



Travel

W R I T I N G

DON GEORGE
with Charlotte Hindle

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THE AUTHORS



DON GEORGE

Don George has been a pioneering travel writer and editor for 25 years. Currently the Global Travel Editor for Lonely Planet, Don was Travel Editor at the *San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle* and founder and editor of Salon.com's celebrated travel site, Wanderlust. He has visited more than 60 countries, and published more than 600 articles in magazines and newspapers around the globe. Don's stories have been selected to appear in numerous collections, and he has edited four travel anthologies, including Lonely Planet's acclaimed *The Kindness of Strangers* and *A House Somewhere: Tales of Life Abroad*. Don has won numerous awards for his writing and editing, including the Pacific Asia Travel Association's Grand Award for best travel article of the year and the Society of American Travel Writers' Lowell Thomas Award.

Don has lectured on travel writing and travel literature at conferences and workshops around the world. He is a visiting lecturer in travel writing at the University of California, Berkeley, Graduate School of Journalism, and the co-founder and chairman of the Book Passage Travel Writers & Photographers Conference, held annually near San Francisco. Complementing his travel writing and editing, Don often appears as Lonely Planet's global spokesperson on TV and radio and in print. Don has worked as a translator in Paris, a teacher in Athens, and a television talk show host in Tokyo. He now lives in the San Francisco area with his wife and two children.



CHARLOTTE HINDLE

Charlotte Hindle travelled overland to Australia from the UK after graduating from university, and stayed on to work at Lonely Planet's head office in Melbourne for three years. In 1991 she returned to England to establish Lonely Planet's UK office, which she managed until June 2002 when she decided to change career to become a freelance travel writer, photographer and mum. Over the years Charlotte has written for many Lonely Planet guides, including *The Gap Year Book*, *The Career Break Book*, *Australia*, *Mediterranean Europe*, *Walking in Britain, England and Britain*. She also writes for the *Independent* and *Wanderlust* magazine. Her photographs are sold by Lonely Planet Images (LPI) and regularly appear in Lonely Planet's guidebooks, newspapers and magazines.



DAVID ELSE

David Else is a professional travel writer based in the UK, specialising in guidebooks for independent travellers of all budgets. David also contributes to travel and outdoor magazines, and works as a consultant for travel companies, tourism bodies and specialist mountain-trekking operators.

Since the early 1980s David's travels have taken him to India, Mexico, the Arctic and much of Europe (among other places), but his great love is Africa. He has travelled, trekked, worked and written across the entire continent, from Cairo to Cape Town, from Sudan to Senegal, via most of the bits in-between.

David's Lonely Planet guidebooks include *West Africa*, *Southern Africa*, *Gambia & Senegal*, *Zambia*, *Malawi*, *Trekking in East Africa* and the legendary backpacker bible, *Africa on a Shoestring*. He has also written guides to Zanzibar and Kenya for other publishers, and contributed to numerous compilation titles, such as *African Safari*, published by Insight Guides and the Discovery Channel.

When not tramping the globe, David turns his attentions closer to home. With a team of co-authors he has written several editions of Lonely Planet's guides to *Britain* and *England*, and he still manages to get his boots dirty by researching and writing *Walking in Britain*.

Contributing Author

Janet Austin has worked in the travel publishing industry for 11 years, as an editor and writer. Her particular focus is travel literature, and writing and researching for travel and lifestyle publications. She has written on Italy for Lonely Planet's *Western Europe* guide, and provided content for a range of print and Web publications. Janet is based in Melbourne with her husband and two grey cats.

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-five years ago, a very successful man twice my age leaned toward me at a cocktail party and said, 'Let me get this straight. You're travelling around the world. You're not spending any of your own money. And you're being paid to do this?'

That was a conversation I'll never forget. I'd been hired six months earlier by the *San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle* as a travel writer, and had been describing my first two commissioned trips: the first to a Mexican fishing village and its neighbouring resort, the second a one-week cruise around the Caribbean. 'Son,' he said, looking me straight in the eye, 'that's not a job, that's a *dream*.'

Travel writer. The title does conjure exotic scenes: lying on a chaise longue on a white-sand beach by an aquamarine ocean, palm trees rustling in the salt-tinged breeze; sipping a *café crème* in a Parisian café, scribbling impressions in a battered notebook; bouncing through the African bush, snapping photos of gazelles and lions, and ending the day by listening to spine-tingling tales over gin and tonics in the glow of a campfire.

And yes, I have been lucky enough to be paid to do all these things. In the past quarter-century, my work has taken me to more than 60 countries. I have slept under the stars on pine needles and in thousand-dollar-a-night hotel suites. I have eaten fresh-sliced sashimi on a rocking Japanese fishing boat, billy tea and damper in the Australian bush, and steak tournedos with truffles and foie gras on a sun-dappled terrace overlooking the terracotta roofs of Provence. I have met Kenyan woodcarvers and Caribbean boat-builders, Welsh poets and Balinese puppet-makers, Fijian farmers and Californian vintners, Greek chefs and Jordanian archaeologists. But most important of all, I have experienced first-hand the incredibly rich diversity of culture, creativity and connection that graces our globe.

There is, of course, a flip side to the above. Being a travel writer means enduring long hours in front of a blank computer screen, experiencing stress attacks induced by looming deadlines, receiving rejection letters, bedding down in fleabag hotels, surviving endless journeys in storm-tossed ferries and nights when you spend more time in the bathroom down the hall than in your own bed... They're all part of the picture, too – and part of the reason for this book. The life of the travel writer is certainly not all glamour and glory; it's disciplined, demanding work that requires a mix of talent and tact, pluck and luck. Making a living solely as a travel writer is very difficult, but travel writing can be a part of your life at many different levels – from the odd travel article written when you return from your holiday to a commission checking out five-star hotels for a glossy magazine.

Wherever and however you intend to travel, the rewards of travel writing – and of approaching travel with the travel writer's mindset – are numerous. First and foremost, you become a better traveller. You arrive at your destination having already learned something of its history, culture and important sites, making you far better able to explore and appreciate what it has to offer. Also, as you will be on the lookout for trends, unique places to visit and hot spots, you gradually build up a store of knowledge, becoming more and more of a travel expert.

When you are on the road, travelling as a travel writer will force you to pay attention. You will look more closely, listen more clearly, taste more carefully – and continually reflect on

what you're experiencing. As a result, your travels will be deeper and richer. In addition, you will often be able to go behind the scenes at a restaurant, shop or hotel, to take advantage of special access to a historical site or museum exhibit, and to speak with intriguing people – from archaeologists and curators to chefs and shamans – whom everyday travellers would not be able to meet.

Finally, even after you have returned home, you will be able to relive your journey over and over in the course of writing about it. And when your account is published, sharing your experience with others will further multiply your pleasure. All these effects will broaden and extend the significance and depth of your travels.

These riches come with a corresponding responsibility, of course. As a travel writer you will have a fundamental commitment to your reader to explore a place deeply and fully, and to report the information your reader needs to know by writing an honest, fair, objective and accurate portrayal of that place.

So my cocktail-party acquaintance was only half-right all those years ago: travel writing really *is* a means of making a living, but it's up there with the globe's other dream jobs. That doesn't mean it's beyond your reach. The world of travel writing is open to everyone – if you love to travel and you love to write, it's a natural. No one can guarantee that you'll be successful, but I *can* guarantee that you'll never be successful if you don't try.

Reading this book will get you started – wherever you may be and wherever you may be travelling. Lonely Planet's *Travel Writing* is a truly global collaboration, intended for would-be and practising travel writers around the world. These pages interweave my own hard-won advice, earned and learned from 25 years on both sides of the travel editor–writer relationship, with insights and information from Charlotte Hindle in the UK and Janet Austin in Australia. In addition to our words, you'll find a treasure trove of tips and tales, including interviews with 28 prominent UK, US, Canadian and Australian travel writers and editors, presented at the end of each chapter; seven exemplary published travel articles that illustrate the principles discussed throughout the book; and an in-depth chapter on writing for guidebooks, written by one of Lonely Planet's most experienced guidebook authors, UK-based David Else. The appendix provides an extensive compilation of UK, US and Australian resources, from publications and publishers to writers' groups and websites, reference books and travel literature classics, that will nurture and guide you on your journey.

One last point about that journey. This book is not intended solely for aspiring professional travel writers, but for writing travellers of all kinds – from postcard-scribblers and journal-jotters to blog-abonds and tome-raiders. In the end, you don't have to make money to profit from travel writing; sometimes the richest rewards are in the currency of experience. The goal of this book is to reveal the varied possibilities that travel writing offers, and to inspire all travellers to take advantage of those opportunities. That's where the journey begins; where it goes is up to you.

– Don George
San Francisco, October 2004



WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A TRAVEL WRITER

THE QUINTESSENTIAL QUALITIES

While travel writing can be one of the most agreeable professions on the planet, it's not for everyone. In fact, trying to make a living as a travel writer can be extremely demanding and daunting, requiring a particular temperament and setting limits on your lifestyle.

What are some of the qualities you need?

Flexibility

One of the hallmarks of the travel writer's life is its general instability and spontaneity. This is equally true both at home and on the road. At home, you have to be able to drop everything and take off for a far-flung destination at a moment's notice. Your life is dictated by the whims of editors and printer deadlines. To a certain extent, you can negotiate timelines with editors, but often their deadlines just cannot be adjusted – and then, if you're not flexible, you risk losing the commission (or assignment, as it is called in the US). You might also risk building yourself a reputation for saying 'No', which you definitely don't want to have in the close-knit travel editorial world.

On the road you also need to leave room for the unexpected. You may need to alter your itinerary to take in a once-every-seven-years festival you hadn't known about, or to spend an impromptu afternoon with the wine-maker who promises to make a fascinating subject for your article.

The moral is this: the more flexible you are, the better.

Adaptability

The second quality is a corollary to the first. If you want to maximise your chances as a travel writer, you have to be equally ready to explore the heart of Paris and the heart of Papua New Guinea. This means that you have to have a closet full of suitable clothing and accoutrements, but even more important, you have to have a head full of suitable attitudes. Are you equally at home on high seas and low roads? Can you keep your cool in hot situations? Is your stomach strong, or are you susceptible to illness? Could you hop from an expedition ship in Antarctica to a \$15-a-night hut on an isolated South Pacific island and then into a five-star hotel in London? To take the maximum advantage of such opportunities, you have to be adaptable.

Frugality

Let's get this out of the way right now: it's not likely that you're going to get rich as a travel writer. Not in terms of money, anyway. You will certainly accumulate an uncommon wealth of experience, but to be a travel writer, you need to be able to live on a precarious income. If you are a freelancer you never know how much you're going to earn in a year, and you don't know when the money you *have* earned is going to come in. Some publications will pay you on acceptance of a piece, while others may not pay you until your piece has been

published – and that could be many months or even years after your initial outlay. Some publications will pay automatically and on time; others will have to be reminded many times before you finally receive your payment. As a result, the commitment of significant, regular, ongoing expenses – a mortgage or school fees, for example – does not fit well with the freelance travel writer's life. If you are lucky enough to get a staff job as a travel writer, you will at least have a regular income you can count on, but generally speaking, the travel writer's lifestyle is a frugal one – and you need to be content with that. We'll talk in more detail about money matters later in this chapter.

Understanding Family & Friends

The here today, gone tomorrow nature of the travel writer's life takes a significant toll on friendships, and of course on more permanent and intimate relationships. You have to have an extraordinarily understanding and supportive partner who is able to carry on without you virtually at the drop of a hat, for uncertain, and sometimes prolonged, periods of time. If you have children, the situation is multiply compounded. The wife of a UK travel journalist (who wishes to remain anonymous) recently complained:

In 2003 my husband managed to be away for my 40th birthday, our sixth wedding anniversary (he was also away for our fifth), our first daughter's third birthday and my brother's wedding. These are all dates he'd had in his diary for months and months, but we just can't afford to turn down work due to prior family commitments.

Even friends can become irritated by your comings and goings, and feel that they can't rely on you – they'll complain that they just don't know if you'll be there for them. In addition, when you *are* there you seem to be working all the time – working long hours is one of the only ways you can make travel writing pay. All in all, in committing yourself to the travel writer's lifestyle, you relinquish a certain amount of control over your own life – and the people in your life have to be satisfied with that.

Curiosity

Curiosity is one of the prime characteristics common to all great travel writers – they are constantly studying the world around them, asking how things work and why they appear the way they do. They always observe and absorb, and they always talk to people – waiters, taxi drivers, sales assistants, fellow travellers. It is essential to have a passionate and insatiable curiosity about the world, and it is equally essential to keep recharging this curiosity so that you bring a fresh eye and enthusiasm to each new place and story. It will set your research, reporting and writing apart from the pack.

Pluck

Travel isn't easy, especially when you're on a mission to track down information and experiences that will make good travel stories. No matter how exhausted and overwhelmed you may be, you have to keep plugging on, overcoming cultural differences, leaping over language barriers, smoothly swallowing stomach-tumbling foods. You have to find the courage to talk with people you've never met, and to learn to trust the kindness of strangers. Time after time, place after place, you can't give up until you've got your story and then you can't give up until you've written it down and the editor has accepted it. And then it's time to start the next story.

Self-Motivation & Discipline

If you are a freelancer you are your own and only boss, and procrastination is your enemy. You have to make yourself sit down at your desk every day, organise your material, plan your story and write. You need the self-motivation to repeatedly rework and resubmit your articles, and the organisational skills to manage travel schedules, workloads, deadlines, finances and networking. On the road you need the discipline to be continually researching, interviewing, taking notes and gathering information. Wherever you are, travel writing can be a relentless, ongoing, time-consuming balancing act that requires unstinting dedication.

Perseverance

Think of your favourite travel writer. Whoever they are, at some time in their life they were unknown, struggling to get a foothold in the writing world, just as you are today. They faced rejection, probably many times, but they always persevered, continuing to send in their proposals and stories to editors. To survive as a travel writer, you too need the confidence, ability and just plain thick skin to bounce back from rejection after rejection. You need a tenacious faith in yourself and an inventive perseverance. The same applies for temporary setbacks on the road. If an avalanche has closed the route to your destination, you hire a horse. If the local tourism office doesn't have the information you need, you track down the long-time resident who is happy to spend an hour telling you neighbourhood tales. Somehow you find a way to accomplish what you need to do.

Passion

Finally, and fundamentally, you have to have passion – passion for people, passion for the world, passion for the whole business of travelling and for exploring and integrating your discoveries into precise and palpable prose. Travel writing is essentially a lonely profession, and it is your passion that will sustain and reward you.

THE GLAMOUR VERSUS THE HARD WORK

So there you are on the African savanna, notebook in hand, camera around your neck, bouncing through the bush in hot pursuit of the king of the beasts. Later that night, you sit around the campfire recounting the day's exploits while sampling the local beer.

Sounds wonderful, doesn't it? But to get there, you had to fly for a day and a half, squeezed into an economy-class seat between an apprentice sumo wrestler and a man whose personal beliefs forbid bathing. You spent a skin-slapping night on a flea-infested mattress, then had your bones rearranged on a bus bounding over a potholed highway. Your stomach hadn't adjusted well to all the time and temperature changes, so you subsisted on bottled water and biscuits.

And now, while others snore blissfully away, you sit in your tent scribbling into your notebook by lamplight, having cursed the flat battery in your laptop. The following afternoon, while others nap, you interview the driver and the cook. And on the day when everyone sleeps in after the late-night bush trek, you get up before sunrise to photograph the tawny dawn light. Now, is that glamour tarnishing just a bit?

While travel writing certainly has the reputation of being an alluring profession, 95 per cent of the job involves a lot of hard work. It's gathering minute details on hotels, bus