

How to Land Free Stuff

**by Freelance Travel Writer
Brian Norris**

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In the last 12 months have you:

*Come face to face with a huge wild water buffalo at a wilderness resort...
with only the reinforced side of a Toyota Troop Carrier between your
faces?*

*Watched a majestic sea eagle dip into the ocean and flap lazily away with
a huge salmon struggling in its razor sharp talons, then retired that night to
a five-star villa after titillating your taste buds with a six-course feast,
washed down with ambrosia-like fine wines?*

*Have you ever been parasailing, jet skiing, and then later pampered at a
luxurious island resort as a guest of the owner?*

Had complementary meals at top-class restaurants?

*Had travel agents and tourist bureaus contacting you with offers of free
trips to various cities and countries around the world?*

*Had escorted tours of major tourist attractions, like Whaleworld — a
completely restored whaling station — where those heavyweight gymnasts
of the ocean cavort just an arm's length away, geysers of steamy water
spouting from their blowholes?*

*Have you cruised around a group of tropical islands in a motorized
outrigger canoe and snorkeled through one of the world's largest and most
famous barrier reefs?*

I Have... For Free... And Been Paid For Writing About My Experiences!

Let me explain. My name is Brian Norris and I'm now into my second half century – more by good luck than good management. I've worked hard all my

life, had good jobs and made good money... most of which I've spent indulging a passion for travel.

No more... now I work when I want and spend the rest of my time immersing myself in the wonders of my own backyard and faraway places like I described above.

All this is largely due to a small item I carry with me everywhere. I'm a freelance travel and lifestyle writer, and this little object is one of the most vital tools in my kit.

It opens doors and opportunities, sparks immediate attention, and gets me respect like nothing I've ever seen before. It fits in my pocket and puts the whole world there too... like a magic wand spiriting me away to wherever I fancy. (More about this in a minute...)

Let me explain ...

How I Got All This Free Stuff

First I should say that there are several ways to go about getting free stuff — I haven't tried them all. In fact, I wasted months before I figured out how to master the one method I've had such success with.

But I've got things pretty much down to a science now, which is why Lori Allen, director of the AWAI Travel Division, asked me to write this report.

She said she gets questions about this kind of stuff all the time and that she thinks people don't understand how easy it is to land a free meal or two... stay in a nice hotel... get back-stage passes to exclusive events. She also thinks readers don't understand the importance of partaking in the freebies.

So let me explain...

Some of the best articles I've written were about things I never would have paid full price out of pocket for.

Sure, if I had all the money in the world, I'd dine at 5-star restaurants and stay in world-class resorts on my own dime. I'd go from safari to spa and lap up the life of luxury while I threw \$50 bills out my car window.

But let's face it. I'm a writer. Not a doctor, not a lawyer, and certainly not a millionaire by any stretch. In fact, I doubt many writers are.

So in order for these places to get any kind of press, they need to cut everyday writers like you and me a little slack. If I'm going to do these things and

write about them (which, as I just explained, I do quite often), I need someone else to pick up the tab.

Jen Stevens, author of AWAI's written program on travel writing, said the same thing. She told me about a trip to Cancun where she and her husband were treated to five days at a 5-star resort, meals and airfare included. Had she been footing the bill, Cancun wouldn't have topped her list of vacation destinations. But the trip was free, so she went. And she wrote about the resort, which meant press they'd not have gotten otherwise.

And travel-writing program member Karen P. said the same thing. She was in Yorktown this past weekend (a short day-trip from where she lives) researching an article when she was treated to a freebie sampler of five desserts at the restaurant she was dining in. She didn't ask for free cake — nor would she have bought five pieces with her own cash — but when she told the owner she was a writer, he rolled out the red carpet.

And after her third bite of cake, Karen realized there was a whole article in the desserts themselves. She started asking questions and filling in details, and now she's got not one Yorktown article in mind, but two.

So you see, getting free stuff isn't just about getting free stuff. It's also about finding stories to write about. And it's important that you keep that in mind.

Give Opportunity a Door to Knock on: Arrange Your Own Perks

I've had more than 40 articles published in at least 10 publications in all, and I can tell you from experience that I didn't get these clips lying down.

It's true that established writers might get press trips handed to them on a silver platter. They may have publications sending them all around the globe for stories.

But when I first started I didn't have that kind of luck. I didn't have a published clip to my name, and no editor was willing to take a chance on sending me anywhere — no matter how good I told them I was.

So I had to arrange my own perks. And even though I get press-trip invitations sent to me now, I still do a good deal of arranging on my own.

Lots of established freelancers do. It's how travel writer Steenie Harvey landed an all-expense-paid *Lord of the Rings* tour through New Zealand. It's how program member Tom Schueneman arranged a discount on his August safari in Botswana. It's how program member Alice Cunningham found herself invited for four nights, free-of-charge, at a deluxe resort on Oahu, Hawaii.

How do you do it?

It all boils down to these few simple points really...

- 1) Develop the right mindset.**
- 2) Be polite and professional.**
- 3) Present a well-defined idea.**
- 4) Keep your audience in mind.**

Develop the Right Mindset

Here's what works for me...

These days I see things totally differently than I did before I started writing travel articles. Everywhere I go, in everything I read, in every news and current-affairs show I see on TV... I look for ideas, subjects to write about, and opportunities to explore.

I have never asked for freebies. They have always been offered to me. And from what I've heard from the other freelance writers I know, this is true across the board.

For example, Steenie told me the best meal she's ever eaten was a freebie. She explained: "In County Galway, Ireland, not far from where I live, I stopped at a little thatched-roof pub (it's called Morans of the Weir, in Clarinbridge — very well known in culinary circles).

"When I told the owner I was a travel writer, he bought out platefuls of fresh mollusks from his own oyster beds, a mighty plate of salmon dressed with salad, baskets of delicious home-made Irish soda bread, and cream-topped pints of Guinness. It was all free — even for my husband."

During AWAI's recent travel-writing workshop in Paris, one of the students — new to travel writing — went into a corner deli to order her lunch. She had every intention of paying for it. But when the owner found out that she was interested in writing an article on the place, he immediately comped her meal.

When I approached a local theater restaurant about an interview, they comped my wife and me a free Saturday night dinner and show... all we had to pay for was our booze. Value? About US\$150.

Be Polite and Professional

As my Dad used to say, "Even if you're not a professional, at least look like one."

One of the first things I did was assemble my writer's kit: one Dictaphone (perfect for field notes on the run)... half a dozen medium-sized spiral-bound

notepads... cell phone... business cards and letterhead with my name, the title "Freelance Writer," and my contact details on them.

You might not need all this stuff. In fact, both Jen Stevens and Steenie Harvey argue that a Dictaphone is too much trouble and warn anyone who insists on using one to be sure and take good notes in addition to recording. (No argument there, but for me it's a belt and braces thing, if it's not in my notes, it'll probably be on the Dictaphone. And there are some situations where it's quite impossible to make notes but you can have a Dictaphone running in your shirt pocket.)

In any event, I highly recommend you at least get business cards (I'll tell you where to get them in a minute) with your title as "Freelance Writer," "Freelance Journalist," "Travel Writer," or "Travel Journalist" on them.

And if you don't want to bear the expense of printing letterhead, simply type your name, title, and contact information at the top of your fax or email.

Present a Well-Defined Idea

Let's use my wilderness-resorts article as an example. Here's what I do...

First, I lay the ground work for a little pre-trip research. I make a short list of possible wilderness-resort targets, finding out as much as I can indirectly, before approaching them.

By the way, I say make a list because I never approach just one place... I spread the net wide. If they have brochures, I read them...if they have websites, I explore them.

This does **two** things:

- 1) It shows that I'm a professional, I've done my homework.
- 2) It also stops a busy person from fobbing me off with brochures and website addresses when I get there.

Then, rather than do all the legwork myself, I find organizations that can do most of it for me — like tourist boards and government embassies. (You can find a complete listing of information centers for every country here: <http://www.towd.com/> and more advice about pre-trip research in the archives for *The Right Way to Travel*, issue #32: <http://www.thetravelwriterslife.com.>)

Then once I have my list finalized, I phone the nearest center and request the name and email address of the manager.

If you're an AWAI member taking Jen Stevens' written program on travel writing and you own the second edition (the one with the blue cover) or if you've attended one of AWAI's live workshops and heard Steenie Harvey's speech on bagging free stuff, then you've got in your course materials some form letters you can use for approaching tourist boards, hotels, and other establishments.

My email is just a modified version of theirs, which briefly explains that I am a freelance travel and lifestyle writer, details the subject I'm interested in, and requests an appointment.

These people are a mine of information. They're in regular contact with just about everybody in the tourist industry and are only too happy to share their knowledge with you. They also know who is worth contacting and who isn't. It's great to weed out the duds before you waste time on them.

I tell them what I'm writing about and say that I have read the brochures and toured the websites. Again, I want to look like I've done my homework, and I don't want them to waste my time telling me things I can easily find elsewhere.

In the end, I'm sure to leave with all the contact names and details I need, lots of background information, and permission to use the Bureau or Center Manager's name as an introduction when I contact each resort. Most times I also leave with several spin-off article ideas.

Keep Your Audience in Mind: Focus on Their Needs, Not Yours

After talking with the tourist board, I now have a list of five or six of the best resorts they recommend, the contact information for those resorts, and a few article ideas to flesh out.

I keep in mind that each resort's goal is to have an article published about them, and so I start to make a list of publications that might feature stories about wilderness resorts.

This does **two** things:

- 1) It helps me define my article ideas since I'm now trying to picture each article in a specific publication.
- 2) It gives me a list of publications to supply to the resort managers if they want more details about where I intend to publish.

Now it's time to contact the resorts themselves.

Where possible, I use email for the first contact and, failing that, fax. I have a template for this purpose, which I update and refine as I go along. But again...if you're an AWAI workshop attendee or you have ***The Ultimate Travel Writer's Program*** (blue cover), you can use the form letters they give you in Lesson 24.

I always lead off by dropping the name of the Tourist Bureau or Information Center Manager and say that person suggested the contact. It leads the prospect onto familiar ground... the name of somebody they know and trust. And by association I'm drawn into that circle of credibility.

I've also found the best way to virtually guarantee a response is to ask questions and list the publications I intend to target for possible publishing. People love to talk about themselves and their business. My initial goals here are to convince them that I can help promote their business and to establish a two-way communication link.

This is all about focus. You'll either be communicating with the owner, General Manager, Marketing Manager, or Sales Manager. What do they all have in common? Each one has the responsibility for increasing their sales figures... that's their job. As long as you keep that in mind, they will do everything in their power to help you help them. And that's when the freebies start to flow!

Like I said, I never ask for freebies. I am genuinely there looking for article ideas when they're dumped in my lap.

Let's not forget, too, the critical idea that you're doing this to promote their business— not get free stuff. I always send an email thanking each link for their assistance, and I keep them up-to-date on outcomes, including copies of any articles I get published.

Good manners cost nothing. And they ensure that the contacts you've made will remember you fondly and jump at the chance to help you in the future.

There's No Such Thing as a Free Lunch

Never lose sight of the fact that your aim is not to generate as many freebies as possible, end of story. Your aim, finally, is to help somebody promote his or her business.

The truth is, a freebie is simply a payment in advance. Your side of the bargain is to write an article that will be published (of course, as an added benefit, you'll earn some money for your piece).

It's the way the system works. One PR representative had this story to tell about a freelancer who didn't hold up his end of the bargain:

“I understand that freelance writers won’t always write about the trip — or write good things about it — but to my knowledge, he didn’t even send a query out to a single publication afterward,” she said. “I was not impressed with him. After all, there is some industry etiquette that freelancers are expected to follow.”

She’s right. There is an unwritten rule that you should produce something that will bring your sponsoring organization business. That’s the reason they’re granting you favors.

And, in truth, if you do sell an article, you have that much more credibility when you try again to land another free trip. Plus, you’ll actually make money from your “freebie.”

So, although you are not legally obliged to write an article after you accept a comp, you should do everything you can to get it published. In other words, hold up your end of the bargain.

Another (Easier) Way to Get Free Stuff: Flash Your “Credentials”

Remember back at the front of this report, I mentioned a little object I said I always carry with me?

I was talking about my credentials... my “Press Pass.” In some situations, having writer credentials can make things a whole lot easier for you.

So what are they and how do you get them?

Press Passes are generally issued by publications to their reporters so that they can gain special access behind the scenes. It’s simply an ID tag that identifies you as a writer/reporter for that publication.

Mine has my photo on it and is now the first thing I put in my pocket every day... before keys, money, or even a clean hanky (sorry Mum!). I take it out and wave it about at every opportunity.

If I need to show ID... well, most people would go for their driver’s licence... not me. Out comes my travel writer ID card. If I go out to lunch or to any seated social or business gathering, I nonchalantly plonk down my sunglasses, keys and you guessed it, my little magic wand.

Why do I do it? Quite often it piques somebody’s curiosity, and you never know where that might lead. I’ll give you the perfect example...

A couple of months ago I went to see a local real estate agent about an investment property we were interested in viewing. As we sat down, I put my keys, sunnies and ID card on the table.

A bit later, he spied the card and asked me about it. I gave him a brief synopsis of my travel and lifestyle writing. He didn't say much at the time, but a few days later he rang and asked if I'd like to go to lunch with him and his business partner. Turns out he and his partner were working on a deal to sell a resort island. Not just the resort, but the entire island — lock, stock, and barrier reef! They could use some press.

To cut a long story short, they offered my wife and me a free long weekend at the island resort, for “research purposes.” While on the island, we made copious notes and I gathered plenty of information for a number of feature articles (keep your eye on Islands magazine over the next few months).

Now, like me, you're probably not employed full-time by a publication that automatically issues its reporters a “Press Pass.”

For freelancers like us, the best way to get credentials is to join an organization of writers — in our case, travel writers.

I joined the **International Travel Writers & Photographers Alliance** (ITWPA).

Now, the ITWPA sends me a list of available press trips every month as well as markets I might consider for publishing my articles.

They also send me professional courtesy-rate vouchers for magazine subscriptions, which allow me to purchase publications at a deeply discounted press rate... member discounts on travel supplies, recommended books, and other practical resources for writers... and discount coupons worth \$200 off any writing-related event sponsored by the organization.

Not only that, but on the members-only website the **International Travel Writers & Photographers Alliance** maintains, there's a collection of useful resources, archived issues of the monthly newsletter, plus announcements about interesting and useful events and services.

And then there's the membership ID I was telling you about. This — quite literally— has helped open doors around the world for me.

Like I said, I just flash it and they practically roll out the red carpet. Particularly in countries where formality is so important.

I can't stress enough how helpful membership in such an organization has been. And lucky for you, all AWAI travel-writing program members get a

discounted membership rate. You can get a full year's membership today for **JUST \$219** (that's \$30 off the regular price). You'll get all the perks plus full member benefits for 12 months.

That means you'll receive the **monthly ITWPA Insider e-letter**, your ITWPA **membership card** valid for one year (the one you'll want to pull out of your pocket whenever you have the chance), extensive **member discounts** (including \$200 off an upcoming travel writing workshop), and access to the **members-only website**.

Taken together, these many membership benefits add up to nearly \$400 – and that doesn't count the value of complimentary travel perks you'll learn, as a member, to arrange. But with this discount, you'll pay **JUST \$219** for your **1-year membership**.

Think of it this way: If you take advantage of just a fraction of the discounts you're afforded, the real cost of your membership is absolutely free. Put membership to smart use to help land some freebies, and it pays for itself in spades.

After your first year you'll need to submit a published article with your application in order to maintain your membership. But with all these tools to help you, you'll certainly be ready.

Here's how to apply: <http://www.thetravelwriterslife.com/itj/bn>

You know, one of my first articles was published on a freebie. I flashed my ID card at the local Tourist Information Center and got a free weekend at Seven Spirit Bay Wilderness Resort. The article was published in *International Living* the following summer.

Cheers from Down under,

Brian Norris
Freelance Writer and ITWPA member

P.S. In July, my wife and I will be spending two weeks traveling... a week in a luxury wilderness resort...and the rest of the time in 5-star coastal accommodation, including a luxury island hideaway... all free of charge. How about you?

Program members can apply at: <http://www.thetravelwriterslife.com/itj/bn>

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