

# 8 secrets to selling your travel stories

A magazine editor gives you the inside scoop on what she and other assigning editors want

**W**ant to turn your summer vacation into a marketable travel article? Good travel writing is always in demand—even in today’s rapidly changing marketplace. Whether the information is coming from a newspaper, a magazine, a website, a blog or an app, “Readers still want the voice of authority ... someone who has been there and can bring forth some nuance that people without travel expertise just don’t have,” says Betsa Marsh, president of the Society of American Travel Writers (SATW).

But as a staff writer and editor for a regional lifestyle magazine in Florida that regularly covers travel, I’ve often found that taking a trip is the easy part of the job. Developing one or more fresh angles for the material and pitching those stories to the right market at the right time—that’s where the real work begins. Here are a few insider tips to help you shape your latest excursions into consumer-friendly destination-travel stories for print and online media:

## **Tell me something I didn’t know.**

As an editor—and a reader—I’m always looking to learn something new. I’ve also lived in north central Florida for nearly 30 years, and have worked at the same magazine for the past seven years. Sometimes—especially when we’re looking for yet another close-to-home weekend getaway story for the magazine’s “Near & Away” column—it can feel as though here in the land of sunshine, where one of the state’s chief commodities is travel and tourism, there’s nothing new under the sun.

Or is there? Did you know that Florida Southern College in Lakeland has

the largest group of Frank Lloyd Wright-designed buildings in the world? I didn’t, until an enterprising freelancer pointed it out to us. Editors love off-the-beaten-path travel stories. Off-season travel stories work well, too. So as you plan your next vacation itinerary, consider a trip down the road less taken. It’s a sure pathway to publication.

## **Learn to love the limitations of your story.**

Would that you could share every moment of your incredible journey with your readers. But, alas, your target publication has a 1,000-word limit (or less!). Most editors these days prefer short, bulleted lists or travel tips over lengthier, descriptive narratives, according to Marsh. How to shoehorn everything in? Don’t. Instead, use the natural limitations of most travelers to narrow the material to a manageable length. This way, you can also spin off different stories from the same trip. For example:

- **Time.** Offer a planned itinerary for a day or a weekend or a week’s worth of activities. A story that provides a well-thought-out plan of sights to see, markets to frequent, can’t-miss meals, and places to stay can be a welcome time-saver for travelers.
- **Money.** Who isn’t looking to save money these days? Consider taking a budget-friendly approach: “New York City on \$50 a day.”
- **Age.** Traveling with young children presents its own set of challenges, as does bringing teens with you, or traveling with seniors. How about “Five family-friendly attractions in Atlanta?” Or

“See the softer side of the Southwest: Six soft-adventure excursions for seniors.”

• **Interests and abilities.** A single destination with a lot to offer—good restaurants, lots of museums, shopping, and recreational activities—has many story angles. You could write a story targeting foodies, another for outdoor enthusiasts, one for shopaholics, and yet another for history buffs. Or combine them into a single “something for everyone” story: “Santa Fe five ways.”

**Take good notes.** Although you may be on vacation, approach the assignment as any good reporter would: Ask questions, take notes, and write down names, titles and contact information of poten-

---

**DEVELOPING FRESH ANGLES and pitching stories to the right market at the right time—that’s where the real work begins.**

---

tial sources in case you need to get in touch with them for more information or clarification after you return home.

## **Take me with you when you go.**

Don’t confuse “short and sweet” stories for ones that are sketchy and incomplete. “Make every single word carry its weight,” Marsh advises. Choose strong nouns and verbs over adjectives and adverbs. Be sure to provide enough descriptive passages, salient facts and sensory details (sights, sounds, smells, tastes and textures) for your reader to re-create your journey in his or her mind’s eye. Place your readers in the story early on using familiar reference points, which could be as simple as saying your story takes place in a village 80



miles south of Paris.

Make sure your narrative is strong enough to stand on its own—even if you have photos to accompany the story. And include an “if you go” sidebar with practical information such as websites, addresses and phone numbers of the attractions mentioned in your article. No travel story is complete without one.

### Tell me a story I can't put down.

Although fewer print and online pubs are buying first-person travelogues, the blogosphere is full of them. If you decide to write one, your narrative should read like a work of fiction, *although it must be based entirely on fact*. But how do you move your story beyond the realm of “What I did on my summer vacation” to one with universal appeal? Use the same basic elements of fiction:

- **Colorful characters.** Work into your narrative some of the interesting locals you meet who personify the places you've visited.
- **A well-developed setting.** (See “Take me with you when you go.”)
- **Conflict.** What challenges and obstacles did you face during your travels? Did you brave the elements? Struggle with a language barrier? Did you discover that your preconceived notions about your destination were not true?
- **Candor.** Travel changes us. In what way(s) did your journey change you? A good first-person account includes insights about the narrator, the journey and the transformative nature of travel.

**Give me a reason to publish the story now.** Whenever possible, pitch your story to coincide with seasonal travel, holidays, commemorative events or anniversaries. Check out local, regional, state and national cultural-events calendars for ideas. And be aware that print media—even the features section of daily newspapers—have a long lead time, so plan your pitch accordingly. If you're pitching to newspapers, “now” means three or four weeks in advance.

## Market trends for travel writers

- **Offer photos, and even video.** “The more skills we can bring forward, the better,” says SATW's Betsa Marsh. If photos or video isn't your strong suit, consider taking a class to improve your skills. Alisson Clark, a freelancer who has written travel stories for major newspapers and *National Geographic Traveler*, says if you can't shoot your own photos, search the Internet for a photographer with original photos.
- **Diversify.** Many travel writers now accept advertising for their blogs. Others partner with a travel agency to take people on tours.
- **Stay connected.** Contact state and local visitors and convention bureaus and get your name on their media-mailing lists for press releases about upcoming events.
- **Know before you go.** Although all-expenses-paid press trips sponsored by tour outfitters and visitors and convention bureaus can help you generate ideas, keep in mind that some publications don't work with freelancers who participate in press trips, according to Clark. Others don't mind if you go, but won't allow you to write about them.
- **Blog.** New writers can make a name for themselves with a blog, but it may take some time to get established in an increasingly crowded blogosphere—or to see any income from advertisers. Clark found it more useful to contribute to existing travel blogs, where somebody else handles the advertising and marketing. Though the pay is often minimal, the exposure is great, she says. Contributors enjoy other perks, as well. “If you have a guaranteed market, you get on a lot more press trips,” she says.
- **Make an app.** There's an app for that. And if there isn't, you may be just the person to create one. Generally you must do all the work up front. Payment comes later, Marsh says. She just developed the content for an app through Sutro Media in San Francisco.
- **Break into print.** Pitch short, front-of-the-book news items to magazines to establish a relationship with the editors. Another good strategy: Pitch to your local newspaper or regional or local magazine. Although the pay isn't great, you can start building a portfolio of clips.

—D.T.

Magazines generally have a three- to five-month lead time.

**Know our publication.** Read up to a year's worth of back issues to get a sense of the publication's audience, distinctive voice, regular columns, typical story formats, and the content the publication has recently covered.

**Know that just because we've “done that story before” doesn't mean we won't cover the subject again.** During the past seven years, I've written two romantic-getaway stories for the magazine and edited several more. Each offered a unique mix of charming towns, bed-and-breakfasts, parks or beaches to visit within a day's drive from our town.

The key is to approach the subject from a fresh, new perspective. Some-

times, simply using different sources may be enough to give you a fresh start. Changing the story's structure—from a narrative to a bulleted format, for example—helps, too. If you pitch an ever-green topic, let some time pass—at least a few months—between the medium's last publication of that material and your query.

### Diana Tonnessen

Diana Tonnessen is an award-winning feature writer and magazine editor based in Gainesville, Fla. Her credits include eight nonfiction books and dozens of articles in consumer magazines such as *Parents* and *Working Mother*. In June 2013, she is offering a weeklong travel writing workshop in Provence. Web: dianatonnessen.com.

For specific travel markets, see the market listings on pages 46 and 47.