Because if you do not do it beforehand, you will be sacrificing very important, both sleep, and writing, and note-taking, and research time doing that travel scheduling while you are there. So this is the number, number one thing. It's super, super avoidable. And there's a lot of reasons that you could think it might make sense to not do it in advance, but you gotta do it. You have to do it. So it's a huge weight off of your head.

I don't know about you guys, but I, for instance, know where I'm gonna be almost to the day, like, physically in the world, typically six, eight months out. And if I know I have a trip and I don't know where I'm staying or, like, even, you know, what I'm doing there, but especially if I don't know where I'm staying or things like that, it kind of just flicks in the back of my mind. It's like a little bit of stress. Like, I don't know where I will sleep. Like, I don't know if I will have a nice place to sleep. I don't know if I will spend too much money on that place to sleep. These things are kind of there all the time. And I will find myself absent-mindedly looking at neighborhoods, or looking at Airbnbs, or looking at hotels in certain areas.

And I have somebody else that I coach who told me...we were talking about overwhelm, and we were talking about assignments, and what helps her feel like she can get things done versus what just kind of makes her ball hit the size of the task. And she was saying, "If I'm planning a trip with my family, and we know we have a week and we wanna go somewhere, that could be anything. And my mind starts spiraling into all sorts of possibilities. We could go here. We could do this, we could do that. But if you tell me, 'We're gonna go skiing. We wanna go somewhere within two hours of Seattle,' and, you know, so and so doesn't wanna ski and they want to do something like this, then I can research those specifications."

So what happens is, if your brain is full of all of the things that you're seeing in the day, all of these small decisions you have to make throughout the day of, "Do I spend 5 minutes here or 15? How important is this museum? How many notes do I need to take? Should I just take pictures or should I quickly interview the museum curator," all of those small decisions that you need to make, you don't wanna add to those decisions. You don't want to add, "How many days should I spend somewhere?" You don't wanna add, "How important is this place versus that place?" You need to make those decisions upfront. And some of those come from the first thing on this list, which is destination background.

So I spoke about this earlier in the context of the history of a place, especially the political history and cultural history...and especially the boundary changing, you know, for instance, Pakistan used to be part of India. Like, if you're writing about India, that's a crucial thing to



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

understand that separation, as well as the British history, and as well as all the things that came before the Mongol Empire, and the Maharajas, and all of these things. So if you don't know that, then there's so many things about the interplay of different dishes, and different spices, and different colors, and different patterns in the clothes, that won't make as much vivid sense to you. So that's one type of thing to research in advance.

But you also, in advance, wanna be knowing what else has been written about these places in other guidebooks, what do other people focus on? Are they unanimous about that? Are there things that you would be remiss if you did not include? Are there things that there seem to be a lot of dissenting opinions on? And then you need to know that it's your job to go and figure out, for your book, what that opinion is gonna be. You need to know what the difference between what visitors think and what locals think about different places. You find this out by reading different publications, different newspapers, local newspapers, which you can often find English-language local newspapers, as well as newspapers that have travel articles catering to foreigners. You wanna know what other people are covering there, as well as the deeper background that informs that place. Because if you go out somewhere, even if you know a place but you don't know it from that standpoint of someone who is curating a book or a block of knowledge around it, if you don't have that background about what other people find valid to say in here, then you are coming at a disadvantage that will hit you later when you are writing. When you come home and you sit down to write, then you're gonna feel like you need to look at that. And now it's wasted, because you're having thoughts about places that you've now seen that you should have had before that would have influenced your travels when you were there and led you to deeper knowledge about the place.

Now, the next thing in here is the guide style. So this goes back to not just the writing, okay? We're talking about research today. So this is what do your people care about. In the last webinar in the series, I looked at, sort of, user profiles, so to say, of the different guidebooks. And we looked at who's really interested in history, who's more interested in food, who's upscale versus lowbrow backpacker, etc. You want to be hyper clear on the style of your guidebook company, and that means reading other guides. I've known people who work on guidebooks who didn't do this until later, who didn't do it until they wrote their first chapter and found it to be really a struggle, and they got a lot of edits back from their editor saying, "You know, I like this but let's put it more in our voice. Let's frame it more from our readers." You wanna know how other writers, after they've been edited, after the company puts their stamp on approval, you wanna know other writers confront similar information. So you wanna read other guides for other books in your region.

Now, you might realize that what I'm saying is that you need to do a lot of reading, like, books and books worth of reading, before you do your guidebook. And that's another reason



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

to stay home for a bit, and not just get on the plane and go there and figure it out as you're there, to stay home and work on your travel schedule and do this research.

Now the two other things to think about, and these are preparation that you do on a day by day basis, both of these, one is research objectives. So I've spoken in past webinars about how you should approach a conference with objectives, what do you wanna get out of this conference? Are you there just to meet people? Are you there to meet specific people? Are you there to meet people who are knowledgeable about a certain thing? Are you there just to learn about a certain thing? Are you there to find something like a sense of validation or camaraderie? There's so many different objectives you can have going to a conference, but it's the same way when you go out. Is this the day when you absolutely need to get everything done in this city, period? That's your objective. Is this the day that, because it's raining, you're gonna get as many attractions in as possible, and hotels?

Now, a neat tip about hotels that I didn't have a specifically great place in the webinar to say, but I really wanted to share with you from Pauline Frommer, is that various guidebook companies have different policies about this. I wanna say it's the Lonely Planet author, but some of the companies, they're the writer who writes the certain areas, know all of the hospitality folks and, when they come, they're kind of like the little god traveling along with the retinue who caters to them. But you as a new writer won't feel like that. And some companies really specifically wouldn't want that. So you often find yourself in a situation where you need to see hotel rooms, not just pictures online but actual rooms. This happens a lot, that you need to see hotel rooms. So how do you do that? How do you get them to show you physical hotel rooms to personally evaluate with your own eyes how suitable they are for your readership, how much you wanna recommend them, what you want to say about them? You come up with funny, interesting situations.

So Pauline Frommer has this great one where she says that she has, like, a list for herself of, like, weird family situations that she goes and says... So she says, like, "Hey, like, you know, my family's coming to visit and they wanna be in a hotel. But I need to see a couple different types of rooms to see if this is the right fit for them because, you know, my sister, like, she has this baby who, like, won't sleep at night throughout the whole night by itself, but it will only fall asleep if it's in some room. So can you show me the adjoining rooms? But then I've also got..." and she goes on to list, like, seven different types of weird family situations that are completely made up in order to get the person at the front desk to show her a bunch of different room types without knowing that she's a travel writer.



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

So you might have days where you don't...you're not a person who likes acting or lying. And so you put your kind of lying face on, and you're like, "This is the day I'm gonna do the hotels. I'm gonna play my character, I'm gonna go out there and talk about my fake family. I'm gonna get it done." So your research objective for the day is something that it's gonna move, it's gonna move based on what you get done the day before. It's gonna move based on the weather. It's gonna move based on how exhausted you are. It's gonna move based on a lot of things. But it's something you wanna make sure that you have every day so that you don't end up dragged through a city and find that, at the end of the day, you only got two and you really should have gotten five attractions, but you didn't do your math the night before to know how many attractions you needed to do that day.

Now, the next thing that I just wanted to touch on because I think people don't always think about it is sourcing. So what I mean here by sourcing is people that you talk to, sources for interviews. And you might think of interview as kind of something that you would do with people at attractions. Like, I was just talking about hotels, you might interview someone about room types. But the way that you source insider tips, first-person local experiences when you're on the ground, is very important. So I wanted to give you a couple of my favorite tips about sourcing. You may have heard cab drivers, that's a really common one. But I find that cab drivers are really hard for guide books because the cab driver in a destination is typically not gonna be the person, socioeconomically, who would be traveling from whatever country your guidebook is published in to the country they're living. So they're not a good avatar for the type of person that you're writing for. So you wanna seek out those people. You wanna seek out people who seem similar to the type of person that you're writing for and ask them what they like to do. So I often say that I like to ask baristas in cafes, but not like a Starbucks, but like a third wave coffee company where they're, you know, really into what they're doing and all that stuff. You can also ask waiters, you can also ask hotel concierge.

But I really like to kind of sit somewhere and snoop. So it could be that you're sitting in a hotel lobby. This is a trick that I really like, which is that in the evening, when I'm tired anyway...and if I were to go up to my room I would probably, you know, fall asleep, or more or less do, like, not useful things on the computer. I will instead sit in the hotel lobby. In fact, I'm gonna do it as soon as I get off the webinar with you guys, I'm gonna go do this. I will sit in the lounge and work there, because it's not as comfortable as the bedroom, as the hotel room, and there are other people in there that I can eavesdrop on. So you will hear other travelers who have traveled to this destination talking, and especially if it's a hotel bar. Sometimes you wanna go to a different hotel than where you're staying, or you're staying in an apartment that doesn't have a hotel. You go to the hotel bar, and you just get a tea, and you work on your work, and you also listen to the locals who come to that hotel bar. And you chat



Dream of Travel Writing

The Guidebook Guide Series – The Life of a Guidebook Writer on the Road

them up, you tell them what you're doing, you tell them that you're a guidebook writer, and you ask them for their tips.

Now, just don't do the thing... I'm gonna leave you with this because it's kind of funny. Just don't do the thing that somebody that I know did, which is have a really lovely conversation with somebody about all the things that they recommend, and then ask them what they're doing in the destination and find out they are the competing guidebook writer for the competing guidebook company, also writing a guidebook that will be selling against your own.

So thank you guys so much for joining me. And I will see you guys next week to talk more about the writing part of guidebook writing.