
SPECIAL REPORT

What Editors Are Buying: How to Imagine Stories that Will Sell Every Time



By Jennifer Stevens

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

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 author of The Ultimate Travel Writer's Program, published by the American Writers & Artists Inc. For more information: www.thetravelwriterslife.com

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Story Ideas Linger, Ripe All Around You



People ask me all the time how I find so many things to write about. It's true, I seem always to be working on some project or other—usually several different stories at once.

The truth is, I come by my ideas in all sorts of places. Some “land in my lap,” so to speak, on press releases. Others occur to me while I'm reading, working on other projects, talking with friends and contacts, listening to the radio, even watching TV.

I, like other travel writers, find ideas almost everywhere.

The key, you'll learn, is in recognizing the gem of a unique idea... and then fleshing it out so it's worthy of a full-length story.

Use Press Releases as Springboards

One easy place to find article ideas is through press releases. In hopes of attracting some publicity, hotels, tour companies, countries' tourist boards, manufacturers of travel products, travel-book publishers, and other firms and organizations send out press releases regularly to editors at publications and to freelance writers.

Now, you should think of press releases as springboards. In my experience, it's rare that a writer picks up a story idea just as it's written in a press release.

Instead, look in press releases for the gems of ideas... for things you can expand upon. Press Releases are, in my view, just a place to get the juices flowing.

Let's examine two press releases here to give you an idea about how you can take a p.r. "blurb" and turn it into a full-blown article idea:

Sample Press Release # 1

Contact: Stephanie Jukes-Amer
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Savvy Travelers Turn to Eurodrive, for a New Car and a Tank Full of Savings

Renault's Short-Term Leasing Program is a Smart Alternative to Car Rental Now Eurodrive Comes with a Basket of Extras, Including Hotel and Museum Discounts In February, 10 Percent Off on All Cars

New York, January 23, 2002 For almost half a century, travelers in the know have been turning to Renault's Eurodrive short-term automobile lease program to get the best deal on a car in Europe. But being known for great prices, great choice and great service isn't enough for Eurodrive. Now every Eurodrive car comes with valuable extras, like discounts at hotels and at many attractions. They're even making it easier to keep in touch with the folks back home by including a free cell phone. And as if all that weren't enough, Eurodrive is taking 10 percent off all lease reservations during February.

Being ahead of the pack is nothing new for Eurodrive. Since 1954, over a half-million savvy travelers have gotten their vacation cars from Renault's Eurodrive program. Although Eurodrive works like a rental, it is actually a short-term lease program, and leasing has a host of advantages over traditional auto rentals. They can be summarized as availability, convenience, and service, with fewer restrictions.

Eurodrive offers a superior product. Customers choose from the entire line of quality Renault vehicles, all of which come straight from the factory. Because Eurodrive cars are right off the assembly line, customers always get exactly the model they ordered, right down to the options. Getting a car with automatic transmission, which is not always available with a traditional European car rental, is no problem at Eurodrive. Another advantage of driving a new car is that there are no unpleasant reminders of previous occupants, like that stale tobacco smell that haunts some rental cars.

Eurodrive's entire approach can be characterized as "no extras, no surprises." Unlike car rentals, Renault's short-term leasing program is a tax-free regime. Eurodrive customers pay no VAT (which runs at 18.6% in France) and no any additional charges like extra fees for airport pickup or additional drivers. Mileage is always unlimited, so customers can drive to their heart's content. The price of the lease is all inclusive; what you see is what you get.

Discounts and Extras

Now Eurodrive is including a passel of dollar-stretching (and Euro-stretching!) discounts that will gladden the heart of everyone who watches their money. Every Eurodrive booking includes automatic membership in the Mercure Advantage Program, which means 30 percent off the advertised rates at 415 excellent Mercure hotel in 12 European countries (excluding breakfast). Also included are the Châteaux et Monuments de France Card good for discounts at

some of the country's great sights and the ABC Privilege Card, which offers price breaks and special services at over 100 vendors in Alsace, Burgundy and the Champagne-Ardenne region. These include museums, famous wine cellars like Georges Duboeuf, and several three-star restaurants, such as Strasbourg's Au Crocodile. Eurodrive also includes a free cellphone with every automobile (the phone is free, you have to pay for the calls).

Eurodrive's 10 percent off in February is an exceptional event for a company that traditionally has not offered across-the-board discounts. The reduction applies to every lease on any vehicle, from sub-compacts to station wagons and SUVs. There are just two requirements: the lease reservation must be made during February and the auto must be picked up before the end of 2002.

Customers who know they will be traveling later in the year can take advantage of the discount by reserving in February.

Convenience, Great Service, the Best Insurance

Eurodrive's other advantages are convenience and service. Renault has 35 pick-up and drop-off sites in nine European countries. A traveler can pick up a car in one country and leave it in another, which is not always permitted with a traditional rental. In the unlikely event of a problem, Renault's continent-wide network of 17,000 qualified service stations is at the Eurodrive customer's beck and call. That far exceeds the resources of any car rental company. And because Eurodrive vehicles are under factory warranty, there is never a charge for parts or labor in the unlikely event of a mechanical problem. Should service become necessary, English-speaking Eurodrive representatives, who are available around the clock, can arrange for roadside assistance, towing and repair, vehicle replacement and can even find a local hotel.

Perhaps most important is Eurodrive's insurance package, which is designed for complete peace of mind. The lease agreement includes a comprehensive insurance policy that covers personal injury, collision, fire and theft -- with no deductible. The insurance policy is good in over 30 countries, more than with the typical rental agreement. Combined with the factory warranty, Eurodrive customers can be sure that every contingency is covered.

The selection of vehicles is first-rate. Eurodrive customers choose from Renault's entire line of high-quality sub-compacts, station wagons, vans, sedans and SUVs. Everyone gets the car that's right for them. Campers can lease a van; a family can have a station wagon to hold the kids' stuff; a couple can have an easy-to-park compact. Those who really like driving might want one of Renault's snazzy new sedans. All are factory-new and never before driven.

What Age Issue?

There are virtually no age restrictions with Eurodrive. Traditional car rentals are limited to drivers between the ages of 23 or 25 and 70. That can be a problem for recent college graduates doing the grand tour of Europe and it is a major obstacle for retired people, who may have the time and money for long trips but who are prevented from rent a car by arbitrary rules. Because Eurodrive is a lease, the minimum age is 18 and there is no maximum age at all. So drive on.

Cost Advantage, Conditions

Eurodrive is less expensive than many auto rentals. The current rate for a 17-day lease on a sub-compact Renault Twingo is \$529. That works out to about

\$31 per day, with unlimited mileage. By way of comparison, consider that a 21-day lease on a mid-sized Renault Mégane sedan is \$12 per day less than the average cost of an equivalent rental car. That difference really adds up over a few weeks.

You may be wondering what the catch is. There is none, just two requirements. First, a customer's permanent address must be outside the European Union, which is not a problem for most Americans. Second, the length of a Eurodrive lease varies from a minimum of 17 days to a maximum of 185 days (six months). That makes Eurodrive perfect for longer vacations and those on sabbatical-like leaves.

Eurodrive is able to offer these great deals courtesy of French tax law, which allows Renault to sell used Eurodrive vehicles on advantageous terms.

Technically, a Eurodrive lease is a purchase-repurchase agreement, with the customer's payment representing the difference between the purchase price of a brand-new car and the sale price of a used auto.

Good News for Business Travelers

Now business travelers can enjoy Eurodrive's benefits. A change in the French tax laws allows Americans going to Europe on business to participate in the Eurodrive program. The sole condition is that they be paid by a company headquartered outside the European Union. That makes Eurodrive perfect for traveling salespeople, those on temporary European assignment and academics teaching abroad for a semester. Of course, all Eurodrive customers must have a permanent address outside the EU.

All in all, Renault's Eurodrive program is the best dollar-stretching deal in personal transportation for Americans (and other non-EU residents) traveling to Europe.

Rates for 2002 start at \$529 for a 17-day lease of a sub-compact Renault Twingo. For more information, contact Renault Eurodrive, tel: 800-221-1052, e-mail: info@renaultusa.com. Or log onto www.renaultusa.com.

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Ideas from Press Release # 1

Consider this Eurodrive Press Release: Did it bring to your mind any story ideas? It did mine, among them...

1. A story for retirees about this unique way to rent a car. That note about age is interesting and would be of interest to an older audience -- maybe readers of AARP's magazine, for example.
2. Similarly, a story for a "study abroad" crowd -- maybe on a website geared for young travelers or in Budget Travel (which I'm guessing has a relatively young readership -- would have to check on that). Or maybe in a publication read by the administrators who manage universities' study abroad programs -- this might be information they'd like to pass onto their students.

3. A story for university professors who take sabbaticals -- might be in an alumni magazine, for instance. This would be an affordable way to have access to a car overseas.
4. Similarly, somebody who rents a villa for a month in the summer or takes an apartment at the beach for a few weeks a year -- that kind of traveler would be interested. I can envision an article that went beyond the scope of this Eurodrive note and included a listing of, say, five money-saving and convenient resources anybody who rents overseas a few weeks or months a year should know about. It might include this information about getting a car as well as useful tips about cell phones or phone cards and other practical information. (I don't know what it would be, off-hand, but to pursue this idea I'd simply talk to folks who have rented overseas and probably, too, to the agencies who do the renting.

Let's look at another press release:

Sample Press Release # 2

--- [FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE] ---

7/22/2003

Now Open In Lake George: Brand-New Fort William Henry Grand Hotel

Contact:
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Suite-exclusive Resort Hotel Brings Modern-Day Luxury, Turn-of-the-Century Style to Adirondacks

LAKE GEORGE -- A brand-new, suite-exclusive resort hotel has opened its doors in upstate New York's Lake George Village -- the most significant addition to the region's tourism landscape in nearly two decades, and a welcoming sight to the vacationers who annually flock to the Adirondack Region and the "Queen of American Lakes."

The Fort William Henry Grand Hotel graces the grounds once occupied by the historic Fort William Henry Hotel, a favored gathering place for the great and the gracious of American society for more than a century, beginning in the mid-1800s.

The exterior of the new hotel re-creates the appearance of the Fort William Henry as it appeared from 1911 until 1969, with its distinctive red roof and wide, welcoming veranda lined with signature Adirondack rocking chairs overlooking what Thomas Jefferson once called, "... without comparison, the most beautiful water I ever saw."

Inside, 96 elegant suites, spread over five floors, offer a new level of luxury to Lake George Village guests. Each suite includes handsomely appointed sleeping and living areas, kitchen amenities, and an in-room entertainment center. Some have a Jacuzzi, others a fireplace. Lakeview suites offer the Village's most spectacular view of Lake George. Adjoining suites can be combined for the ultimate in Lake George luxury -- fireplace, jacuzzi and a bird's eye view of the Village's spectacular fireworks displays. Rates range from \$109.90 to \$499.90 a night depending on suite choice and season.

The Fort William Henry Grand Hotel is the centerpiece of the 18-acre Fort William Henry Resort property, which stands watch over the Southern basin of the lake. The property also features: 99 other newly appointed guest rooms; a 10,000-square-foot conference center, which plays host to such major annual events as the Americade motorcycle touring rally and the Adirondack Nationals Car Show; one of the region's most popular wedding and banquet facilities; an Olympic-size outdoor swimming pool; three on-site restaurants; a complex of boutiques, gift shops and food emporiums; and the Fort William Henry Museum -- the authentically restored French & Indian War-era British fort that served as the setting for James Fenimore Cooper's "The Last of the Mohicans."

The Fort William Henry Resort overlooks Lake George from the heart of Lake George Village, just a few minutes walk from the beach and the central business district. Lake George is located in New York's six- million-acre Adirondack Park, approximately four hours from the New York metropolitan area and Boston, six hours from Buffalo, and one hour north of Albany on I-87 (the Adirondack Northway).

Reservations for the new Fort William Henry Grand Hotel can be made online at <http://www.fortwilliamhenry.com> or by calling 1-800-234-0267.

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Ideas from Press Release # 2

Again, did any ideas come to mind as you read this second release? I thought of a few things:

1. This might be a good place to profile for a "weekend away" article for a New York or Massachusetts newspaper or magazine. Especially in a market within the 4-hour-drive range, this might could make an excellent getaway. The article might include the hotel as a place to stay but then also profile restaurants, shopping spots, and any activities you might do while in the area.
2. Could be a story here for the "history-buff" crowd. I'd find out what sort of publications are out there for those folks who participate and attend

- "war reenactment" events. Maybe that search would turn up an appropriate outlet for an article. And I'd find out a bit more about the French & Indian War. And what point does this property come into play? Is it in a certain season that it's most significant? Perhaps I could link a story about this place to some historical event and suggest readers make a trip here coincide with the marking of some important date in history.
3. Since prices are seasonal, perhaps there is an "off-season bargain" article in this place? When does the property offer the best value? Is it a time of year nobody would really think about going? If so, then I could talk about why it is, in fact, so nice that time of year. Again, the scope of the piece could be wider than the hotel alone but include all sorts of "off-season" offerings nearby.
 4. Is this a place that makes sense for kids? In general, suites are nice when you're traveling with a family. There might be an article here for a publication geared toward parents. I'd have to talk to the p.r. contact about any special amenities available for kids, any family packages, any particular incentives that might draw a family here.

You get the idea... you take the information from a press release and create something more substantive from it.

In several of the ideas I mention above, I ask questions or simply brainstorm. Now, if I were to pursue those ideas, I'd have to do some additional digging first.

I'd start by contacting the p.r. official listed on the release. And, once I'd gathered additional information from him or her, I'd be better able to define my story ideas and able to create more targeted queries for editors.

Read... Anything and Everything

More often than not, I find my story ideas not on press releases, but elsewhere. I read extensively... and so should you.

Don't read just travel-related information. If you'd like to write about international destinations, then keep tabs on the politics and economics in the places that interest you so you know what's going on there.

If you plan to write about things close to where you live—whether it's a B&B in the next town over, the farmer's market that's worth a visit, or the county fair—then make sure you keep tabs on your local events.

Read the newspaper, grab that free poetry publication at the coffee shop and study the ads... you never know where you'll notice something that will catch

your eye and give you an idea for a story.

Read books, magazines, Internet articles, cereal boxes... everything you can get your hands on. Something you come across may trigger an idea for a story.

You have to start thinking about the many different ways you can make information accessible to different audiences. Remember, every different audience you can think to write to equals a new writing opportunity—because that new audience demands a new story angle.

For example, a few years back an Associated Press writer did a news story about Baltimore's open-air film festival, held each summer in that city's Little Italy neighborhood. The AARP magazine followed up with a profile on the elderly gentleman from whose window the movies were projected. The first story triggered the second.

Listen to the Radio... Eavesdrop on Conversations... Gossip

Listen to the radio news, to talk shows... even to conversations around you. What are people talking about, preoccupied with, angry over? Is there an angle you haven't heard discussed? You might think about how a city-wide issue relates to your smaller neighborhood or how other communities might have resolved whatever issue is preoccupying yours.

For example, when I lived in Baltimore, a controversial issue was whether or not to let bars within a designated 40-block area stay open past the regular 2:00 a.m. close time and shut their doors, instead, at 4:00 a.m.

Now, this might at first glance appear to have nothing to do with travel writing. But it has me thinking.

I wonder if the local paper there might be interested in a travel/entertainment story about the bars and clubs in nearby Washington, DC that already stay open until 4:00 a.m.

It would be a timely piece, and I could write about where they are, how each differs, and what sort of crowd "hangs out" in each place. And if my local paper isn't interested, perhaps Washington magazine would be, or I could try a monthly music magazine that profiles destinations... I imagine there is one.

You see, by simply staying on top of local events in a community familiar to me, by listening to what people are talking about, I've been able to come up with a story idea that just might sell. You can do the same thing.

Do Not Be Shy... Start Talking

Talk to anyone and everyone. You never know when a simple conversation will trigger a story idea. For example, I was talking with the owner of a small chocolate shop in a tiny town in France. I asked how business had been. He told me that he put a Web site up on the Internet that had recently boosted his business by 50 percent.

It wasn't that a sudden preponderance of French people ordered candy by mail... but instead, having seen his site, visitors from around the country stopped by when they were in the area touring.

Are there stories there?

You bet: a profile of this gentleman for France magazine maybe or even a piece on the delicacies of France.

This guy made chocolates. In the next town over, the specialty is macaroons... I could focus a travel story on this region of France around each town's special treats. Perhaps I could sell it to a food magazine that publishes travel articles (as many of them do) or even to my local paper's travel section.

As it turns out, this is a little-visited region of the country and this somewhat odd-ball focus might well be of interest to an editor looking for a new way to cover a country that writers write about all the time.

Open Your Eyes, Ears, Nose, and Mind

Watch what's going on around you. When you're on the road to do research, take notes about what you see in a new place and about your impressions. Notice details like colors and temperature, the time it takes to get from one place to the next, the way locals react to tourists and to you.

You'll find these gems of information cannot only trigger article ideas, but also come in very handy when you're actually writing.

For example, I've traveled fairly extensively in Mexico over the past few years, and I've been astounded at the wonderful, affordable shopping at many of the markets. I always have my eye out for things I can use in decorating my home. It occurs to me that I might put together an article about the best places to buy home finishings.

In Oaxaca, Tlaquepaque, and Guadalajara, for example, you can find everything from hand-painted bathroom sinks and tiles to copper door knobs and fine mirrors—at a fraction the cost of similar items in the States.

I've got on my to-do list an article about the best places to track down various items (with sidebars about where to stay and what other things to do) that I might sell to a home-renovation magazine. Or maybe I could turn it into a holiday-related piece and write about the best places in Mexico to go Christmas shopping.

Just as you should make note of what's going on around you when you're traveling, it's wise to do the same even when you're puttering about near home. Take note of a park that's been cleaned up or a new shop or restaurant. If there's a construction boom, find out what's going up... you might get a jump on a profile of a new hot spot.

Keep Those Scissors Handy and Create Clip Files

I think of my clip files as my junk drawer of story ideas. I have my files divided, generally speaking, into four categories:

Random Story Ideas

Whenever an idea occurs to me—no matter how irrelevant to what I might be working on at the time—I jot it down on a piece of paper and toss it into a file folder I've labeled "Story Ideas." Into this same folder go the "clips" or stories by other writers that trigger ideas—usually I'll put a yellow sticky paper on the top with my related idea on it.

Event-Specific or Holiday Story Ideas

Another useful clip file I keep is event and holiday specific. If I go to an annual festival I think I could write about for the following year, I pick up lots of brochures and maps and such, clip them together, and drop them in this file. It helps, too, to scribble the holiday or time of year onto the info so it's easy to find when you go hunting for it.

Remember, publications often want seasonal stories many months in advance. So if you've got an idea for a Christmas story... August is not too early to start querying publications about whether they'd be interested in publishing your piece.

Examples of Writing You Admire

I keep a third clip file of articles I've enjoyed reading—examples of strong writing by other people. When I start working on a type of story I haven't written in a while or something that's altogether new to me, I'll flip through this "Favorites" file of mine and see if I don't have an example of something similar that I thought was done well.

Just as we did in our workshop when we went through examples of well-written articles and analyzed what, exactly, the writers had done... so I do on my own. It helps, often, to get the juices flowing. And I always learn new things when I study these pieces.

Country Files

I keep one last kind of clip file as well—in fact, it's a series of folders. These are my country files. Each country I've written about—or would like to write about—has a folder. I clip out of magazines and newspapers anything I see that's about these countries—sometimes I won't even take the time to read the article and simply tear it out and drop it into the folder. That way, when I go to write about that place, I've got the beginnings of my research all ready to go.

Pen and Paper -- A Travel Writer's Trusty Companions

Another habit I've developed over the years is to always keep on hand a pad of paper and a pen. When I travel, I take along those "steno" pads with cardboard covers and spiral bindings—they're good in the rain and you can slide the pen into the binding for safe keeping. (I use a ball-point pen ever since that trip to Belize years ago when my notes—not in a steno pad, and written in ink—bled into each other in a rain storm.)

Also nice are "reporter's notebooks." They are like steno pads, only narrower. This sort of thing is really a matter of personal preference. I advise, simply: make sure whatever you're carrying has a cover.

Also, I keep a little pad of paper and something to scribble with next to my bed. I know it sounds a bit excessive, but more often than you might think, something on the late-night news or in a book I'm reading will trigger a story idea, and so it never hurts to have something on hand with which to write it down.

The Best Ideas Are Specific, Unique, and Targeted



Now that we've gone through the best ways for you to harvest your story ideas, the next step is to sift through them and improve upon them. The best story ideas are specific, unique, and targeted to a particular audience.

If you're anything like me, what you'll scribble on a scrap of paper and toss into your clip file will most often be just the core of an idea... something that struck you as a possibility for a piece, but not something you've really thought through.

So when you sit down to decide on the actual story you'd like to write, you must make sure that your idea is—

Specific

Don't send a letter to a publication asking if the editor is interested in a piece about Belize. Instead, ask if he'd be interested in an article about the best jungle lodge or the top spots to invest in real estate.

Unique

If you've been reading a lot of travel stories, you'll develop a sense after a few months for what's run-of-the-mill and what's new. Also, by keeping country files you'll have on hand some examples of what other people have written about the place you're going to write about, so you'll know in what ways your piece will need to be different.

I've found that one way to keep ideas unique is to think about what the stereotypical view of a place is and write to counter it. If most people know about the diving in the Bahamas, then you write about the hiking trails.

Targeted to a particular audience

When you target a particular audience with your story idea, it becomes a stronger idea. Here's what I mean: If I were to write to the readers of *Walking* magazine about St. John in the U.S. Virgin Islands, my story would, most likely, be about the trails there—the best walks, the best guide, the best time of year to go, maybe the best “outdoors” hotels to stay in.

That story is specific and it's unique—at least to the readers of *Walking* magazine. While you might regularly find stories about St. John in travel publications, it's not run-of-the-mill fare for *Walking*.