

# WRITING FROM THE ROAD

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*by Tom Bentley*

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Topping the small hill in the almost hallucinatory heat and seeing the dizzying number of centuries-old pagodas small and large, the sacred shrines polished and crumbling, the diverse animal and spirit statuary—and yet more and more of all, up and up into the higher hills above, I had a feeling I've had just a few times before: This is unbelievable. Unbelievable on a couple of levels: first, that I was traveling through vivid, mysterious, ancient Myanmar, a country whose borders were basically closed to tourists just a few years before. Second, that I hadn't paid a dime for the long flights, the extravagant hotels, nor the meals and tours that structured the trip.

Why? Well, words. In the Myanmar case, I'd exchanged just the promise of words to come for an all-expenses paid press trip in late 2015, hosted by an international immersive-travel company. This was only the fourth press trip I'd been on, but one that had by far the most writers in tow, 17 in all. That unbelievable feeling? I'd also had it only three months before the Myanmar trip, coming out of the water from a snorkeling session on Hawaii's Big Island, at a cove so dazzlingly beautiful, with its wind-whipped palms and gleaming waves, that it gave me chills, despite the warm water. That wasn't the only time I was bedazzled on that trip, because I stayed with my girlfriend on the Big Island rent-free for five weeks.

Why? Again, words.

Let me explain: In the past few years, I've spent a couple of months in the Bahamas, seven weeks in Panama, seven weeks in Mexico and the time in Hawaii. I stayed in an incredible penthouse in Vegas for five days, and went on a jolly six-day trip through the Florida Keys. I've had a few comped rooms at great California B&Bs. All because I was either directly writing about the trip for a PR agency or the like, or because I was being rewarded for a prior published piece about a place, or because I was house-sitting with my girlfriend in a place from which we could both do our work. Writing work.

## THIS IS NOT MY BEAUTIFUL HOUSE. (BUT IT'S MINE FOR NOW)

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Let's talk about the house-sitting first. First of all, for it to be doable, you have to have the kind of work that allows you to leave your house for relatively long stretches of time. It's clear that the Internet and its communication efficiencies have opened the floodgates for "solopreneurs" who can sell services or goods from their own homes—or, in my girlfriend's and my case, even from other people's homes. I've been freelancing for many years from my home office as a marketing writer, magazine and newspaper writer, essayist and fiction writer. My girlfriend, Alice, works within a narrower range as a marketing writer, but again, she's worked from home for years.

Alice had heard about an online service called Caretakers Gazette that listed house-sitting opportunities all over the world. With that service and subsequent ones we engaged, the basics are the same: you pay a small subscription fee, put up a profile of your interests, skills and experience, and then you can see listings from homeowners. The listings run a remarkable gamut, and they are truly international: there are listings to be the head butler of extended households at imposing castles, to maintaining what appears to be a lean-to on a tiny island. There are opportunities from staying at a compact flat in Central London to helping build a dream house in a remote part of the Costa Rican jungle.

That "build a dream house" part is where things can get sticky. Some homeowners might simply want you to take care of a couple of cats, bring in the mail and keep the house up, as we did for a period in lovely San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. Other ones might want you to care for unusual animals, like the parrots, toucans and deer we attended to, among other beasts, in Panama. (And the deer being one that we were encouraged to "walk"!)

Or the four dogs, all with varying medical needs (and one definitely in need of a psychoanalyst) that we cared for in the Bahamas.

### PREREQUISITES AND PITFALLS

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If you need to work close to regular 8-hour days, then being part of a homeowner's plans for you to manage their three Airbnbs and help build a horse stable while they are gone aren't realistic. We did Skype with the homeowners of the Bahamas house, but because that was one of our first housesitting experiences, we didn't ask enough questions. We could have found out more details about the irregular Internet, how much attention the dogs actually needed, and how the owner, who we originally thought would be gone for two full months, would be popping back in for a week at a time, with disconcerting results.

Back in your native land, you have to make sure your own mortgage/rent is set up to be paid, as well as your other bills, so online payments are your friend. We have had

house-sitters stay in our house several times while we've gone gallivanting about the world, so you either need to register with the same kind of online service, or have reliable friends or trusted acquaintances. And we have a cat to care for, but thank god, unlike the deer, she doesn't need to be walked.

But you know how things work in your own country; be prepared for things not to work in quite the same way in another. Language and cultural barriers can be perplexing, but operating in a patient spirit of adventure and openness to the exotic or simply weird is helpful. (Though I don't recommend the adventure of crashing the host's car, as I did. It worked out OK, but some lessons are less worth learning.)

But mostly, these excursions are worth it. Travel takes you out of yourself, out of the coffin of your conventional thinking, out of one-day-follows-another, endlessly, until your own end. The housesitting service we use now, *MindMyHouse.com*, sends regular listings that we mull—and sometimes pine—over. We thought maybe, just maybe, we could do the Moroccan oasis one, but had to drop out. No fears though—there are always new ones to come. Housesitting isn't always easy and the unexpected can happen. But who wants the expected? Dublin in the spring, anyone?

## TRAVEL WRITING FOR FUN AND (NOT SO MUCH) PROFIT

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You can see that being a writer in general sets the stage for the house-sitting trips. An additional advantage is being a travel writer too, because you can then write about the house-sitting locales for newspapers and magazines. I mentioned staying in Hawaii: I wrote a piece on fun coffee tours there for the *San Jose Mercury News*, have another on a famous Big Island architectural wonder coming for the Hana Hou in-flight mag, and another in the offing on a fun kava bar for the *Los Angeles Times*.

Now those are straight pitch/approval/submission pieces, where I approached an editor and landed an assignment. Always keep an eye out (and a notebook handy) when you're traveling because there's double-duty potential there: You can trek around interesting places, and get paid later for writing about it. I've gotten advance assignments from editors for places I knew I'd be traveling, and also gotten them later after I returned.

Get competent with a camera too. Today's more image-conscious publications are sometimes sold on the photos alone, with the text a complement. The newest smartphones can take quality images if you are careful, though I still carry a digital camera. And some pubs (like the *Los Angeles Times*) pay for photos separately, though sadly in my experience, travel articles in general pay less than they did years ago.

The money (or lack of it) brings up another issue: many publications will not accept any articles that derive from media or press trips, even if only part of the trip (say, the flight) was comped. Considering that it's tough to make a living as a writer, and a travel

writer in particular, and with travel expenses never cheap, this feels punitive. My stories for the publications mentioned above were all on my own dime, since we paid for the Hawaii flights and other expenses, just not rent for our lodging.

## PRESS TRIPS CAN IMPRESS

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However, there are some publications that are looser about press-trip stories, or that are the intermediaries for publishing them. For instance, that Myanmar trip mentioned at the beginning? The reason I was given that trip was because I'd won second place in a travel-writing contest for Dave's Travel Corner in 2013 (and a third-place win in 2014). I'd written about the Florida Keys for his site before, so when a Keys PR agency contacted him with the offer of a media trip for a writer, Dave turned the trip over to me. (Do submit to writing contests—you never know what the outcome—and the lingering aftermath—might be.)

PR agencies and media-relations organizations for destinations often engage connected travel writers to write about sights, excursions and restaurants for their clients. If you have a relationship with a highly trafficked venue like Dave's (huge volume of site traffic, and he tweets your articles to his list of nearly 270,000 Twitter followers), you're in good stead to be offered fully paid media trips, like the ones I took through him to Myanmar, the Keys and Las Vegas (and he offered others I couldn't go on).

Now, for none of these trips did I receive any cash for writing about them later. And media trips are typically so venue-filled, morning into night, that you are a cross-eyed dishrag at day's end, so you can't do any of your other writing. But damn, to go to an exotic place like Myanmar (and in their own ways, exotic places like the Keys and Vegas), and venture to the peculiar and always colorful venues in those places, without paying a cent? Sign me up.

Another potential perk that can come from writing straightforward articles on places where you've paid expenses is that they might later offer free stays, like I received from two beautiful bed and breakfasts, one outside Pinnacles National Park and one outside Placerville, CA. Those were both unexpected treats.

## TRAVEL IS A TONIC

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You might feel an unstated yet tangible pressure to only write about the good on such journeys. After all, they are underwritten by companies that have a stake in the game. But I never had any of the entities behind the trips push a slant or writing agenda. I was intrigued to be offered such trips, and they all exceeded my expectations, so it was easy to write with appreciation. However, I didn't write about some of the less thrilling aspects of travel for any of those trips (like the stomach bacteria I returned with from Myanmar)—



it didn't seem integral to the tales I told. But I did feel fully open to writing about some of the oddities and weirdnesses I encountered.

Travel, particularly to faraway places, can be irritating, stressful, and take you far from your comfort zones. But your comfort zones aren't the places that expand your thinking, deepen your sense of self, make you say "wow!" Traveling as a writer can pack extra satisfaction, because you can reflect upon your journey, and put it on the page. Putting a trek into words can itself be a form of travel: you move through your mind, made more elastic by the new electricity you've brought to it by seeing novel sights.

Your writing will take you places. Literally.

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