

The highs and lows

Instagram paints the life of a travel journalist to be endless press trips and freebies – but is it all it's cracked up to be? **Eleanor Howard** talks to four travel writers about the reality behind the sunset snaps

Rosalyn Wikeley
Native content editor, *Condé Nast Traveller*

What are some of the hardest things about being a travel journalist?

Travelling takes up time, and time is money as a writer. If the company that has commissioned you does not cover your expenses, then you also have to cover these, which often means you are actually losing money. Sadly, this means the quality of travel journalists is diminishing as there are only a few who can still command competitive rates.

What are your top three travel tips?

Think about why you're travelling rather than simply trying to tick a box and get that Instagram shot. Travel is a different thing to different people but, universally, it's time out of your routine to experiment and stretch your mind. The main thing I have learned is that you can be in the most mesmerising corner of the world but, if you're not with the right people, it can be tainted. If you can travel and see and feel where you're going (i.e. on a train) then opt for that. Lastly, speak to the locals and learn about their customs and mores – you'll be amazed by what you learn when you ask questions and listen.

How has the travel journalism industry changed since you first started writing?

PRs have more power on setting the tone, as does advertising. Also, travel is having to adjust to new sustainability standards, offsetting where they can.

What do you think the future holds for travel journalism?

As experience is increasingly commodified by the likes of Instagram, travel journalists need to remember the underlying reasons for travel. They must ensure that the psychological interrogation of travel persists.

Olivia Squire
Print editor-in-chief, *SUITCASE*

Where was the last place you visited for a travel piece?

My last trip was to the Original FX Mayr clinic in Austria for a piece on intermittent fasting and detoxing for our health issue. I'd never been on a full-on 'wellness' trip and it was definitely an eye-opener.

How has the travel journalism industry changed since you first started writing?

I've only been in the industry for two and a half years, but I think that even in that time sustainability and purpose have moved from more of a specialist topic into an absolutely non-negotiable part of what we do. We're all navigating what it means to travel responsibly, manage our climate impact, and retain transparency and integrity. So offering empty, glossy luxury just isn't enough anymore.



Image: Henri Cooney

Who is your favourite travel writer?

I love Olivia Laing's books. Although they're not strictly travel writing, they evoke such a sense of place and contextualise a destination within history, culture, and nature – *To the River* (which traces the path of the River Ouse in Sussex) and *The Lonely City* (loosely set in NYC) are favourites. Plus A.A. Gill, of course.

Other than reviews, what do you think travel journalism can offer readers?

I think travellers are increasingly looking for guidance on how to travel more meaningfully, sustainably, and thoughtfully, which is definitely what we try and provide.

of travel journalism

Best Press Trips

Olivia Squire: I think the ones that stand out are pilgrimaging with a Yamabushi monk in the Shonai province of Japan; a foodie weekender in the Lofoten islands; and a sustainable safari in Botswana.

Rosalyn Wikeley: In terms of the press trip that had the most impact on my life, it was on safari in Botswana where I ventured through the Okavango Delta on horseback with a team. It tested and reconfigured my human senses and was an all-round humbling and heart-racing experience.

Gemma Bowes: When I first started writing, I went to New York and stayed in a penthouse on the top floor of an amazing new hotel where Lenny Kravitz had been sleeping the week before - in the same bed!

Gemma Bowes
Freelance travel editor and writer (*The Times, The Guardian*)

Is travel writing as glamorous as it looks on Instagram?

It is when you're on one of 'those' trips. They'll whisk you around in a luxury car, give you champagne when you arrive, take you to amazing restaurants and leave gifts in your room. But that's at the luxury high-end of the spectrum and not all travel journalists are covering those kinds of brands. You're living that lifestyle while you're there, but then when you get home you're only getting paid £300 to write 1,000 words. It is a badly paid profession and I think most travel journalists struggle to make a career out of doing it full-time.

How has the travel journalism industry changed since you first started writing?

It's hard now because it feels saturated. It can be difficult to find those lesser-known places or special hotels because people are Instagramming everything they find. It used to feel a bit more like we were the experts discovering things and revealing them to people but now the travellers are doing it themselves.

What is the hardest thing about being a travel writer?

It's stressful being a travel freelancer especially when you have a family or other commitments. You're away all the time, the money isn't great, it feels very unreliable and risky. All the papers I've worked at are laying people off constantly and having budget cuts so there is a lot of uncertainty.

What do you think the future holds for travel journalism?

It feels like now we are much more focused towards practical tips and lists about holidays. That has its place but I hope there will always be more lyrical, poetic travel pieces that people want to spend time reading. In some ways, there are more opportunities now than ever before because a lot of commercial companies and websites have their own magazines and editorial content.

Joanna Booth
Freelance travel writer (*The Daily Telegraph, Guardian, The Sunday Times Travel Magazine*)

How has the conversation around sustainability affected your work?

I would like my travel to be more sustainable in all the obvious ways like going to one place for longer, but so far that hasn't been possible as my son is only three years old and I can't leave him for longer than a week. The truth is I haven't made huge changes, but I feel increasingly guilty about it. Flights are a huge part of the environmental problem with travel. Carbon offsetting (reducing carbon dioxide or other greenhouse gases in order to compensate for emissions made elsewhere) is a bit of a fraught issue. I don't carbon offset every single flight I go on; mainly because travel journalists aren't particularly well-paid and I do quite a lot of flying.

However, I would say there is an incredible benefit that travel can bring. It's thinking about how you travel: do you stay in locally-owned hotels? Do you eat in family-owned restaurants? Do you choose to use carbon transport? All these things have a huge knock-on effect. You can make sure your money is going to communities rather than massive multi-national companies.

What are your top three travel tips?

When looking for a restaurant, always go one street back from wherever the main attraction is. If it's by the river, the views will be amazing but the food will be a bit crap. If you go one street back it will probably be much better.

Always learn 'thank you' in the language of the country you're visiting. I am not fluent in anything other than English, but if you learn thank you and smile a lot that will make such a big difference.

Think differently – if you want to go somewhere that's overcrowded and on the tourist trail, go out of season. If you want a specific type of holiday rather than a specific place, go somewhere less well known. Tourism is a genuine problem on a macro level. It's ruining certain destinations and it's a problem for communities. ●

Worst Press Trips

Olivia Squire: Because we pick and choose so carefully, I can't say I've had a real nightmare with a trip – normally it's things we can't control, like the weather, natural disasters or illness, that make things stressful, as opposed to bad organisation or the destination itself.

Rosalyn Wikeley: I reviewed a rental property in Rome which was on the wrong side of town and didn't feel clean. I had taken a plus one and felt disappointed but it certainly didn't ruin our trip.

Gemma Bowes: I went on a trip once where one of the activities was a trip to a stud farm to see how horses are artificially inseminated. It's not always glamorous.