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## SPECIAL REPORT

# Another Way to Sell More Stories: How (And Why) to Write Real Estate-Related Travel Articles



By Jennifer Stevens

The Ultimate Travel Writer's Workshop  
American Writers & Artists Inc.

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## About the Author

Long a writer for and the past editor of International Living, Jennifer Stevens has spent the balance of the last seven years gallivanting through Latin America and the Caribbean -- to Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, Belize and beyond reporting on and writing about the best locales for overseas travel, retirement, and investment.

She is also the former editor of Island Properties Report, a monthly letter devoted to living and investing on islands around the world, and she was a writer and editor for several years at Trade & Culture magazine, a bi-monthly devoted to international trade issues. Jennifer is the principal architect and writer of The Ultimate Travel Writer's Program, published by the American Writers & Artists Inc. For more information: [www.thetravelwriterslife.com](http://www.thetravelwriterslife.com)

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# Eight Guidelines for Writing About Travel and Real Estate



Writing travel articles with a "special-interest" focus is one of the smartest strategies you can employ to make more money from every trip you take.

Briefly, the strategy works this way: Let's say you're traveling to Belize to write an article about diving for Sport Diver magazine. But beyond that, you also gather enough material while you're on the ground to put together a story about honeymooning in Belize's islands for Bride Again magazine and another on traveling there with kids for Child magazine.

One trip, three audiences, three paychecks.

## Three Reasons to Add "Real Estate" to Your "Special Interest" Pursuits

A "special-interest" area you may not have considered is real estate. But I recommend you add it to your list. Here's why --

- 1) Real estate-related travel writing is something relatively few travel writers do. That means you're competing for by-lines within a smaller pool of freelancers, and your chances of getting published (provided you write well) are greater than they might be in other niches.
- 2) The consumer-oriented publications that regularly focus on real estate (like International Living or The Offshore Real Estate Quarterly from EscapeArtist.com, for example) are in need of writers who can skillfully put together a travel-related real estate piece.
- 3) Publications which usually focused more on straight travel have begun to publish real estate-related articles as well. Over the past couple of years, I've come across such pieces in Conde Nast Traveler, the Escapes section of The

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New York Times, and Travel + Leisure. The message here? There's an ever-growing outlet for your real estate-related travel stories.

## Eight Guidelines to Follow

Perhaps you're worried you're not qualified to write about real estate. Admittedly, if you were writing for an audience made up exclusively of real estate agents, you might need some special expertise to lend you credibility.

But, as I've mentioned, plenty of "consumer" publications buy real estate-related travel articles, and most of the time they are written by folks just like you.

However, you should keep these eight guidelines in mind --

1) Consult the Writer's Guidelines and learn from past real estate-related articles printed in the publication you're targeting.

For instance, if you were writing a real estate article for International Living, you'd want to make sure it focused not only on a destination outside the United States, but on one where readers would find good property values.

In other words, while Costa Rica is, indeed, outside the US, as far as IL is concerned it's old news and it's too expensive. By contrast, articles with these headlines have appeared recently:

- An over-supply in the housing market means bargains galore in increasingly international Melbourne
- Your dream home on the beach for 10 cents on the dollar -- why the world is falling in love with Cape Town

Taking a similar tack, The New York Times published a piece about investing in waterfront property in Nova Scotia in its Escapes section under the headline:

- Havens: Bargains Across the Border  
<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B04E1DF173BF932A25757C0A9659C8B63>

Though clearly geared to an audience more interested in travel than investing, Conde Nast Traveler's article about Nicaragua nevertheless includes a strong real estate theme with plenty of information about current property offerings and prices. I found it under the headline:

- Nicaragua's New Wave: Okay, it's a little rough around the edges. But it has a world-class lake, twenty-five volcanoes, miles of empty beaches. .

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. . And Americans, it seems, are buying up the place. Jason Wilson reports on the pleasures (and perils) of a frontier  
<http://www.concierge.com/cntraveler/articles/Editorial/Article/data/cntraveler/2002/02feb/NicaraguasNewWave.xml/>

Real estate might be either the primary focus of your travel article or simply one aspect of it. In either case, you'll need to familiarize yourself with the publication you're targeting so you know how to best structure your piece and pitch it to the editor.

NOTE: Consider, too, the livability of the destination you're writing about. Just because a locale is affordable -- and might make a terrific vacation destination -- that doesn't necessarily mean it's an attractive place to live.

I spent two years working as a Peace Corps volunteer on a remote island between Madagascar and Mozambique. It's beautiful there (turquoise waters, talcum beaches, flowers by the bucketful). Property is cheap. People are friendly. But for a myriad of reasons, it isn't a place I recommend expatriates settle.

2) Get to the "promise" of your article early.

This is true no matter what sort of "special-interest" travel article you're writing, but it's particularly important with real estate-focused articles.

Make sure you've clearly defined the appeal of this place for your audience. What, fundamentally, does it have to recommend it?

In the International Living examples I listed above, that "promise" is stated directly in the headlines. Again:

- An over-supply in the housing market means bargains galore in increasingly international Melbourne
- Your dream home on the beach for 10 cents on the dollar -- why the world is falling in love with Cape Town

In The New York Times piece about Nova Scotia, the writer gets to it quickly, in the second paragraph. It reads: "Mr. Johnson was quickly captivated by the miles of empty coastline, brimming with heron and eagles. The word condominium didn't exist in the weathered hamlets, where fishermen discussed lobster catches instead of celebrities. What's more, the prices were a fraction of what the couple had seen in Massachusetts, in part because of the favorable exchange rate."

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In the Conde Nast Traveler article about Nicaragua, the second paragraph begins: "It's amazing what one can buy in the new Nicaragua, Snider tells me. Anything is possible, he says, so long as you can pay cash."

3) Paint a picture of this place you're writing about.

Again, this is something all good travel writers do, no matter what special focus their articles might take. I won't belabor the point here. But I mention it because it's particularly important in this context.

Put yourself in your reader's shoes. Certainly you'd want to know what a place looks and feels like if you were considering a short vacation there. Think how much more critical that information becomes if you're considering the destination as a place to live or to invest your money.

4) Use quotes -- talk to residents and real estate agents.

You might or might not include quotes in a straightforward travel piece. It would depend on how you approached your article. But with a real estate story, I encourage you to include them.

You need to make it clear that you aren't making unfounded assertions about a destination. You need to back up your claims with some proof. And one of the best ways to do that is to quote people on the ground.

Talk with locals who already live or own there. Ask them why they chose this place. Ask them to describe it for you. Ask them what, in particular, they like about it -- and what frustrates them.

And talk, too, with real estate agents. Ask them how the place has changed in recent months or years. Ask them to describe for you the property market. Ask them to tell you where they think potential residents or investors will find the best deals. Ask them what makes this place different... and special.

The quotes you gather will not only lend credibility to the case you're making, they'll also bring to your story the kind of "local color" editors love.

5) Employ specific examples.

You absolutely cannot write a strong real estate article if you don't have concrete examples to back up the argument you're making.

You have to actually get inside some properties to see what your money buys you.

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If you've "promised" your readers up front that they can own a beachfront retreat for less than \$50,000... well, then, you better deliver some examples of just that.

In The New York Times Nova Scotia article, for instance, the writer includes such specifics as:

"The fishing town of Lunenburg, population 2,500, became a tourist destination with its 1995 designation as a Unesco World Heritage Site because of its architectural integrity. A two-bedroom wooden house with no water access just sold for \$83,000 and a six-bedroom Victorian with harbor views went for \$147,000."

6) Make smart use of comparisons.

The best real estate writers bring to their articles perspective and judgment. They've traveled extensively enough and written about real estate enough to know when they see a really good deal.

But even if you don't have a long list of real estate clips to your credit, that doesn't mean you can't help your reader put into context the "promise" your article makes him.

Compare the property prices you're finding in the destination you're writing about to those in the States. Or, if you're writing about a stateside locale, then compare it to another, better-known one.

If you'd like to draw for you reader some comparison to other, perhaps similar destinations -- but you haven't visited those other places -- ask somebody who has. Check listings online. Email a real estate agent in that other place. Ask a real estate agent in the country you're focusing on how the prices compare. Chances are, he'll know.

In that Nova Scotia piece, for example, the writer recounts his conversation with a local real estate agent: "He said that many buyers were leapfrogging Massachusetts or Maine to get oceanfront property for one-fifth the price. One recent sale: a three-bedroom colonial with a veranda overlooking the bay, for \$115,000."

7) Do some real estate homework before you go and gather research on the ground, too.

You'll have the best luck gathering the real estate information you need if you start your research ahead of time. Begin by finding at least one real estate agent online and getting in touch before your trip. Explain that you're a freelance writer, you're doing a real estate-focused article, and you're hoping

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he might meet with you when you're in town and perhaps take you to see a few examples of properties on offer.

During your trip, pick up as many sample listings as you can. Don't walk by a real estate office without sticking your head inside, introducing yourself, and picking up a listing sheet.

And check the classified listings in the local papers, too. Particularly in places where there's a growing expatriate population, you may find price-inflation. There ends up being a two-tier pricing system -- a lower price for locals than for foreigners, who are perceived to have deep pockets. So to get a sense for the "local" market, check the ads. (If they're in a language you don't speak, grab a bar-tender or the desk clerk at your hotel and ask for help in translating.)

8) Take note of the practical (but often boring) stuff.

When you're writing about real estate (particularly foreign real estate) you will have to gather some practical information you'd never bother about were you writing a more "traditional" travel piece.

For example, you'll want to find out --

- Can foreigners own property? If so, how?
- Is buying a complicated process? Roughly speaking, how does it work?
- Is financing available? If so, on what terms?
- What sort of tax burden can new owners expect?

And, depending on the scope of your article and what the editors want, you may need to include some "lifestyle" details, too --

- What's the cost of living?
- What are some examples of prices for items you'd typically buy like milk and bread?
- What does it cost to visit a doctor -- and what's the medical care like?

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# Seven Markets Where You Might Sell Your Real Estate Articles



This is by no means an exhaustive list, but here are a few places you might consider selling your real estate-related articles --

- International Living -- Writer's Guidelines at <http://www.internationalliving.com/index.cfm?page=write4us>
- EscapeArtist.com -- <http://www.escapeartist.com> (See today's featured publication below for advice about writing and submitting articles.)
- Coastal Living -- Writer's Guidelines at [http://www.coastalliving.com/coastal/magazine/writers\\_guide.html](http://www.coastalliving.com/coastal/magazine/writers_guide.html)
- The New York Times "Escapes" Travel section, which appears on Fridays -- Writer's Guidelines at <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/travel/escapes/index.html>
- Global Perspectives in Real Estate Newsletter -- Writer's Guidelines at <http://www.realtor.org/cipshome.nsf/pages/writersguidelines>
- International Real Estate Digest -- Writer's Guidelines at <http://www.ired.com/info/guidelines.htm>
- AARP The Magazine -- Writer's Guidelines at [http://www.aarpmagazine.org/Articles/a2003-02-21-mag-writers\\_guidelines.html](http://www.aarpmagazine.org/Articles/a2003-02-21-mag-writers_guidelines.html)

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# Special Focus: Writing About Real Estate for EscapeArtist.com



By Roger Gallo  
Publisher, EscapeArtist.com

For every one article we receive on international real estate, 200 on living overseas land in our in-box. The reason is obvious. It is simple for each of us to write about what we know. Living overseas teaches us a great deal -- and hence we feel comfortable writing about it.

Real estate is another matter. Writing about international real estate takes a bit of knowledge. While it isn't complex knowledge, it is a bit beyond the reach of the average person to write about it authoritatively.

## We Need Real Estate Articles

Yet right now we need more international real estate articles for our magazine than ever before. But I want to make sure writers understand what they need to do.

We actually publish two magazines -- our flagship, Escape From America and also the Offshore Real Estate & Investment Quarterly. (The reason I've kept the latter a quarterly is simple: the dearth of real estate articles.)

I will pay \$150-\$300 for full-length (1500-3000 words) articles that meet our needs.

We have two large real estate marketplace directories -- one on EscapeArtist.com and one on CaribPro.com. These marketplace directories are our bread and butter. Good articles on international real estate fuel our website, keep it at the top of the search engines, and bring visitors back for return visits.

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I'll be frank: The real estate articles on our website encourage advertisers to place adverts on our website, encourage property owners to place real estate listings and bring us visitors who are seeking international real estate. Clearly, having articles on international real estate is a priority for us.

To be honest, I'm not interested in how many articles you've sold. I don't care if you've been published all over the world if you're just getting started.

What I want to know is whether you've taken the travel writer's course, studied this special supplement on writing international real estate articles, and really understand what separates an adequate piece from one that's really superior -- one I'd publish and pay for with pleasure.

### How to Know What Destinations Make Sense

Go to the city/nation -- We are interested in any nation outside the USA, although the USA can be used as a comparison. We are even interested in remote areas, such as islands and laid-back enclaves if they are exciting and livable.

In all cases there has to be a reason why the reader would want to live there. But real estate articles about unusual places can be very interesting, so analysis is necessary. Articles on real estate in the Bahamas are common; articles on real estate in Dominica are rare.

Evaluate the livability of the place: would foreigners want to live there?

### What to Include in Your Article

One method of opening an article is to start out with a few personal touches about you, and your relationship to the place. How does the place make you feel? What does it remind you of? How does it inspire you? Why would you want to live there? How did you get there and why did you go there?

Make the reader want to be there. No more than a paragraph about its history except in unusual circumstance. A sentence or two giving reference to an illustrious past is usually sufficient. The idea is to excite the reader by sharing things with the reader -- it is never good to be didactic.

### How to Research the Destination

Analyze the available real estate by looking in the newspaper. Yes, a newspaper. That is where the locals look, that is where you should look. Compare prices; there usually is a high end, a middle ground and a low end. Most of the properties listed in the paper will be in the middle and high end in

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terms of quality and price. Make a list of prices that can be part of your article as long as you endeavor to see a sample of the properties. If possible view one or two of the middle end properties as seen in the newspaper before seeing an agent.

Contact one or two real estate agents, ask them about these same properties tell them you'd enjoy seeing 'like' properties. (If they try to switch you to higher priced properties find another agent.) If they assist you and show you comparable properties make a note of their name, address and contact information. These are the type of agents you want to send your readers to.

### Let the Facts Fill out Your Article

Write your article based on the facts.

Describe the city/nation -- tell the reader why he or she would want to live there. (It is important to stress why the reader wants to live there... what are the incentives?)

Describe the real estate as a whole; you may have to use comparisons to other places. Look for bargains. Are there bargains? Describe them.

Give one or two examples: type of structure, location, and price. Is it exciting, if so, convey that excitement. Obviously in high-end areas like the Balearic Islands everything is going to be expensive, so a bargain in such an area is going to be an expensive bargain, but a bargain none the less.

Look at finer properties; give one or two examples as above.

### Include Information about Real Estate Law

Find out what you can about the local real estate law. How is title held? An agent can usually answer these questions. It is not required to write a legal thesis, just to supply the way title is held, and if there is title insurance. Also find out what the property taxes are and what fees are charged in a real estate acquisition. A real estate agent is happy to answer your questions as they make their living satisfying their customers with such answers.

### Supply Photos if You Can

If possible, take digital photos of some of the properties. Inside and outside if possible.

Taking digital photos of the properties: It is often difficult if not impossible to get good interior shots, getting good exterior shots is a matter of location and luck. Eight photos is sufficient. Photos are not absolutely necessary, but they

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add much to an article.

A digital camera is inexpensive and it expands your creative canvas. I find that I usually cannot use over 50% of the photos sent to me, although there have been some wonderful exceptions. A 35 MM camera takes a superior photograph with better resolution than a digital camera; if one is willing to convert such photos to .jpeg format they will present a better photo.

Learning to use a digital camera will prepare you for submitting articles to other online magazines. Learning to use a standard camera will prepare you for submitting to hardcopy magazines as well as online magazines.

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# Special Focus: Writing About Real Estate for International Living



An Interview with Kathleen Peddicord  
Former Publisher, International Living

1) Is International Living in the market for real estate articles?

Yes, always.

2) What makes for a worthwhile "real estate" destination?

No one answer to this. Remember, there are several reasons to be interested in real estate -- first, because you need a place to live... second, because you'd like a second or holiday home in a place you'd like to be able to spend some time... and third, because you're looking to make some money. All very different reasons.

In other words, a good real estate destination can simply be a nice place to live... because then you have a market for people who want to know about how to arrange to live there... and then you can help guide them through the process of shopping for and purchasing (and renovating, outfitting, etc.) A new home.

A good real estate destination can be a good vacation destination... because then people want to spend time there though probably not full-time. You have a market for second-home buyers. And the concerns and issues and ways of considering the purchase are different than when thinking about buying a full-time residence.

A good real estate destination, of course, is also a place where there's money to be made from real estate, either through appreciation or maybe cash flow (rental income). To make a case for appreciation, you need to be able to identify some reason why the market is currently under-valued (could be the

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currency, could be the market cycle, could be politics, etc.)... and, as well, some reasonable argument for why this local distortion will correct itself within an identifiable window. When considering real estate this way, you need an exit strategy. How are you going to make money... and when?

3) Specific advice for anybody interested in writing a real estate-related article for you?

Understand your angle. Are you writing about a place as a full-time residence... a part-time getaway... or a place for good investment return? Don't try to do all three at once. Not only the particulars, but the tone of the article will be different depending which agenda you're addressing... because your readership will be different.

You could write about Mexico, for example, as a good place to live full time, a good place for a second holiday home, and as a great place to invest in real estate for profit. However, in each case, you'd be talking about different parts of the country, and, importantly, you'd be talking to different people... so you'd want to slant your piece accordingly. Even the vocabulary would be different.

For International Living's Writer's Guidelines, visit [www.internationalliving.com](http://www.internationalliving.com) and scroll down to the very bottom of the home page. Click on "Write for Us."