

**HANDOUT for: Wined, Dined, and Pampered: How to Parlay Your Travel Writer Status Into Coveted Perks (Presentation by Steenie Harvey)**  
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## **Subsidizing Your Trips**

Air fares. Hotel bills. Dining out. Checking out events and visiting attractions. Unless you're prepared to stay in the cheapest hostels and eat unappetizing meals, the actual expenses of travel can often be staggering.

When you're starting out, be realistic. Those juicy \$1 and upwards a word front cover features are generally given to writers with a track record...writers who've first impressed the editor with shorter 'front of the book' snippets. The same goes with getting a magazine to pick up your expenses. It's a rare editor who will pick up all the travel costs of a writer with whom they don't have a relationship..

So say you're only averaging \$200 for an article. If a trip costs you \$2,000, then you've got to sell 10 articles to simply break even.

Sure, to cut down on expenses, you could concentrate on writing about your own city or region – and that's what some writers do. But it doesn't beat the glamour of exploring new places.

To make any amount of decent money from travel writing, it's usually necessary to persuade other people to subsidize your trips in as many ways as you can.

Many established freelancers do this by getting themselves 'hosted' or 'comped'. They're treated to meals, accommodation, tickets to shows, invitations to exhibit openings, etc.

Who pays for it? Well, the providers are generally visitor and convention bureaus; individual hotels; tour companies and other outlets offering travel-related services.

Of course, in return for wined, dined and receiving other forms of hospitality, writers are expected to deliver the goods - stories that will generate paying customers.

But don't get me wrong. Not everything is always entirely for free. Becoming a travel writer certainly doesn't mean that you'll never have to pay a dime for anything ever again.

For example, some Press Trips require that you pay your own transportation costs to reach the destination. And if you're contacting a hotel or a tourist office as an individual, you may be offered accommodation at a discounted 'Press Rate' rather than getting your stay for free.

But discounted "press rates" are still worth having. They're often at least 50% less than the normal hotel rates. Visit during weekdays – and go out of season.

But you'll also come across Press Trips where airfares and all meals and accommodation are part of the package. In fact, everything except personal expenses (laundry, telephone calls, bar bills etc) is paid for.

## **It's All About Publicity**

Why would Ireland's tourism office fund 8 North American travel writers on an all-expenses paid jaunt - air-fare from the US included – to go cycling around the West coast, feast on seafood and experience some of the country's best traditional music pubs?

Why do the vast majority of Visitor & Convention Bureaux across the US and Canada offer Individual and Group Press Trips that coordinate accommodation, attraction admission, outdoor activities, interviews, partner introductions, ground transportation, and meals?

It's because they're constantly seeking people like me (and you) to help promote their travel products and services. Writers are a conduit for hotels, for resorts, for countries --- for every type of travel industry service. We're the link to magazines and the readers that these people want to attract.

For the travel and hospitality industry, when it comes to getting 'returns' on their marketing budget, the money that it costs to host a travel writer is less than taking out ad space. And readers are more likely to be swayed by the words of a writer who has 'been there, done that' rather than decide where they want to go on the promises of an advertisement.

## **Press Trip Options**

### **Group Press Trips, Media Visits and FAM Tours**

Following a specially-designed and itinerary that's usually quite rigid, Group Press Trips are for invited groups of travel writers. You'll undoubtedly need some clips to show the hosts before you get invited on one. These trips are arranged throughout the year by tourism offices or sometimes by public relations (PR) agencies. The agencies may be acting on behalf of specific clients such as a chain of resorts like Sandals, a Convention & Visitors Bureau, the tourism department of a foreign country, or even a tour company offering vacations.

You'll sometimes also see Group Press Trips described as Media Visits or FAM Tours. FAM stands for 'familiarization'. An organization such as a Visitors Convention Bureau or a Tourism Office will get together with local businesses and arrange to showcase the best their city or region has to offer.

Group Press Trips and FAM Tours often revolve around a specific event. A good example was the Alaska Media Center's Winter Press Tour that took place in early March. After a packed 7-day agenda of curling, ski tours, dog mushing and Northern Lights viewing, the trip ended with the final stages of the World Ice Art Championships.

### **Individual Press Trips**

For most freelancers, Individual Press/FAM/Media Trips are generally easier to come by and arrange than Group Press Trips. You're not always tied to a specific date. You're not in tight competition for places with other writers. Plus the schedule isn't likely to be so break-neck.

Together with the tourism office and other hosts, you can either follow a planned theme or put together a custom-made itinerary to reflect the main thrust of your story. This could perhaps be a maritime theme...golf...antique hunting...wildlife...old plantation houses...gardens...family travel...Civil War battlefields.

Contact tourism offices well in advance. Most require advance notice of between 4 and 8 weeks. Some also indicate that they prefer you to visit in mid-week --- and preferably not in the high season.

Unlike with Group Press trips, there's sometimes leeway regarding bringing a traveling companion. But there's no hard-and-fast rules and you'll have to read each sponsor's guidelines. In some instances, a partner or friend can come for free -- it will always help if they're your 'researcher' or the 'photography' half of a team effort where you're the writer. And even if your companion isn't comped, they may be offered a reduced press rate.

Some sponsors encourage you to bring a companion. And though it's admittedly quite rare, you might be invited to bring along your family too.

For example, a few months back I came across an announcement for an Individual FAM Trip for a ranch holiday in Wyoming. Available any time from May to September, the trip included accommodations and meals for up to four people for one week, all ranch activities, and ground transportation. Airfare assistance was available to qualified journalists (those with assignments).

As the Ranch hoped for coverage in family publications, the blurb went on to say: "Writers are encouraged to bring their families."

But whether you're traveling alone or with a companion, always remember that you're in a destination to work. You're not on vacation.

## **Sample of Individual Press Trip**

### **Nebraska Division of Travel & Tourism**

"When people say 'getting there is half the fun,' they really mean the best part of travel is the little gems you discover along the way. However, as a working professional you don't have time to unearth these treasures on your own. So let our Public Relations Team do the walking for you!

We organize group press trips for journalists or custom-tailor travel itineraries for journalists who want to explore Nebraska at their own pace. Whether you're an antique aficionado in search of the nation's best bargains or an adventure writer looking for the trail less traveled, we will help you with all the logistics—or even show you around ourselves." [www.visitnebraska.org](http://www.visitnebraska.org)

## **Arrange your Own Perks**

If I was writing about North American destinations, I would make full use of Visitor & Convention Bureaux. However I'm not – practically all my articles nowadays relate to overseas destinations.

So another way – and the method I use - is to make direct contact with hotels and individual operators. Depending on whether my assignment is more about travel rather than real estate and relocation, sometimes I'll also contact a city's local tourist office in advance to arrange tours and free entrance to visitor attractions.

### **Other FAQs**

**Q** I've never been published. Can I get on a press trip?

**A** Only a very slim chance without clips or an assignment letter. But it has been done. And whether you're published or not, ask a hotel if there's a special rate for travel writers.

**Q** Can I take my wife/husband on a press trip?

**A** On organized press trips, generally not – and it's bad form to ask. As a freelancer traveling independently, there's usually some leeway – and it helps if your partner is your 'researcher' or 'photographer'.

**Q** How about taking the kids on a press trip?

**A** Not unless you're writing on a family or kid-specific theme. A villa or camping vacation might work – a cruise to the Norwegian fjords won't.

**Q** If a hotel arranges a press trip, can I write an article that only mentions the hotel in a sidebar?

**A** Much depends on what you have implied to the hotel. If, say, you're writing a hotel review for a regional magazine, then they'll obviously expect decent coverage. On the other hand, the majority of hotel PR people understand that unless it's specifically a hotel review, most editors don't want articles solely about accommodation - not unless there's something particularly unique about the place.

**Q** Are press trips ethical?

**A** Some say yes, others no. I have no problem with comps and freebies. If you intend making a full-time career from travel-writing, you're effectively a business traveler. And when you have to shell out hundreds of dollars to visit a destination, you either need to be very prolific or develop some business sense...otherwise you're on the road to ruin. If your editor isn't picking up the tab, why shouldn't somebody else? And although you're effectively giving free publicity to a destination/ resort/hotel etc, there's no obligation to lay on praise with a trowel. What is unethical is the practice of accepting press trips and then not delivering any articles.

**Q** Do press trips compromise objectivity?

**A** They shouldn't do. For example, take a trip by a package holiday company or a hotel group to some concrete block resort on Spain's Costa del Sol. As I would never choose to vacation here myself, how can I be objective? Well, I'm not writing for me, I'm looking at it from my readers' viewpoint. How does the destination measure up to similar Spanish resorts? Does it offer value for money? What kind of people will enjoy staying here – couples, families, etc?

### **Seeking Adventure?**

If you're particularly interested in adventure and eco-travel, take a look at ATMS (Adventure Travel Media Source). [www.atmstravelnews.com](http://www.atmstravelnews.com) Unlike with some sites, you don't have to pay anything to get information on upcoming press trips. Most are posted by individual resorts and adventure tour operators throughout North America, but a few weeks back I saw a biking tour to the West of Ireland (air fare from the US included) posted here.

Here are some postings that were recently on the site:

- Stay in an Eco-Lodge in Nicaragua
- The world's only Cowboy Poetry Rodeo (Utah)
- Biking safaris around Tucson
- Whitewater thrills in Hico, West Virginia
- Summer getaway in the Bridger-Teton National Forest, Wyoming
- Experience the Old West on a Wagon Train Adventure
- Sea Kayaking in Harpswells, Maine
- Inter-tribal Indian Ceremonial in Gallup, New Mexico

### **Press Trips through Travelwriters [www.travelwriters.com](http://www.travelwriters.com)**

You have to pay an annual membership fee of \$59 to fully access the site, but you receive periodic announcements from public relations companies and tour operators seeking to invite journalists on expenses-paid trips around the world.

Recent trips up on the website (to get full details you have to be a member) include:

- Explore the Magic of Bruges, Belgium
- Hawaii Food Tours in Honolulu announces Fam Tour
- Rosatito Beach: the Total Experience
- Cycling Ethiopia Press Trip
- Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta Invites Media
- Visit the new Hotel Providence, Rhode Island
- Women Only Walking Holiday Exploring Coastal Trails
- Maya Spa and Zahra Hotel invites travel writers to experience Mayan treatments
- Angel Valley Farm – 'Body Beautiful' spa in Costa Rica
- Britannia Inn, mid-coast Maine
- Newfoundland: Earth to Human

### **Press Trips though ITWPA (International Travel Writers & Photographers Alliance)**

You're getting a complimentary 3-month membership in this group as a perk for joining us at this workshop. Twice a month, members receive an e-letter that includes useful advice, tips, and tools of the trade from Kyle Wagner, the editor of that letter, as well as press-trip listings.

### **How to Make Connections**

Most destinations, companies – even events – have their own websites. These usually contain details for contacting the Press Officer or media representative.

Call, write or email. Introduce yourself - and if you don't have a specific request at this moment, ask to be put on the mailing list. If you've telephoned, follow up with a quick note thanking the person for speaking to you.

**Seven simple rules to follow:**

- Be polite
- Be concise
- Be specific
- Give plenty of notice of when you intend to take the trip – at least 6 weeks
- If you have had any articles published, include 2 or 3 tear sheets
- If you already have a letter of assignment from an editor, send a photocopy
- Always thank people for their help – and send them a copy of your article after publication.

**SAMPLE LETTER OF INTRODUCTION**

Here's an example of a letter of introduction that you might send to a Visitor & Convention Bureau/ Tourism Office:

Hilary Townsend (Public Relations Manager)  
San Diego North Convention & Visitors Bureau  
360 N. Escondido Blvd., Escondido, CA 92025-2600

Dear Ms. Townsend,

I'm a freelance writer specializing in family vacation travel. Family Circle West Coast has recently started a new feature called Especially for Kids and the editor has commissioned me to write a story on San Diego. My assignment letter is enclosed along with 3 recent clips.

San Diego Zoo, Legoland and the Birch Aquarium are stand-out attractions, but I hope to feature at least 8 specific ideas. I look forward to hearing what other fun and educational/hands-on activities you can suggest.

Family Circle West Coast is a monthly publication with an average readership of 86,000 for each issue. As its budget does not cover writer's expenses, I'm hoping that you can help with accommodation arrangements at hotels that offer complimentary or special rates for visiting travel journalists. As I will be making hotel recommendations, I would ideally like to stay in two separate accommodations that are both 'kid-friendly'.

I intend spending 4 nights in the city. My preferred time to visit would be 4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> September inclusive, but 14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> September inclusive works for me too.

Best regards,  
Marian McLeod (Ms)

CONTACT INFO (Address, phone, e-mail)