

HOW TO BAG THE BEST FREEBIES

5 Real-World Tips for Scoring VIP Travel Perks

Steenie Harvey



How to Bag the Best Freebies: 5 Real-World Tips for Scoring VIP Travel Perks

By American Writers & Artists Inc., Travel Division

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INTRODUCTION

Dear Traveler,

Travel writing and travel photography are at the very top of most people's wish-list of 'I'd love to do that' careers. And if they aren't, they should be. I certainly wouldn't swap my job for any other.

Dream job, dream lifestyle? Of course it is. In the last eighteen months alone, I've taken long-haul trips to Thailand, China, India, Malaysia and Argentina. (Living in Ireland, I regard anywhere in Europe as short-haul!)

"Oh, have you been on vacation again?" my neighbors ask.

It's getting wearisome explaining that I'm not returning from a vacation. I'm a travel writer who takes photos — and exploring faraway places is my job.

But to be honest, it's difficult justifying what I do as 'work'. For instance, how can I say that cross-country skiing in the French Alps is hard labor? Or that it's a pain to explore the villages of Spain's Granada province...go curio-hunting in Chiang Mai in Thailand...or visit Italy and wander the ruins of Pompeii.

My neighbors are already green with envy at the job I do. And so I don't want to make them even more jealous by telling them about the free accommodation in luxury hotels; the gourmet wining and dining; the private excursions and tours arranged especially for me; the complimentary spas, saunas and even safaris...

Yes, safaris! All mine for the taking at no cost. The perks of being in the travel business are truly astonishing and close within your reach too.

A Lobster and Champagne Lifestyle

Like me, many other freelance travel writers and photographers enjoy a way of life that ordinary mortals can only dream of. You see, we ‘work the system’ to our full advantage.

Not only do we get paid for our stories and photos, we also get ‘hosted’ or ‘comped’ by visitor and convention bureaus; by individual hotels; by tour companies and other outlets offering travel-related services. (Comped means being given a free stay.) We’re treated to meals, accommodation, tickets to shows, invitations to exhibit openings, to name a few.

Naturally, in return for this generosity, our hosts expect us to provide stories and photos that will generate streams of paying customers.

If you’re reading this report, you’ve purchased *The Ultimate Travel Writer’s Program* or *Turn Your Pictures into Cash...A Comprehensive Program in Taking and Selling Amazing Photographs*. By following these programs, you’ll learn all the tips and tricks that savvy media professionals use for getting ‘freebies’ in exchange for their travel writing or photography services.

EDITOR’S NOTE: If you don’t yet have a copy of one or both of these programs, you should get one. AWAI is famous for their show-them-how-to-do-it and teach-them-how-to-make-money-at-it approach and these days members of their programs write in from around the globe with stories of their success. This one’s in Fiji... that one’s in Australia... another is on her way to Malaysia. And they’re all living “the life” — traveling when they please, working from home, turning their vacations into paychecks. For more information about *The Ultimate Travel Writer’s Program*, visit: <http://www.thetravelwriterslife.com/vip/rpt>. For details about *Turn Your Pictures into Cash*, visit: <http://www.thephotographerslife.com/vip/rpt>.

Unless you insist on backpacker travel, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t be enjoying five-star treatment too.

You don’t have to be a staffer to avail of ‘press trips’, ‘perks’, and ‘comps’. And you don’t have to travel overseas either. There are lots of benefits available to freelance travel writers and photographers throughout the U.S. and Canada.

Nor is it necessary to have been in the business for years. In fact, quite a number of your fellow American Writers & Artists Inc. members are already enjoying a lobster and champagne lifestyle on the strength of getting a couple of articles or photos published.

Take Alice Cunningham who intends writing an article on ‘Hawaii’s Most Romantic Room Views’. “I’ve been comped four nights at a deluxe resort on Oahu after advising them of my plans,” she told us.

Sandra Kennedy attended AWAI’s Workshop in Argentina. Within three months (and a couple of published articles later) she’d been invited on a luxurious, four-day press trip to a spa resort in the Bahamas. That’s not all — she’s also been invited to a small town in Washington called Cascade for another all-expenses-paid four days. Then Sandra and her husband Bill are heading to Mexico’s Riviera Maya. The resort where they’re staying is offering them a free “renewal of vows” ceremony — a Mayan Ceremony with a Spanish Translator.

Now, it needs pointing out that there are more organized press trips out there for writers. So if you can offer a photo package of words and pictures, you’re greatly increasing your chances of getting on some fabulous trips. And, of course, increasing your marketability with editors.

“I think the main thing is that if you’ve published articles and photos both, it adds to your credibility,” says fellow wordsmith and photographer David Morgan. “You’re more likely to get the perks.”

Though, if you strictly just want to do photography, perks certainly exist for you too.

Tim O’Rielly has used his photography status to travel to Kauai, a Hawaiian Island renowned for its enchanting beauty, cascading emerald mountains, flower-bedecked streams and swaying, palm-fringed shores. There, he stayed for a week, all expenses paid.

Or consider Sue Wright. Sue shared her story about a trip to Las Vegas to shoot photos for her local newspaper. Even though it was her first ‘job’ Sue got upgraded from a “back-of-the-hotel teeny room to a suite as big as my first apartment!” at the Aladdin Casino & Resort.

Shhh...Don’t Tell the Readers

Few people realize these perks are there. I was freelancing for four years before I realized that many of these goodies were available just for the asking.

Yes, it’s as simple as asking. You can decide what perks you want to produce that great article or to take that great shot, and people will bend over backwards to accommodate you.

It is however, up to you to arrange your own travel perks or to set ‘the system’ up in a way that editors or agents call you up with exciting trips. Although, I must admit, I’ve been on organized press trips in the past. Nowadays I much prefer to approach an organization directly — it might be a tourist board, a hotel, a tour operator, a theater... and I’m not shy about asking for special consideration.

By the way, I don't only ask for 'special consideration' solely on my behalf. When my 'researcher/photographer' husband accompanies me, he gets all the benefits too.

Why are we feted like royalty? Well, it's because writers and photographers are the vital link for travel industry marketers to reach their target audience — the traveler.

You see, tourism is big business. Around the world, tourism generates \$1.2 billion in spending per day, according to the World Tourism Organization.

It's no wonder, then, that hotels... tour organizers... cruise lines... airlines... even local governments are willing to spend big bucks on travel writers and photographers—in hopes that they'll have a positive experience and write about it favorably or submit inspiring photos in a magazine, newspaper, or newsletter.

Seeing the World in Style

I don't mean to brag, but, I just want you to see what's possible when you pursue the path of a travel writer or photographer.

Last March for instance, I was in India. For much of the trip we effectively traveled for free. Taking the accommodation at rack rates, I reckon we saved at least \$2,000 on what regular visitors pay.

With all meals complimentary, we got free lodgings in an historic colonial hotel in Cochin...at a swish eco-friendly resort on Kerala's backwaters...at a jungle lodge providing wildlife safaris...at a business hotel in the high-tech city of Bangalore...in another old colonial mansion in ancient Mysore, famed for its silk and sandalwood.

We also spent a day and night exploring Kerala's verdant backwater lagoons in a 2-bedroomed *Kettuvallom* — a thatched roof houseboat. Just us — no sharing with any other visitors. Plus we had our own crew of three: skipper, cook and engineer.

Not only was the houseboat stay also entirely free — we were given the same boat that Paul McCartney and his wife Heather stayed on a couple of years earlier.

Lobster and champagne? At times it's more like a rock star lifestyle!

Meet Interesting People...

Beyond the free eats and sleeps, there are some aspects of being a travel writer or photographer that you simply can't put a monetary value on. For example, you get to meet all kinds of fascinating people that normal travelers would never encounter.

The 90-year-old 'Last Days of the Raj' British colonel I met in India was a splendid character. (He shot his first tiger at the age of nine.) And the Irish ex-jockey running a brothel in Thailand had some even more priceless tales to tell...

However, I can't compete with my colleague David Morgan. David wasn't any hot-shot photographer when, with a Vivitar camera in hand, he traveled across Asia for six months. He dined with the Privy Counsel to the King of Thailand... met the late Mother Teresa... and shook hands with the Dalai Lama.

Or take AWAI member Peggy Sweeney who has been very busy since our Bermuda workshop. She has an invitation from the Commodore of the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club to return as his personal guest for the final stages of the prestigious Newport to Bermuda yacht race. Britain's Princess Anne will also be in attendance.

Yet another writer met with Denmark's Minister of the Economy when she was on a press trip there a few years ago. Another dined with the vice president of Nicaragua. You'll find your status as a media professional acts as a calling card when it comes to meeting celebrities, diplomats, politicians, artists, musicians, sports stars, and more.

Yes, this is the lifestyle most people only dream about. And, it's a lifestyle that will soon be your reality.

So, let's get started shall we? The top five travel perks—and how to get them as a travel writer or photographer, await you.

Wishing you happy — and lucrative — travels,

Steenie Harvey
Freelance Travel Writer

VIP TRAVEL PERK #1:

Join a Group Press Trip

From Dinosaurs to Orangutans:

Country inns...islands crowned with castle ruins...tumble-down monasteries once pillaged by Vikings. Do you like the idea of a complimentary 6-day trip cruising Ireland's river Shannon on a luxury hotel barge?

Or how about practicing your wrangling skills and exploring Wyoming on horseback? (And getting 3 days eats and sleeps on a ranch — for free.) Then there's digging up dinosaurs. Montana scheduled a Dinosaur Trail press trip this summer. One of the highlights was digging for fossils at the Makoshika Breaks Guest Ranch.

Almost every Convention & Visitors Bureau throughout the U.S. and Canada offers Press Trips for writers and photographers. So do many foreign tourist boards. Sometimes known as FAM (familiarization) trips, these group jaunts usually include accommodation, attraction admission, outdoor activities, interviews, ground transportation and meals. Often airfare to the destination is included too.

To find these bureaus, refer to the Resource section on page 31.

I'd been writing for about three years, when the travel editor of the UK's *Daily Telegraph* rang me up and said something on these lines:

"We have an invite here for a 10-day trip to Borneo, sponsored by British Airways Holidays. We can't spare a staffer — it's August and they're all on family vacations — but I thought this might be perfect for you. We'd want an article from you (we'll pay you, of course)...something on the lines of orangutans, headhunters and a view of Asia from a first-timer visitor's eyes. If you're interested, just let me know."

All-expenses paid, top class hotels (the Shangri-La included), and traveling business class. How could I possibly turn down such an offer?

You'll need to have a couple of published pieces or photos under your belt which *The Ultimate Travel Writer's Program* or *Turn Your Pictures into Cash* will help you accomplish. However, even as a newbie, getting on a press trip is easier than you might think. Jen Stevens, the author of *The Ultimate Travel Writer's Program* has this to say:

"Back when I was editing *International Living*, I'd regularly get calls from P.R. agencies asking if I'd send a staffer on an all-expenses-paid trip someplace. But we had a small staff, and often I couldn't spare a body for a week. And so rather than let a good trip go to waste, I'd call a freelancer...somebody I knew to be reliable, professional, and a joy to work with. She'd get a free trip out of the deal. And then I'd pay her for a story."

One AWAI member, Hayley Clarke, says that's exactly what happened to her. "I have just returned from an 8-day, all-expenses-paid, 5-star trip to Malaysia taking in Kuala Lumpur and Penang, courtesy of Tourism Malaysia," she told us. "I went on behalf of that same magazine that published my first article. Seemingly they were so impressed with my style and professionalism that when this trip came up, my name simply popped into the Senior Editor's head!"

Ski — and Golf — at No Cost

Ski Vermont...Lake Tahoe...the Resorts of the Canadian Rockies. All their relevant tourism associations offer group and individual press tours. In the case of Vermont, the March group press trips included skiing at six resorts with lodging, food and travel between resorts provided.

In fact, almost every ski resort throughout the U.S. and Canada runs a high-profile PR campaign either in-house at the resort itself or through PR firms. Find out who's in charge of the marketing and public relations for the places you're interested in, and get in touch.

To learn how to get on press lists, see page 23.

One writer received a press release about a special family weekend getaway that a hotel was offering at a big discount — and it included free ski lessons for the kids. She asked if she might come for a couple of nights simply to check the place out, get a tour, and meet in person with her contact to learn more about what the hotel had to offer. She went, for free, two weekends later.

The same goes for golf courses and golf resort hotels. They all want publicity. Arizona and Wisconsin seem particularly keen on attracting golfing photo-journalists, but it's not only golf destinations in the States...

You might be able to wangle yourself a golfing trip abroad. I can't promise you St. Andrews in Scotland, but Mike Palmer has played golf, free, on some of Ireland's best links courses. And I've just read a hilarious account of a golfing press trip to Italy by a guy called Tim McDonald. (Think highly disorganized...think gargantuan meals that last until 2 am!)

VIP TRAVEL PERK #2:

Arrange Your Own Individual Press Trip

Visit the Wizard of Oz

Like many Convention & Visitor Bureaus, Kansas Travel and Tourism provides design-your-own press visits.

They provide a rental car, accommodation, interviews, most meals, and more. You could be hiking through the wildflower covered Flint Hills, traveling to the depths of the earth 650 feet below ground in the new Underground Salt Museum, strolling the streets of old Dodge City, even visiting the Wizard at the Oz Museum.

Tailored itineraries; personalized city tours; complimentary admissions, meals, and accommodations. Here's another sample of a sweetener from Nebraska's Division of Travel & Tourism.

"For those in search of the nation's best undiscovered treasures, Nebraska 'marks the spot.' To prove it, we offer travel journalists, writers, photographers, and editors firsthand access to everything Nebraska has to offer."

Or Experience a Safari

Nagarhole National Park is one of southern India's most renowned wildlife reserves. Although sightings of tigers and leopards are getting rarer (much depends on luck), you're almost certain to see herds of wild Asiatic elephants. Lots of elephants — there are estimated to be around 4,000 here.

Kabini River Lodge is definitely where to stay if you're in this part of the world — it used to be the hunting lodge of the local Maharaja. In days gone by — when the emphasis was on shooting and not conserving wildlife — the Lodge's guests included Viceroy, officers of the British East India Company and Imperial Russian Dukes.

Most visitors pay \$125 a night per person to stay at Kabini. But I didn't pay anything. Nothing for the accommodation...or for the food...or for the late afternoon and early morning guided safaris.

Or how about an African safari? Tom Schueneman was a sound engineer for bands — and he'd never written an article before he enrolled in *The Ultimate Travel Writer's Program*. Last year, Tom took advantage of his travel-writer status and traveled to Botswana to take a first class safari at a deeply discounted rate.

How to Negotiate the Freebies... As a Newbie...

"I wasn't trying to get free lunch but it just happened," says AWAI student Karen Pevenstein who was researching an article on Yorktown, VA. "I told the manager at the restaurant where I wanted to eat that I was a freelance travel writer working on an article. I started asking a few questions and taking notes. When she asked for credentials, I whipped out my ITWPA badge. Suddenly I was whisked to a corner table enjoying a fabulous free lunch with the most amazing dessert sampler imaginable."

Like Karen, simply tell people you're a travel writer or photographer. Don't be shy. Let it be known. You just never know what perks or freebies will arise as a result. If you're new at this, then, like Karen, you may want to get your own ITWPA badge. It's a great way to gain credentials as a newbie. For more details on the ITWPA badge see page 26.



Enjoy More Rip-Roaring Adventures

It's not just India and Africa where you'll find adventures. For example, retired television executive Duane Harm and his wife Harlene spent an entire summer traveling across the western U.S., visiting 23 different ranches in Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana. They stayed for an average of three days at each ranch. The total value of their stays? About \$55,000 — and they didn't pay anything for it.

The Misty Mountains...the golden woods of Lothlorien...Isengard where the wizard Saruman hid away in the Tower of Orthanc. One of my own favorite adventures was taking a 'Lord of the Rings' day tour by jeep around New Zealand's South Island (where many of the scenes from the movie trilogy were filmed).

We splashed across the Arrow River — in LOTR, the Ford of Bruinen where Arwen faces the Black Riders of the Nazgul. We clambered out to gaze at Amon Hen where Frodo mounts the Seat of Seeing and is engaged by the Eye of Sauron. All absolutely wonderful! If my husband and I had paid for this day trip, it would have cost an equivalent \$300.

Here's one adventure that might intrigue you. This spring, the Raft Maine Association hosted press trips for different market segments: seniors, women, families with kids and families with teenagers. They also stated that if the set dates didn't work, they would be happy to host individual press trips.

Each trip included three nights lodging, all meals and activities and a fill-up of your gas tank. They also stated that air transportation would be considered with a letter of assignment from an editor.

To learn how to query an editor, see page 21.

VIP TRAVEL PERK #3:

Wine and Dine Like Royalty or Just Get a Free Lunch

Fabulous Foodie Freebies

Ah...those oysters and smoked salmon served at Morans of the Weir down in county Galway on Ireland's west coast! Although I've enjoyed my own share of fabulous foodie freebies, Jeanine Buckley made me drool with her descriptions of her "three days of idyllic leisure" and the dinners she was treated to whilst on assignment in Maine.

"The first night, after dinner — chilled lobster salad served in a fresh avocado — I sat in my fireside chair with my laptop computer and actually worked on several of my course lessons. The next night I feasted on Boiled Maine Lobster, accompanied by a chilled Chardonnay and an exquisite view of the ocean. Plus, I came away with enough information for four or five articles. And, the best part is, when I checked out, the bill was zero!"

And Experience the World's Best Hotels

Daryl Emerson planned to write about a few places in the Caribbean. So he contacted several hotels in Bonaire and Belize and was offered a free week's stay in both locations. And it didn't stop there — the manager of the Bonaire hotel invited him to stay an extra week at their resort in Curacao.

Jennifer Minton traveled to Antigua, Guatemala to research two stories, one on investing in and retiring to Guatemala and another on traveling there. She stayed at one of the nicest hotels in Antigua, an old stucco villa with arched passageways and exposed beams, extensive gardens, and open-air patios...and she stayed for free.

John Forde just managed to get a complimentary stay in a 5-star Vienna hotel — his wife and their young son are traveling with him too. (The pitch for his story was 'Romantic Vienna With a Toddler in Tow'.)

Mike Palmer wanted to spend a few days at an all-inclusive tropical rain forest lodge in Ecuador — reachable only by boat on the Napo River. Instead of paying hundreds of dollars for the experience, he got the trip at no charge!

Remember, all these experiences will earn you nice fees too. When you submit your articles or photos to publications, you'll get paid for your work. *The Ultimate Travel Writer's Program* and *Turn Your Pictures into Cash* will show you all you need to submit your work to clients.

Don't Refuse the Discount—or the Upgrade

Sometimes you won't get accommodation entirely for free — but many hotels offer a heavily discounted 'press rate'. For example, on my Lithuania trip, I wasn't able to bag free lodgings in the city of Kaunas. However, I got this e-mail back from a top business hotel, the Santakos.

"Thank you for your kind attention towards our hotel. I'd like to offer you a very special rate — 60 EUR per night — for your stay. Full breakfast, sauna and swimming pool, parking yard are included. Rack rate is 140 EUR."

Check out page 24 to get the lowdown on how to write a letter of introduction that will open doors of opportunity every time.



Fill Your Goodie Bag

Beauty and fashion writers get lavished with all kinds of valuable free stuff — everything from designer purses to \$300 pots of face cream. Real estate writers (well, certainly those in contact with Irish realtors), can expect cash stuffed into brown paper envelopes, free stays in Kerry caravans, and bottles of whiskey. I should know...when writing stories about Irish property, I've been the recipient of some very interesting freebies.

As a travel photo-journalist, what goes in your goodie bag largely depends on what you specialize in. Are you interested in camping, fishing and the great outdoors? Well, get in touch with the PR department of manufacturers who supply everything that's needed for a trip — and let them know that you're out there. Especially if you're doing a product review piece, you may be able to kit yourself out with a stack of new gear for free.

To be honest, I could be far more pro-active in filling my own goodie bag. Mind you, I shouldn't complain because I've been gifted bottles of wine from everywhere and even a bottle of Polish *zubrowska* (vodka flavored with the grass that bison feed on.) And although it's not the best bit of booty in the world, the clock I was given by Treasure Island Casino & Resort in Las Vegas is still ticking.

If you're an avid reader, Jen Stevens advises getting your name on publishers' review-copy lists. As a travel writer or photographer, you might say you'd like releases about new books written on various countries, on travel tips, or on living in destinations around the world. Perhaps you'd also be interested in political commentary or books about international affairs.

Jen suggests contacting the publicity departments at various publishing houses. Explain that you freelance for various publications — and that you'd like to receive regular press releases about the books they figure you'd find most interesting. Soon, you'll be receiving a steady flow of releases. When you see a book you think you'd enjoy, give the contact person a call and he'll send it off. Do this often enough, and you'll start to automatically receive books in the mail...absolutely free.

VIP TRAVEL PERK #4:

Indulge Your Passions — for Free

Do You Enjoy Scuba Diving...Whitewater Rafting... Deep Sea Fishing...Bob-Sledding?

Well, in return for an article or photos, there's a plethora of small tour operators and businesses yearning to accommodate you.

We received this note from Gary Peach, a member with a passion for sailing and fishing. "I have been hired to go on six free sailing trips in Costa Rica (have already been on 3 and am to go on 5 fishing trips next month for Online Costa Rica magazine and a sister online version."

At AWAI's photography and travel guidebook workshop in Bermuda, Suzanne Dicks was researching horseback-riding on the island. Expecting to pay for her trail ride (at that time Suzanne hadn't had an article or a photo published), she was thrilled when the owner of the stables waived all charges!

Mike Pinter had planned a week-long Ecuador vacation and wanted to spend a day river-rafting through the interior. Before he left, Mike tracked down an American running a successful rafting tour business. He wrote a letter introducing himself and followed up with a call. Mike explained that he'd be on assignment for *International Living*, to do a piece on adventure travel. The owner was so pleased at the prospect of free publicity, he offered Mike and his girlfriend a free day out in exchange.

Loren Worthington was a novice before studying *The Ultimate Travel Writer's Program*. Now he can boast several published articles — and paychecks. Plus he scored a "free ride" — literally! Loren experienced a complimentary, high speed run down the Olympic bobsled track in Utah. He's now working on an article about his "adrenalin travels."

No matter where you are, you can do the same thing. Interested in birding in the cloud forests of Argentina? Call around to find a guide and get in touch with him. Cycling in Europe sound like fun? Call a few companies that arrange such trips and see if one will give you a ‘comp.’

Luxuriate in Spa Heaven

Want to splash about with a gang of stark naked Germans?

No? It makes for great material, but I must admit that the historic Friedrichsbad in the Black Forest spa town of Baden-Baden won’t suit everybody — this thermal spa is totally nudist. And yes, men and women do bathe together. (Having no modesty whatsoever, naturally I had to experience the spa, its rigorous 16-stage bathing plan, and also the exfoliating massage with a scrubbing brush!)

But you don’t have to prance about naked in Germany to indulge yourself with complimentary spas and saunas. For example, I got two saunas and bathing sessions for free in Tallinn in Estonia. And in a top-class hotel in Chiang Mai in Thailand, I got an excellent discount for a 90-minute full body Thai massage. All it cost was \$8.

The spa business is very competitive. All over the world spas are seeking publicity — even the spas in your hometown. As a travel writer or photographer, publicity is what you can provide.

Travel With Actors... Trussed Up in Chains?

I don’t know if this can be classed as traveling smart or not. But if you want to visit somewhere truly exotic, here’s an invite I came across from the Department of Tourism in Rajasthan, in northern India. (The English isn’t great — you have to giggle at the prospect of being made to travel around Rajasthan. And why actors are also likely to be along on this junket is mind-boggling!)

“Tourism writers, Photographers, Journalists, TV Teams, Travel Tour Operators, Actors and Tourism trade-related personalities are being invited for the FAM Tour conducted by the Department. They are being made to travel around the State as Department Guests.”



VIP TRAVEL PERK #5:

Open Sesame — VIP Access

Access All Areas With a Media Pass

Here again, just telling people what you do for a living and asking for what you want is the secret to getting all kinds of perks and freebies.

“Just tell people you’re a freelance travel writer in town researching an article,” says Jeanine Buckley. “I used the contacts the tourism office provided and was instantly supplied with free passes and media kits for the town’s top attractions.”

Wendy VanHatten is another member of Jen Stevens’ *The Ultimate Travel Writer’s Program*. As a published travel writer she’s been given some very special attention. In North Carolina, she received complimentary passes to the Biltmore Estate in Asheville. In San Diego, the Wild Animal Park gave her complimentary passes, too. And in Scottsdale, the 4 Peaks Mine gave her an interview and special access to information about the mine.

And going back to Tallinn in Estonia, normal visitors pay over \$9 to get into Club Hollywood, one of the city’s hottest nightclubs. Me? Yes, you can guess...nothing.

You see, Tallinn’s tourist office was only too happy to give me a ‘VIP’ card allowing free entrance into literally dozens of places. (Free public transport and shopping and eating discounts too.) I just wish I’d had more time to take advantage of everything on offer. Although I didn’t want to visit the zoo or every one of the city’s 26 museums, I could have tried bowling, took a river cruise, got a rental bike, visited art-house cinemas and even gone ice-skating. All for free.

To locate a tourist bureau or office in the destination you’re going to, refer to the Resource section on page 30.

Gain Entry to Sold Out Events...and Get Backstage

I had a commission to write about the Wexford Opera Festival in southeast Ireland... but all the seats for the night I planned to go had sold out. No problem. I contacted the Festival's PR department and was given two tickets for the best seats in the house.

Usually, the organizers of any event reserve a certain number of VIP tickets for travel writers (even for those scatty ones who should have made their arrangements earlier than I did). Backstage passes and complimentary drinks and nibbles are often part of the deal too. And if the event is anything like Wexford's Opera Festival, then so too is a goodie bag of event mementos.

Take Exclusive Private Tours

Tallinn, Estonia's capital, comes straight from the pages of the Grimm Brothers' darker fables. Here are dragon-headed gargoyles and squat stone towers with russet-colored caps...needle-thin spires colored black and copper...gilded weathervanes adorned with mythical creatures. Names like Long Leg Street, Goldfoot Tower, Hanging Hill and the Wall of Hatred all add to the dark magic...

Not long back, I wrote and photographed a piece for *International Living* on Tallinn's ghost stories. As I adore 'the dark side' of cities, it was great to spend three-and-a-half hours with a private guide who specialized in legends.

How much did my private tour cost? Nothing. It was especially arranged for me by Tallinn's tourist office.

And it's not just walking tours. At every great monument and castle around the world (and at cathedrals, historic mansions and museums too), Joe Public gets the 'official' tour. Not the one-on-one 'insider's' tour. And that's the one you want to arrange. Your status as a media professional will help you do it.

Flash Your Press Credentials

Karen Pevenstein...Martin Fumarola...Brian Norris: they all know about — and enjoy — the benefits of press credentials.

Brian Norris, one of AWAI's very first members, has had dozens of articles published — and has just landed a new column with a local paper. The column will do a new human interest piece each week — each story will focus on someone in the tourist industry. His in with the editor? His ITWPA press credentials.

Brian's ITWPA badge identifies him as a professional travel writer. This badge has brought him everything from a free weekend getaway on a tropical island to free spa treatments to free eco-tours to other free or discounted adventures. All these freebies provide great article ideas, which in turn bring great publicity for the places he goes.

For freelancers like you, the best way to get credentials is to join a relevant organization — in your case, an organization of travel photographers and writers. As a member of *The Ultimate Travel Writer's Program* or *Turn Your Pictures into Cash*, you're eligible for membership in *ITWPA: the International Travel Writers & Photographers Alliance*.

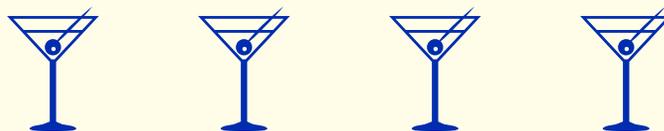
An ITWPA membership will really kick-start your career as it gives you one of the best things a newbie lacks: credentials. After all, people will want to see proof that the articles you write or photos you take will land in publications.

When you're just starting out, you may not have anything published. But flash your ITWPA membership and you've got instant credibility. For more details on the ITWPA membership see page 26.

Pyramids, Cable Cars, VIP Airport Lounges: a Whole World of Free Attractions

AWAI member, Martin Fumarola, has been saving quite a few bucks during his travels. "I just returned from Venezuela where I enjoyed the Varig VIP Lounge in the Sao Paulo International Airport at no charge, landed a complimentary stay in a 3-star hotel in Caracas, and got a free pass to the 'Telesferico.'

I flashed my writer credentials at the ticket counter for the 'Telesferico'. (It's a cable car service that takes visitors directly to the Monte Avila hill, said to be the largest cable car run in the world.) The clerk handed me a free pass, and I saved nearly \$20. And on a trip to Mexico City, I had a similar experience when I got the \$35 fee waived for my visit to the Teotihuacan Pyramids on the outskirts of the city. Again, it was just a matter of asking."



GETTING STARTED

At the start of this report I mentioned ‘lifestyle’. As a freelance travel writer or photographer, you’ll enjoy a way of life that most people can only dream of. You’ll ‘work the system’ to your full advantage.

You’ll get paid for your stories and photos. You’ll also get ‘comped’ by all kinds of travel-related business and services... getting treated to meals, accommodation, tickets to shows, invitations to exhibit openings and more.

Naturally, in return for this generosity, your aim is to provide stories and photos that will generate streams of paying customers for these establishments and destinations. So, it’s important you develop your skill as a travel writer or photographer through the programs, *The Ultimate Travel Writer’s Program* or *Turn Your Pictures into Cash*.

It’s my job though, to help you get the perks. So, in this section, ‘Getting Started,’ I’ve covered the brass-tacks of how to go about getting ‘comped’ at an establishment, how to get on Press Lists and how to sell your story to a publication. These are all the tips and tricks that savvy media professionals use for getting ‘freebies’.

There’s no reason why you shouldn’t be enjoying a five-star lifestyle too. Remember, you don’t have to be ‘on staff’ to avail of ‘press trips’, ‘perks’, and ‘comps’. You don’t even have to travel overseas either. Opportunities for freebies exist right in your hometown and country.

Arranging perks however, does take some planning in advance, so with that in mind here are a few proven ways that you can pursue them.

What Makes a Great Query Letter?

The vast majority of newspaper, magazine, and newsletter articles are generated by freelancers who contact editors with story ideas and ask for assignments.

So, how do you go about suggesting an article to an editor so you end up with an assignment?

Quite simply, you write a query letter. This is a letter you send to an editor in which you propose writing an article about a specific subject. The best query letters are short, remember editors are busy people and you want to get to the point quickly. So with that in mind here are four points to remember.

1. Keep it short (never longer than a page)
2. Offer a specific article idea
3. Position the idea so the editor will immediately grasp the benefit for his readers
4. Explain how you'll approach the topic as well as how long your article will be, what point of view it will have (if applicable), and whether or not it will be accompanied by photographs

When your query letter is successful you will be rewarded with a letter of interest or perhaps a letter of assignment. For complete details on how to write a successful query letter refer to lesson 22 in *The Ultimate Travel Writer's Program*, or see the FREE guide, *How to Get Published Using a Cereal Box...A Tube of Toothpaste...and the Back of a Coke Can* that you received with *Turn Your Pictures into Cash* or *The Ultimate Travel Writer's Program*.

Following is an example of a query letter that you can use to model your own letters.

The letter on page 22 is from a travel writer living in Czech Republic and wanting to write about real estate and small business opportunities in Eastern Europe. When you write your own query letter you will have to substitute the details in this sample with details on the topic that you wish to cover.

Your Name
Freelance Travel Writer
123 Any Street, Anytown, IL 60614 USA
Phone (123) 456-7899 Fax (123) 456 7898
Email: yourname@youremail.com

Date

Editor's name
Title
Publication
Street address
City, State, Zip

Dear Editor's name,

Are you interested in giving your readers a unique insight into an Eastern European destination? I am a freelance writer living in Prague, the Czech Republic. I have traveled extensively throughout Eastern Europe while pursuing business opportunities there.

I propose a 3,000 word article detailing the real estate and small-business opportunities in the Czech Republic and the steps to overcoming the country's enormous amount of red tape. My article will also include opportunities in Poland and Slovakia.

The article can easily be separated into two accounts if space is limited.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Your Name
Freelance Travel Writer

How to Get Your Name on Press Lists

To keep on top of all of the perks that are out there you're going to want to get your name on Press Lists so PR agencies know to alert you to press trips.

To make sure you get contacted by these agencies you should pick a few relevant organizations from whom you'd like to hear regularly and send an email or call to introduce yourself. Your email might say something like this:

FROM: Your Name, Freelance Travel Writer
TO: Ms. Allen, Travel PR Inc.

Dear Ms. Allen,

Please add my name to your media list so that I receive press releases from you regularly. In addition, I'm interested in being alerted to any organized press trips you might have in the works.

I'm a freelance travel writer who specializes in luxury travel. My articles have appeared in *Luxury Times*.

The best way to keep in touch with me is via email at: yourname@youreemail.com

Thank you for adding my name to your mailing list. I look forward to receiving material from you regularly.

Sincerely,

Your name
Freelance Travel Writer
1234 Main Street
Anytown, IL 60614 USA
Email: yourname@youreemail.com
Phone: 123-456-7899

In order to participate in most press trips you'll need at least a 'letter of assignment.' Keep in mind, even if you get a letter from an editor agreeing to look at your article 'on spec,' that might be good enough to satisfy a PR official looking to fill a press trip. But you must be up-front with that PR official in saying that you've got a 'spec' assignment. Of course you might increase your chances of getting a spot on the trip if you've got two or three such jobs lined up.

How to Arrange Your Own Perks

More often than not freelance travel writers and photographers arrange their own travel perks. Rather than join an organized press junket or press trip, they approach an organization directly—might be a tourist board, a hotel, a tour operator, a theater or another travel related service—and they ask for special consideration.

Ask. I've mentioned it before. Here again, asking for what you want can lead to all kinds of perks and freebies. But how do you ask?

Here are three things to keep in mind when you write a letter of introduction for yourself.

1. Present a well-defined story idea.
2. Keep your audience in mind. What's the benefit of your coverage to the reader?
3. Be polite

This type of letter should address what you're going to be doing in town and how, exactly, the press coverage you plan to provide can benefit the business you are approaching.

Following is a sample introductory letter requesting a complimentary room. You can take this letter and adapt it for any type of introductory letter you might need. This topic is covered in depth in chapter 24 of *The Ultimate Travel Writer's Program* or turn to Lesson #53 in *Turn Your Pictures into Cash* to learn more little-known secrets that photographers use to land free meals, vacations, and other fun perks.

Your Name
Freelance Travel Writer
123 Any Street, Anytown 60614 USA
yourname@youremail.com
123-456-7899

Mr. Doe
Manager, Boutique Hotel
123 Any Street
Anytown, SPAIN

Date

Dear Mr. Doe:

I am a freelance writer conducting research for an article on the best boutique hotels of Spain for an American audience. My piece will cover their architectural history, style, and level of comfort as well as tips for readers interested in visiting and staying in these unique and significant buildings.

I will be traveling in your area from Monday, 1 June to Sunday, 7 June. I would like to know if you might grant me a reduced press rate or perhaps a complimentary room for a night or two so that I might experience your facilities and interview you for my article.

As I've said, I plan to recommend to my upscale readers the places to stay, and I believe your boutique hotel would be of particular interest to them.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Your Name
Freelance Travel Writer

Remember, there's an unwritten rule that you must produce a written piece or publish photographs for publication in return for complimentary stays at hotels and other freebies.

The deal is that your article and photos will bring your sponsoring organization business. So, although you are not legally obliged to write an article after you accept a comp, you really should...and do everything you can to get it published. In other words, hold up your end of the bargain.

Instant Credibility, Credentials and Confidence

One parting tip that can help any newbie travel writer and photographer gain instant credibility. Press credentials.

In some places, having ‘press credentials’ can—quite literally—open doors for you. What, exactly, are press credentials? And how you get them?

Press credentials are what newspaper reporters carry around—the ID tag that gets them past the police line at a crime scene so they can report on the event.

As a freelance travel writer or photographer, you won’t be employed full-time by any publication that automatically issues its reporters a ‘Press Pass.’ But that doesn’t mean you, too, can’t benefit from ‘credentials’ that can help you gain access to a new museum exhibit or get better seats at a festival.

For freelancer like you, especially when you’re just starting out, the best way to get credentials is to join an organization of like-minded individuals—in your case, travel writers and photographers. And it’s here that I’d like to tell you about an organization run by AWAI’s Travel Division called The International Travel Writers & Photographers Alliance.

It’s a membership you’d find useful as you establish yourself—the next step, as it were, in ‘looking and feeling’ like a professional. For full details please visit:

<http://www.thetravelwriterslife.com/itj/vipperks>

<http://www.thephotographerslife.com/itp/vipperks>

In closing, I’d like to leave you with a selection of resources to help you get started with your first assignment. If you decide to contact any of these resources or any that you find on your own, be sure to reread the tips I gave earlier in the report on how to write a strong query letter and how to write a letter of introduction that will open the doors of opportunity.

Good luck and happy travels!

APPENDIX A:

Resources: For Freelance Travel Writers and Photographers

Where to Find Press Trips and Assignments:

goTravelNews.com:

<http://www.gotravelnews.com/>

Here, you'll find real, hot leads about press trips and tours that are happening only weeks from now. As of this writing, there's a Press trip: Digging for Dinos — a dinosaur trail press trip that's happening this June 20–26 in Montana USA. Here's another press trip: Experience the historic High Hampton Inn in the mountains of Cashiers, NC. May 21-24, August 27-30 and again in September 24-27.

This site is continually updated and it's full of free listings and explanation of press trips. Some requirements may apply for certain destinations such as already having an assignment. But this site also lists date requirements as well as an itinerary and contact information.

Media Kitty:

<http://www.mediakitty.com/>

As a travel writer or photographer, you can gain news and story ideas, access media trips, discover jobs and assignments, research stories, raise your professional profile, and meet exceptional tourism contacts worldwide on this site.

Travelwriter Marketletter (TM):

www.travelwriterml.com

Travelwriter Marketletter (TM) is an award-winning monthly newsletter of current market information, news, and tips for travel writers and photographers. It tells you about markets, pay scales, editors, specs and informs you about trips.

Society of American Travel Writers (SATW) (for photographers too!):

<http://www.satw.org/>

Society of American Travel Writers is an organization whose purpose is to “promote responsible journalism; provide professional support and development for our members, and to encourage the conservation and preservation of travel resources worldwide.”

Their members include writers, photographers, editors, electronic media and journalists, film lecturers, broadcast/video/film producers and public relations representatives.

There is a fee of \$130/year but you can join their mailing list for free at listadmin@listsatw.org

For Travel Writers Only:

American Society of Journalists and Authors (ASJA):

<http://www.asja.org>

The American Society of Journalists and Authors helps professional freelance writers advance their writing careers. Members share candid data on writing rates, publishing contracts, editors, agents and more. Non-members benefit from their Contracts Watch newsletter, annual writers conference and writing resources.

They post press trips and you can join the association for a one time \$100 fee. You can also sign up for their newsletter for free. “Membership in ASJA serves as proof to editors, agents and fellow writers that you are a seasoned professional nonfiction writer.”

Travelwriters.com:

<http://www.travelwriters.com>

With a community of 10,000+ professional travel writers, Travelwriters.com is based on a simple principle: to connect top-tier travel writers with editors, PR agencies,

tourism professionals, CVBs and tour operators, nurturing the important link that so heavily influences the travel media.

For just \$49/year, you'll gain access to PR agencies looking for writers and who are sponsoring press trips. There is also a specific section on upcoming press trips and they will provide you with contact information if you are interested in a particular destination.

For Photographers Only:

Build Relationships with Tourist Boards and Chambers of Commerce:

Turn to lesson #38 in *Turn Your Pictures into Cash* to learn how to build relationships with tourist boards and chambers of commerce. Doing so, will land you all kinds of perks, freebies and an entrée to the publishing world.

Book Your Own Tours and Adventures:

Wildland Adventures

www.wildland.com

Here you can book tours or vacations anywhere from Alaska to Panama, to Morocco. The purpose can be anything from family fun or a second Honeymoon.

They are known for there 'active' adventures that cater to 'inquisitive travelers'. You can sign up free for press trip announcements, and media information is readily available. They have been featured in such publications as Consumer Digest, Outside Magazine, and Conde Nast Traveler to name a few.

Get Connected with Public Relations Firms:

All About Public Relations:

<http://aboutpublicrelations.net/index.htm>

This site gives very useful information on how to combine articles with photos, how to take better photos, what is a good media kit, and what type of agencies to contact for specific stories. This site is a resource that can connect you with domestic and international Public Relations firms.

Get Connected with Tourism Boards:

Tourism Offices Worldwide Directory:

<http://www.towd.com/>

The Tourism Offices Worldwide Directory is your guide to official tourist information sources: government tourism offices, convention and visitors bureaus, chambers of commerce, and similar organizations that provide free, accurate, and unbiased travel information to the public. Here, you can find a tourist board anywhere in the world.

You can also use the google search engine (www.google.com). Type in the destination you want to visit + tourism board. For example, you may type in:

Australia + tourism board

This will generate favorable results. In fact, I'll get you started here:

Belize Tourism:

<http://www.belize tourism.org/press.html>

This is an example of a tourist board site where information is designated for press or those associated with the press, or those interested in gaining more knowledge of Belize's tourist attractions. They have a press kit that includes specific contact information, information and statistics about the area, about tourist and the business tourism creates. Facts like these would be great to include in a query letter to an editor.

And, here are some more tourism boards to get you started...

Tourism Australia:

www.australia.com/

Scottish Tourist Board:

www.visitscotland.com/

Wales Tourist Board:

www.visitwales.com/

Ireland Tourist Board:

www.ireland.ie/

Northern Ireland Tourist Board:

www.discovernorthernireland.com/

Belgium Tourist Board:

www.visitbelgium.com/

Looking for Convention and Visitor Bureaus? Go Here:

First, what are convention and visitor bureaus? They are not-for-profit organizations charged with representing a specific destination and helping the long-term development of communities through a travel and tourism strategy. Convention and visitor bureaus are usually membership organizations bringing together businesses that rely on tourism and meetings for revenue.

For visitors, CVBs are like a key to the city. As an unbiased resource, CVBs can serve as a broker or an official point of contact for convention and meeting planners, tour operators and visitors. They assist planners with meeting preparation and encourage business travelers and visitors alike to visit local historic, cultural and recreational sites.

For example, you can find the Virginia Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau at

<http://www.vbfun.com/visitors/contact.asp>

The Virginia Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau provides assistance to working press filing stories about Virginia Beach as a travel destination. They can answer questions about tourism, arrange press passes for resort attractions, coordinate press visits and point you in the right direction to get the information you need for your Virginia Beach story.

To find more bureaus across the globe, simply go to the search engine google (www.google.com) and type in the destination you'd like to visit + Convention & Visitors Bureau. For example:

Tahiti + Convention & Visitors Bureau

Doing this, will help you pull up favorable results and leads.

Or, you can go here <http://www.iacvb.org> — a jam-packed resource about convention and visitor bureaus. Here, you can find a convention and visitor bureau worldwide.

And, here are some American Convention and Visitor's Bureaus to get you started...

Las Vegas Convention Bureau:

<http://www.lasvegas24hours.com>

San Francisco Convention & Visitors Bureau:

www.sfvisitor.org/

Greater Boston Convention & Visitors Bureau:

www.bostonusa.com/

Washington DC Convention and Visitors Association:

www.washington.org/

Seattle Convention & Visitors Bureau

www.seeseattle.org/

With any of these bureaus — don't be afraid to mention your credentials or ask who to contact on your arrival. In some cases the CVB will set up a meeting for you in advance of arrival so that when you get to your destination someone will be there to greet you and give you some orientation.

Four Faithful Sources for More Leads:

The **Google** and **Yahoo** search engines are a great way to find more resources. Just remember to use keywords such as “Convention & Visitors Bureau” ... “tour operators” and “press trips” and more. Plus, using the plus sign (+) to add in the destinations you'd like to go will help you get even better results.

When you arrive at a hotel or are booking your “complimentary” room, ask for **tour guides, PR people and other tourist services** in the area. Get their contact information. When you arrive, talk with the hotel concierge. They'll be happy to assist you.

And, don't forget the good old faithful **phone book**—whether you search through the one in a hotel room or the one online. You just never know what lead you'll find in there, especially in the ad section or yellow pages.

Once again, good luck and happy travels!