

Will Peach asks Pam Mandel about Creative Travel Writing

WP: Pam, give us a little background about your creative endeavors in the field of writing and travel blogging as a whole. What makes your blog/editorial pursuits and/or voice different and why the hell did the TBEX organisers ask you to present with this unqualified piece of filth sitting opposite you?

PM: I started this game a LOOOONG time ago, I've been blogging since 1996. I got here first. Get off my lawn.

Actually, I've been writing, as a job, for more than 15 years, and done a respectable chunk in travel. I have three guidebook credits, some magazine bylines, a little radio, and hey, I once got a story in the Irish Farmer's Journal. I don't want to read you my resume, but I have one, and it's a writer's resume.

As for what makes me different, uh, I play the ukulele. And I really care about writing. Obsessively. I think it is the single most important thing for a blogger. Anyone thinks that writing does not need to be the very first concern of a blogger can hand over a vowel from their keyboard every day until they discover that words matter.

I wish I didn't feel like it was rare, but I really, really, REALLY love writing and a minimal percentage of people I talk in this space feel that way.

WP: Principally we're here to help coach and help bloggers be more creative. Before we do that let's rip them apart. As an editor, what are the biggest mistakes you see writers making that force you to want to set fire to your computer and end your days playing ukulele to a sell-out audience of one frog on Walden Pond?

PM: I think we talked about this. I can't bear shameless shilling for the sponsor of a trip, stuff that's clearly written just to accommodate some random text link ad, travel writing in which the writer goes on and on about their glorious good time and gives you nothing to relate to. I don't like dis-ingenuousness, lazy generalizations, poor grammar, insulting your readership either directly or indirectly by treating them like they're stupid, oh, so many things. I'm also REALLY tired of people telling me how awesome they are, how awesome their experiences are. So what? Make me care.

WP: Creativity then. That awful objective word. How do you measure it? How does a travel piece grab Pam Mandel by her own curly brown mop of hair and shake her vigorously until she screams, sweating uncontrollably in her nether regions, ENOUGH ALREADY I LOVE YOU!

PM: Take me there. When a piece drags me right into the heart of the story, I get super excited. I'm a sucker for good descriptive language. I like funny, a lot, and a certain self deprecation, not taking oneself too seriously. I like to feel like I'm experiencing what the writer is experiencing. I like the attention to detail that makes places come alive, I like a tension that makes me feel like something is going to happen, I like to be surprised, even if it's something small. Good travel writing -- good narrative travel writing is a kind of poetry. There's a book by a Nigerian writer, Ben Okri, called The Famished Road and

the whole time I read it, I felt like I was dreaming. Since travel has that sense to it, that sense of an other place, writing that can capture that sense of dreaming just wins me right over. Yeah, the bar is high.

WP: In terms of creative techniques you are the master of gripping narrative. "The Kid with the Tattoo" does something delicious by showing us, in a postmodern way, this self-awareness you have, as the story unfolds, over the act of writing and whether or not you deem it, as you jokingly put it, "difficult". Is learning to be creative a difficult process then? Is it something that a writer discovers over time?

PM: I don't think it has to be difficult, but I do think it takes time. We are, I think, too impatient to publish everything. I studied art and oh, I threw away a lot of bad work. I think we could throw away more as bloggers. I heard Tim Cahill speak last year and he talked about how he throws away the first pages of what he writes. I also read a piece somewhere that advised cutting the first paragraph or two of your story as it's often irrelevant. We are in such a hurry to click publish that we don't give ourselves time to marinate, to become creative. I try really hard to wait until the story feels right and to give myself room to be creative. It doesn't always work, I'm not going to lie. I write my share of garbage, and I just hope I have the good sense to throw it away.

WP: Your writing (I'm thinking of a Journey in Fever here) consistently evades the stereotypical where/how/when of most travel posts and instead transports us, deliberately, into your psyche in a stream of conscious burst of energy. Yes, we get some of those details, but not all. Why is showing and telling (or a lack thereof) such a central device for you and what exactly are you trying to do with it?

PM: I'm not a reporter, my stories are really your standard memoir -- I went somewhere, I saw something, it made me feel weird, nervous, happy... I'm just trying to say to my readers, "Oh my god, I saw this thing, and it was so weird, and it made me think of these 97 other things, and historically, this fourth thing is true, and can you believe how fucked up and magical the world is?" I suppose if I was reporting, traditionally, I'd be more concerned with where/how/when, but the biggest thing for me is not those questions, but WHY? And sometimes, WTF?

WP: Turning away from breaking TBEX presentation rule number two (the first rule of TBEX being you most certainly talk about TBEX) and being heinously self-promotional, who else do you see, in this field and out, as being particularly creative and what approaches do they use?

PM: I LOVE Gawker's travel pieces, they are unapologetic and full of sass. I am devoted to World Hum, it's thoughtful and always beautifully written, and probably if a writer has had a story on there, I'm also devoted to their blog. Eva Holland recently started a collaboration called Vela Magazine -- travel writing by women -- and it's amazing. But truthfully, a lot of blogging leaves me feeling pretty cold. I can count on my hands the number of bloggers I think are truly turning themselves to writing great stories. And the one thing that ties them together is that they are writers, they are real lovers of writing, they are crazy for words.

WP: You make a note in your writing to point out that parts of your travels are supplemented by tourist boards yet you avoid overtly pandering to them and bending over backwards in sycophantic displays of love-making. What is the effect of this corporate/creative tie-in and are there any ways writers can creatively express themselves while still appeasing sponsors?

PM: It's a risk, honestly. Every time I do a sponsored trip I end up writing something that I think is going to get me kicked off the roster, I swear. I imagine them back in the offices going, "Seriously? We funded THIS?" But here's the thing: I do not care what the sponsor thinks of my story. Don't get me wrong, I WANT them to be happy with my work, of course, I'm not an idiot, nor would I intentionally go about shooting myself in the foot -- I don't have Gawker's nerve. But I remind myself of something really important every time I sit down to write: The PR agency is NOT my audience. This is a really easy mistake to make, but let's be perfectly clear: I am not writing my blog to make PR agents and travel providers happy. That is not my job. Unless I am being paid to write work for the agency for their materials, they get NO say over what I publish, ever.

I have been lucky, very lucky, in that I have written about meth addled island kids, suffering a raging fever, getting insanely seasick, oh, a bunch of not exactly shiny experiences, and had the sponsors say, "We loved the work you did while you were traveling with us, it was so real." That's awesome, right? I wrote what I wanted and oh, look, the ground did not fall away underneath my feet. Don't worry about appeasing sponsors. Worry about what you give your READERS, always, first. Sponsors want your readers' eyes anyways, so why would you not place your readers first?

WP: Let's talk narrative. 80% of travel blogs out there don't really seem to get it. What is your understanding of it and is there a framework that creative travel pieces follow?

PM: Yeah, narrative is like porn, you know it when you see it. And we all struggle to define it. But I always come back to this really human analogy -- "Let me tell you a story." Maybe we over think it, when all we're trying to do is say, "Oh, I have to tell you about what happened to me when I was trying to get home from Zanzibar, the whole thing was so.... weird." I've heard Don George (he wrote The Lonely Planet Guide to Travel Writing) say that he has a method -- what are the steps I took to get there and what changed -- but that doesn't work for me. I do like to think about the art of narrative as travel -- you go somewhere, some stuff happens, you reach your goal, but the goal in narrative is weirdly metaphysical, it's that you shifted your perspective or you learned something new or you just discovered that, oh, that place is fucked up, and you really needed to tell someone about it. You really wanted to tell a story. I guess the framework I follow is that it's a story that REALLY wants to be told. That's the framework for the stuff I read that I like, that there's some kind of necessity, it's a story you can't NOT tell.

I was at a conference last year and I saw -- this is true -- a man that was about two and half feet tall on a Segway. And I was standing in the middle of this plaza and a friend walked up and asked me how my day was going. "OH MY GOD," I said, "I JUST SAW... I MEAN I THINK I SAW..." I couldn't wait to tell someone,

anyone, about this very odd sight. I feel like the writer should be compelled, to that degree, to tell you their story. A lot of stuff is just noise, just recaps. Less noise, please, more OMFG.

WP: Futility. Whatever we say is all objective right? Our ideas on creativity might be different to the rest of the people sitting here. How do we come to terms with that but still continue to experiment anyway?

Go for it. Just go for it. Who cares what I we think, anyway?

WP: Lastly, what 3 critical take-aways can you give to travel writers hoping to be more creative?

PM: Be brave. Don't try to protect yourself, your situation, your income. Write like you have all the money in the world. Write like you MEAN it.

Be honest. If the hotel was super weird, if the food gave you gut rot for days, if people said things that made you crazy, write about it honestly. I'm not saying you should do a hatchet job, but if you're not going to be honest, don't write it. Your readers will love you for your honesty, I *promise* this. And it's hugely freeing to be honest in your writing, it cuts you loose to be totally crazy.

Axe the word "travel" from your self-declared title and just be a writer. Throw away all the ideas you have about what you think it means to be a travel writer and just write. Any idiot can be a travel writer. Be a WRITER, love the words, and then see what happens.

Pam Mandel asks Will Peach about Creative Travel Writing

PM: So, seriously, why are you here? What's makes you qualified to talk about creative writing?

WP: Well, I think this is the fundamental question that not only I but every delegate and speaker at TBEX should be asking themselves. I'm here because I wanted to prove to myself that I could stand in front of an extremely handsome and amorous crowd and speak somewhat fluidly about something I love, travel blogging. It really isn't any more complicated than that.

In terms of being qualified yes, it's a great question and one that I'm sure many people are thinking seeing me speak at this session. So in that way I'm keen to add a riposte to this question first before making any attempt to share advice about creative writing and what it constitutes.

The honest answer? I wouldn't say I'm qualified to speak about creative writing or (any aspect of blogging for that matter) than anyone else present here today. I have my own ideas about it sure, and it's on that premise I gather I've been asked to speak. I don't go out of my way trying to be creative, I simply speak my mind and, to some at least, that makes for an entertaining read. People either love what I have to say or hate it. But few are impartial. I guess that means I'm doing something right.

PM: You edit for Vagabundo and TravelSexLife, right? Let's talk about what's in your inbox: What do you see that makes you think, "Oh, yeah, this is it!"? What catches your attention right away?

WP: Editing for two vastly different sites (if you take into account the subject matter) means I get to see a whole spectrum of pitches and article ideas. I'd be lying if I said I didn't find the former (TravelSexLife) the more exciting vehicle for stories out of the two. That's because stories relating to sexual adventures on the road capture our attention more than a straight up travel story about say "street food in Malaysia" or something of that ilk. Even more so when you take into account how blogging has changed our reading habits and made us a whole lot more critically selective in choosing what we spend to choose those few short moments in the day reading.

That being said, what does that say about traditional travel writing and creativity (especially that for which Vagabundo is typically a vessel)? Does it mean all pieces have to present some human element that we can all relate to (whether it be about sex or not)? Fundamentally I'd argue yes, that the "human element" or, more precisely, writing that presents some kind of transformative experience, is that which grabs my attention most. I love confessional writing, where I'm transported deep into the psyche of the writer and they bear something personal. Pitches that present that - and I want to stress that that type of experience can come from even the most mundane of events - are the ones that excite me most.

So, to catch my attention, I think writers need to ask themselves where they are in their writing. The most creative writers, in my opinion, are concerned with the experience and its effect, more so than the elements and facts of a place. When I get a simple line in a pitch telling me how a certain trip or travel experience changed something, naturally I say "go write it". The crazier, the better of course.

PM: Can you break that down into tips we can all make sense of and use? (Three takeaways)

The first tip: ask yourself how a certain experience made you think or feel.

Anyone can google simple facts and figures about a place. Creative writing has little to do with those details we have fast access to. The things we can learn from reading your writing alone are those that always prove most interesting (and, usually, what we deem the most “creative”). That's where your own unique inflections of thought and the lessons you learned from doing certain things prove essential. The reader wants to know about you and your own uniqueness. If they want to find out about a destination, they'll go and read a practical guide.

Write about your thoughts and feelings of being somewhere but do it sparingly. Over saturating your writing with every tiny thought thread is sappy and dull. Let the events of a story unfold and provide insight at the crucial points.

The second tip: stamp your personality all over your writing and don't be afraid of who you are.

Yeah, it's kind of disgustingly positive, is a bit "Planet D" and makes me feel sick while saying it, but don't be afraid of who you are and letting that come out in your writing. Your weird turns of phrase, the strange and peculiar dialogue you use to communicate with others and the downright wacky things that happen to you, all prove essential in creating engaging work. Tap into these aspects of your personality and lay them out there and watch people take an active interest in your life and your writing.

In my case this takes the form of four-letter word tirades, seedy sexual innuendos and being controversial for controversies sake. All of which, as I'll address later, I don't see anything wrong with. This is a new medium, there are no boundaries and, as many travel bloggers will tell you, copying others (while it might get you so far) just makes it dull for everyone in the long run. Put in your own quirks, the glorious colloquialisms you use and the decrepit subjects which fascinate you, and you're onto a winner.

The third tip: take risks and don't be boring.

The first two tips hinge on this final one. What happens if you're boring? How can you possibly be a creative writer?

I guess this is the point I hold closest to my own philosophy. Being boring is something of a sin to me, especially with life being so full of opportunity. Yes it's contentious, especially as deeming someone "boring" is as subjective as deeming someone "creative", but I think there's so many avenues to explore that nobody really should have grounds to copy anyone else or run out of things to say.

Everyone has something interesting to relay, the debate is whether they choose to put it out there (in order to play it safe and be accepted) or whether they take a risk and go for it. If you can handle the criticism, speak out and don't hold back. People might not respect you or what you say (and you'll be amazed by how often people often like to take things personally) but it sure makes for creative writing.

PM: What do you see that makes you say "Not this, again. Please, no." Or just "Delete."

WP: Contrary to what many people might think, there's not that much I react to in that way. All writing is a foundation which you can cut, copy and add to and I'll be honest if I don't like an idea by trying to be as constructive as possible - except for the submissions in this workshop, which I'll brutally mutate with limited self-measurement.

I think the biggest thing that I'll usually reserve a sigh for are pieces that have no apparent beginning or ending and just drone on. Don't get me wrong, I like stream-of-consciousness writing (and by all means keep it organic) but you need an attention-grabbing hook. If I'm not caught in the first paragraph (or even first few sentences) I'll more than likely glance over the rest in a dead-eyed glaze. The same goes for the close. Bring it back to the opening if you can and give the reader something more to think about.

Another thing I reserve disdain for are pieces that vary on the self-indulgent or self-congratulatory side of things. Contrary to what I said earlier, it's still important you put your personality and perspective in there, just make sure you do it in a measured way that people can relate to.

PM: Do you have a method to generating your ideas? Or do you just take your pants off and see what happens? I want to talk a little freestyle about writing here -- how does it work for you? What do you DO, exactly?

WP: Firstly, if I was to take my pants off, yes it would be rather in-fitting with my tone of writing, but hardly lunchtime material for TBEX. I'll reserve that for the after-party instead.

In terms of idea generation what happens with me is that I'll look at what other travel writers are doing (an another essential creative writing tip) and try and work out what the opposite approach would be and explore that. Generally these ideas don't come immediately after reading other peoples work but sometime afterward, when I've had time to think about it and play through scenarios in my head.

Then what I'll do is imagine I have one shot to get across a story to a group of similar-minded friends who share the same sense of humor. Granted this can appear infantile (if you have that type of friendship group) but there's also a lack of inhibition that comes with it that makes a certain style intriguing or at least vaguely interesting for an outsider. Appreciating that readers will see the fun in it is often my major downfall. A lot of people expect that travel writing should be overtly serious all of the time. I think otherwise.

PM: How do you feel about writing outrageous stuff, like taking a huge swing at TBEX or running around a sponsored stay naked? What do you want people to know about this kind of boldness?

WP: I don't really think it is outrageous. All the writers I admire critique peers and the environments in which they write. Yes, it's pretentious to measure up to them, but the biggest criticism I have leveled at me is that my writing doesn't add anything.

Travel blogging, as we know it, is so new and uncharted. In order to progress we have to highlight its flaws and come up with ways to improve it and not expect to get it right first time. I don't have the answers, but if I can get people to think (while hopefully making one or two people laugh along the way), then I'm doing what I want to do with my writing.

I also want to remind people that travel writing should be fun. A lot of us are sat here today worrying about how to drive traffic, better optimize our sites, score more press trips, design the perfect website and whatever else that we've forgot the principle reasons why we started doing all this in the first place. The business-side of things often takes over the creative. As sad as that is I think there are plenty of unconventional ways to marry them both. I want to help encourage people to get creative and have fun exploring that.

PM: You poke fun at bloggers (and TBEX), there's a naughtiness in your writing, is this an intentional approach?

I think the first thing that people miss is that before anyone else comes into the equation I'm always the first target of my writing. Thankfully this type of self-deprecation usually comes with being English yet the moment I lose the capacity to laugh or be critical of myself is the moment I'll probably end up speaking at every TBEX event and making huge sexual demands of its organizers and speakers. Wink wink, nudge nudge, Pam Mandel.

My view is basically this: why not be a bit cheeky? It's playfulness and at the end of the day I can separate interactions with people through blogs and the interactions in reality that count most. I think it's crucial to remember that online is online and this dichotomy between who you are as a person in real life and who you are on the internet is a construction of your own making.

If you're bold enough to put yourself out there for public scrutiny (such is the nature of a personal blog) an innocent jibe (for I never say anything deeply personal) should be considered light-weight banter, not criticism. If I have offended people, I hope we can sit down with a beer and let me tell you how you've engaged me enough to care. More than likely though I bet you're still wondering who the hell I am!

Will Peach asks Some Other People about Creative Travel Writing

Bret Love, Green Global Traveler: "Creativity is a dangerous thing, because you risk alienating those who prefer coloring inside the lines, which is, frankly, most people. Creativity is about taking risks, and it's often difficult to jump off that ledge without knowing there's a safety net."

Ayngelina Brogan, Bacon is Magic: "Creative travel writing is about capturing the experience. Anyone can google flights, hotels or buses. It is expressing the personal experience of being there that counts."

Robert Schrader, Leave Your Daily Hell: "I approach my pieces creatively by taking a topic and asking "Where am I in this?" sometimes, it's very easy, other times, such as when I write about more "boring" topics like visas and currency exchange, it's writing with personal authority and flair, in order to make the ordinary more extraordinary, that counts".

Talon Windwalker, 1 Dad, 1 Kid: "I think the main thing I do to try and write more creatively is not to use an outline. I find when I use an outline, my writing becomes more sterile. I feel married to the expectations of my outline rather than feeling like I can just . . . write. I've also found a good cocktail or two really helps tap the creative fount."

Jennifer Beth-Nixon, Scarlett Adventures: "Creative travel writing, for me, is that perfect balance between giving enough information to make your reader yearn to recreate the experience themselves, whilst giving enough of your own personality away to make the tale something that would hold it's own at a dinner party. You pretty much want people to retell your tales at dinner parties and just replace your name for theirs! If in doubt, sex stories or near death experiences always help. "

Lola DiMarco, Where in the World is Lola?: "I use a persona to speak through that is a bit cheeky and sassy. "Lola" loves to have fun and share her unique experiences with her readers. People like to see what else Lola will be up to next and where in the world she may wear her lovely boa."

Lindsay Hogg, The Traveller World Guide: "If you're a boring person I hope you're good at stumbling, social media and networking because nobody is going to want to read about you being boring in another country."

Tom Stockwell, Waegook Tom: "My style isn't well-crafted prose or blunt critiques - I write as if I'm telling my friends a story in a bar or coffee shop and I'm trying to make them laugh. It can take a while to find your own style - my first blog posts were all over the place - but once you do, then you're up and running."

Robert Schrader, Leave Your Daily Hell: "I approach my pieces creatively by taking a topic and asking "Where am I in this?" sometimes, it's very easy, other times, such as when I write about more "boring" topics like visas and currency exchange, it's writing with personal authority and flair, in order to make the ordinary more extraordinary, that counts".

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Mike Barish, Editor, Associate Editor Sherman's Travel : Identify your voice and then use that to connect with your audience. There are already too many guidebooks and travel sites out there for you to just run through a list of things to do in a city. *Why* do you think people should do them? Why did *you* do them? If you enjoyed them, who else might?

There's more to editing than proofreading. Even if you run your own site and pride yourself on being an independent blogger, partner with a friend who possesses some writing experience and ask them to look over your posts. You could do the same for them. Be each other's gatekeepers to ensure that you're publishing your best work possible. Challenge each other and your readers will benefit from the end results.

Kate Bailward, Blogger, Driving Like a Maniac: Don't be a Travel Blogger. Be a person who writes stories about travel - stories that they are proud of and believe in. I don't care about destinations: I care about the person visiting them and how they react to them. Your voice is the thing that keeps me coming back for more, so use it to its best advantage.

Oh, and for the love of god, use language properly.

Andy Murdock, US Digital Editor for Lonely Planet: Think of a photographer you like – Ansel Adams, Galen Rowell, anyone whose work you admire. Now think of all of the crappy shots they took that never saw the light of day: Ansel's thumb in the frame obscuring Half Dome, Galen tripping over a rock while trying to capture the Potala Palace. Their audience just gets to see the really good stuff. Make this true for your audience too.

Get yourself an editor. No, not that person you're thinking of right now – they like you too much. They speak your language so they know what you mean even if you're not being clear. Find another person that wants to write better and edit their work, and do it with the sole goal of making their writing as strong as possible. Maybe it's someone you only know online so you don't have to see their sad-puppy face when you point out all of the things wrong with their piece. Never let anything you write see the light of day without this person dissecting it and stitching it back together first.

Write because a story needs to be told, not because you feel the need to fill space with words. I could elaborate, but really everything is summed up in that first sentence. In fact, you should probably just ignore the last two sentences of this paragraph because they're just undermining the message.

Eva Holland, Senior Editor, World Hum, cofounder Vela Mag,: Think beyond a straight chronology - from "The trip started on day one" to "And then I went home." I'd encourage them to zero in on the part of the trip that matters, the moment or conversation or afternoon or what-have-you that the story is really about, when the change happened. (Because something has to change, or it's not a story, right?)

Doug Mack, Author, Europe on Five Bad Ideas a Day.: Know who you are and what you have to say and how you want to say it. Don't try to be everything to everyone like some sort of writerly Skymall. Explore new territory (I mean that mostly figuratively, but literally, too) and new ways of expressing yourself. For

sure. Don't pander, don't simply chase the page-views and ad dollars. Unlike Skymall, you are a person, not a company. As such, I want to be able to identify with you, to know you on some level, to have a sense of a tangible human being composed of endearingly weird tics and flaws to go along with the singularly excellent skills and traits and ideas.

The best writers have a strong, interesting voice. Good writing and good ideas are their own best SEO, especially if the stories hold together in some way, if they build a portrait of a specific individual. If you always write thoughtful essays about remote villages and then you suddenly have a debauchery-filled post about package tours in Mazatlan (or vice versa), in an entirely different voice and with no acknowledgment that you're out of your usual element--well, I'm going to be confused and, frankly, will wonder if you just copied a tourism bureau's press release. You can write about those two places, of course, but I want to be able to see the connective tissue of voice and personality and ideas that runs throughout each story.

If you ever--ever--write the words "I'm a traveler, not a tourist," or some variant of same (and without irony), I will personally hunt you down and whack you with a rolled-up copy of Evelyn Waugh's "The Tourist's Manual." Written in 1934 and still the best, funniest, sharpest take-down of that enduring and grating travel-boast.

Lavinia Spalding, Freelance writer, Author, Writing Away: A Creative Guide to Awakening the Journal-Writing Traveler, Editor, The Best Women's Travel Writing Volume 8 and 9: Rewrite. Then rewrite, and rewrite again, and keep rewriting. I usually do at least ten revisions of whatever I'm working on before I let anyone see it. Then I send it to a few respected friends or colleagues, and when I get their comments back, I start the revision process again. I don't publish anything until I'm sure it's my best work.

Figure out WHY you want to tell *this* story. And I'm not talking about wanting to write it because it's a fascinating subject or a beautiful place. Why specifically do **YOU** want to write it? What is it about the subject that appeals to you, personally? If you can put your finger on that before you start writing, you'll end up with a more interesting story because you'll care more—which will make your reader care more.

NARROW YOUR FOCUS. I receive countless submissions for *The Best Women's Travel Writing* that, although interesting and beautifully written, suffer from having too many stories and ideas packed into one. The writer has tried to cram absolutely everything about an experience into one essay, instead of concentrating on one crucial element of it. Ask yourself what the heart of the story is, and then make sure your work is always in service of that.

Leif Pettersen, Freelance writer, Lonely Planet guidebook author, blogger, Killing Batteries: People are going to tell you, emphatically sometimes, that you must post frequently or you'll never build a loyal readership. I disagree completely. In fact, you'll be in danger of losing readers by rushing out poorly written, pointless posts four times a week instead of posting something smart and engaging 2-3 times a month.

Scan a handful of the best travel blogs (and by 'best', I don't mean 'most popular') and look at how often they post. With all the means we have today to push out new posts to readers, long periods of silence have ceased to be detrimental to maintaining a captive audience.

Also, all the work required to keep up a frantic posting schedule is time that you should be out on the streets of your destination, absorbing the nuances and organic (i.e. non-guidebook) experiences that will become your great posts. Organic experiences that will become great blog posts do not happen to people camped out in the hostel working on their blogs for six hours a day.

Lauren Quinn, Freelance writer, blogger, Lonely Girl Travels, The most important and precious thing a writer has is his or her own voice. The craft can be learned, and should be learned, must be learned--- but the thing that makes great writers great (at least the ones I love) is the strength and conviction of their voice. No one wants to hear the same old stuff, the nicey-nice. Or maybe they do, but there isn't any longevity in that. When I read, I want to feel something. I don't even necessarily want to agree with the writer; sometimes it's better when I don't. But I want to *believe* them, if that makes sense.

It's easy to fall into a groove where all you get is "wow, that was great" feedback; where you're not getting any constructive criticism that pushes you further and deeper; where you become mad self-reflexive and exist inside your own little feel-good world. It's a fine line to walk, between using your blog as a platform for unrestrained self-expression, and using it as a masturbatory oversharing session. I think exactly where that line is is different for all of us, but it's crucial that we each identify that line and stay mindful of that line, traverse it like tight-rope walkers and use that community we've built as our safety net.

Mike Sowden, Freelance writer, blogger, Fevered Mutterings: Brown shoes with white trousers - for the love of Bieber, NO NO NO. This works both as a metaphor for, well, anything you like, and as a specific fashion suggestion. Take your pick.

There is an enormous amount of pressure to do what huge amounts of other people are doing, especially at first when you're not sure what YOU are doing, and especially when what other people are doing is clearly getting them money, social media buzz, laid, etc. That pressure is everywhere, and we are all susceptible to it, as social animals and as pragmatic professionals. And yet the absolute worst way to stand out from the crowd is by doing what other people are doing. Want to write like Paul Theroux? ME TOO. But there's a difference between "being inspired by" and "Xeroxing", and it's the difference between having a distinctive voice/brand/persona and sounding like everyone else. Remember who you are, and filter all incoming advice through that concept. It's the best way to end up somewhere you're happy with.

Learn how apostrophe's work. (I never did, and it's hurt my career no end.)

Stories happen when plans falls apart, when scripts start editing themselves and when things go to shit. Go find these places. (Carefully. Using insurance).

If you're not slightly nervous when you click "Publish" or "Send", you haven't written hard enough.

Andrew Evans, National Geographic's Digital Nomad:

- 1) [REDACTED]
- 2) Learn new skills. These days, it's not enough to just be a writer/photographer/videographer/smiling host. Don't get too caught up in your public persona statement of, "I am X . . . I do X . . ." Just be you and let travel push you into new territories. Good travel lands you in unexpected places and forces you to try new things. Suddenly you'll become a spelunker or long-distance hiker or a camel whisperer or simply a better listener. Just don't get to preachy about these self-discoveries and start calling yourself an expert, because then you will be a **** .
- 3) Think about what you are offering readers online. If it's just travel tips, then yawn. They can get those off a cereal box or off the umpteen million travel tip websites already out there with severely-conflicting advice on how to backpack around Europe. Besides, no matter how well-traveled you may think you are, you will eventually run out of tips. Instead, tell stories--good stories. Good stories win over packing advice every time.
- 4) Take notes people! Being a blogger does not grant you a more vivid memory or a free pass from basic journalistic practice. Carry paper and pen and take notes about what you see, the names and facial expressions of people you meet, the way everything looks and behaves. When you're eating a new food, write down the best adjective you can to describe the taste of that food while said food is still in your mouth. Take more notes early on in a trip, when you're reactions to a new place are keen and fresh. If you've taken lots of good notes, you should be able to blog about a place long after the fact.
- 5) There are no free lunches. I mean, some of you will be offered a lot of lunches (and flights, train trips, bungy jumping, etc.) for which you will not be charged and you will think this is awesome, because it is, BUT, in the long run, that relationship can go only one of two ways. The PR industry is still having its summer fling with bloggers-at-large, but only because we are the best show in a small town. PR is the opposite of No Strings Attached. Do not expect the love to last, i.e. the free lunches to go on forever, unless your life's ambition is to become a severely-underpaid ad copywriter for the travel industry. If it is, then please kill your blog and get a job on Madison Avenue--you will be happier and so will we. Win, win.
- 6) Be positive. There is a whole hypercritical school of travel writing that goes back to the Victorian Age when British ex-patriots would compare every inch of the globe with the fair and drippy England of home. It is always very easy to rip a place to shreds, and while sometimes it is very amusing to mock a place, it is much more challenging (and rewarding) to find those redeemable nuggets in a destination and let them shine. If you're covering something devastating (a war-torn country), you still have to give the reader a little leaf of hope somewhere in the piece. If you write without hope, then you are just like Paul Theroux and deserve to be pummeled.
- 7) If the PR industry treats you like a rock star and you start to think you are a rock star, then be a real rock star: David Bowie, Elton John, Chuck Berry. Don't be the Katy Perry of travel blogging, ever.