

V!VA Travel Guides

www.vivatravelguides.com

Insights from Editor Paula Newton

1. How do you characterize your readership?

Our readership could be anyone who does a search for travel information on the Internet. We try to provide information that might be useful for travelers of any budget or demographic, but our primary audience for both our books and the website is the young backpacker crowd.

2. Who writes for your publication? Where do you get your stories?

Since anyone can add content to V!VA's community-based website, our stories come from anyone, anywhere. However, paid assignments are given to those who successfully apply for freelance work with V!VA, or frequently to those who attend a V!VA Travel Guides Boot Camp (please see below). We also accept book proposals.

3. If you were to give one or two bits of advice to a freelancer hoping to break into your publication, what would you say?

We hold regular Travel Guidebook Writing Boot Camps, to train writers in how to write for travel guidebooks. There is an application process to get in, and a fee. We hire many of our freelance writers through this process. Writers are paid on a per-review basis. Once they have written a set amount of reviews for us, they then get their boot camp fee refunded (as well as having been paid for the reviews). Attendance at one of these camps, and an ability to stay on the ground in the country in question after the boot camp is a very good way to get a foot in the door at V!VA Travel Guides. There are Boot Camps already scheduled for Nicaragua (18-22 August 2008) and Costa Rica (22-30 August 2008), and there is also one being planned for Mexico in the Fall.

Alternatively, our website, www.vivatravelguides.com is a community-based website. Anybody can add reviews at any time, to any place in the world. Writers could submit a few reviews and then perhaps apply for freelance work with us, pointing out the reviews that they have already uploaded to the website. This way, V!VA has a good understanding of what the writer is capable of upfront, and it shows that the writer is willing and enthusiastic about our aims and goals.

4. What is a mistake you typically see new writers (or writers in general) make?

The most common mistake of prospective writers is not following the correct application process for staff writing or freelance writing positions. When applying for a job, if a resume, cover letter and a short travel writing sample are requested, those items should be sent, nothing more, nothing less. This mistake occurs in at least 50% of the applications for work that V!VA receives. It shows a lack of attention to detail and an inability to follow procedures (neither of which V!VA want in potential staff members).

5. Speaking specifically of travel articles, what kinds do you look for? Can you tell me a little bit about your own needs? How would you characterize your publication's travel coverage?

V!VA is a travel guidebook, and as such is looking more for reviews and write ups of destinations, hotels, restaurants, things to see and do, etc, written in a travel guidebook-style. Coverage is primarily Latin America focused at this time, but will expand in 2009 to other parts of the world. There are already guidebooks for Ecuador and Peru. A Colombia guidebook will be released by the end of July, with Chile, Bolivia and Argentina books being published by the end of 2008. Books for Nicaragua, Honduras and Costa Rica will closely follow these. All content in the books can also be found on the website.

6. What, in your view, separates an OK travel article from one that's truly inspired?

An OK travel article is one that is written about a destination that has already been written about many, many times. A great travel article is one that finds a new angle on a place.

7. Do you have any pet peeves when it comes to travel writing?

At VIVA there are a list of words that are used all too frequently that make the editors cringe due to their over-use, namely:

Boasts (v.)
Façade
Feature (v.)
Nestled
Offer (v.)
Spare (adj.)
Upscale
Well-appointed
Gem

All of these words are fine when used in moderation, but in most cases they appear far too often.

8. Think about the writer you most like to work with... what makes him or her so special?

The writers that VIVA like to work with are professional and committed. They meet set deadlines and follow VIVA style, tone, guidelines and procedures.

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Writer's Guidelines

The VIVA List is a way for travelers to share experiences and have those experiences published in our award-winning books. Unlike traditional guide books, which list all of the must-sees and the must-dos from any given place, VIVA List focuses on unforgettable individual experiences. Here are some tips to follow for giving the best chance of having your work star in the next VIVA publication:

1) Uniqueness

What is it about your story that is going to make it stand out from the competition? If you are writing about a big, well known tourist attraction, what makes your experience stand out from that of others who might also be writing about the same place? Did you have an unusual cultural encounter or experience it in a way few tourists have? If writing about a common type place, such as a beach, imagine how many beach stories the editor will see. What makes your beach special? The editors will be looking for a mixture of well-known attractions, and fascinating little-known places that are off the beaten path.

2) Find your niche

Are you a ruins hound? A food connoisseur? An expert in traveling with kids? A birding expert? Write about what you know and enjoy. Our readers want to hear from those who really know what they're talking about!

3) Focus

Find a focus and stick to it. Tell what needs to be told, what you think makes it interesting, and remember to only tell it once. Remember to make every word count.

4) Narratives

Both the very best, and the very worst pieces received for the last book were personal narratives. First-person narratives often make for the best travel pieces; however, if you are not confident, avoid them. Instead, use your experiences as a starting point for a place or activity to write about, but then dive into writing about it from a third person view. Included here are some links to examples of great first person and third person writing.

First Person: La Ciudad Perdida Ruins arren Fitzgerald

Third Person: Mothers of the Disappeared

5) Story structure

The structure of your story is hugely important. First, grab your reader with a powerful opening sentence that will make him or her want to read the entire piece. Writing about a beach? Avoid opening sentences like "The beach at Ipanema is very, very nice." Try something more sensational, like "Brazil has many beaches, but only one has such beautiful women that it inspired a best-selling timeless song – Ipanema." Once you've got your reader, think about the structure of your piece. It should flow logically.

6) Proof Read

ALWAYS proof read your stories before submission:

** Spell carefully and proofread. Use the spell checker and grammar checker features on your word processing program: it will help you catch typos as well as avoid common pitfalls like run-on sentences and fragments, but this is NOT replaced by good old-fashioned proofreading.

** Fact-check. Always check on dates, times, history, addresses.... Be detail oriented. If you don't know something, look it up, or consult a reputable expert (like the tourism office or embassy). Research and confirm facts with 3 different sources. If you find a good web site that confirms your facts, include it for our reference.

** Read your story aloud. Are all the sentences well structured and do they make sense? Often times, sentences that look good on paper will sound funny when read aloud. It's a good way to improve your work.

** Get feedback. Ask a friend or family member to read the piece through and give you feedback. Pick someone who will be honest, such as a family member who does not like you. Just kidding! Seriously, pick someone who will tell it like it is. Ensure that you do not jump around between tenses within the piece. Example: "I'm bouncing around in the back of a beat-up bus. Through the window, I can see kids running alongside. Once I got there, the bus stopped and I got out." See how different tenses can disrupt a narrative?

7) Plagiarism

This is your chance to let your voice be heard! Why would you want to copy someone else's voice? Needless to say never, ever plagiarize, and plagiarized material will not be published.

8) Relax

Relax and enjoy the writing process. Don't try too hard to write an academic or formal piece if that isn't you. Let your natural voice shine! Travelers have unique experiences and stories, but what makes them interesting is the tone and ease of which you tell your story. Readers, and especially editors, can tell when you are trying too hard, or not at all.