

# Taking the road less traveled

A nontraditional 'travel writer' discovers butterflies  
and much more off the beaten track

**T**OO MANY TRAVEL WRITERS are settling for second-best when it comes to selling their stories and earning good money. These are folks who love to travel and have the skills to write about it. But their concept of travel writing is limited to traditional travel articles that describe where to stay and what to see. And their target markets are limited to traditional travel magazines and newspaper travel sections. As a result, they're missing out on a lot of potential sales.

Instead, I take a two-pronged approach to travel writing. Sure, I write the occasional typical travel story. But I also use travel as a springboard for a wide variety of other kinds of articles—selling travel-based stories to magazines ranging from *American Profile* and *Preservation* to *Working Mother*.

Most travel writers focus on finding those hotels and hot spots that lure readers to a particular locale. The resulting articles, what I call "traditional" travel pieces, describe "10 Great Things to Do in Cleveland" or "San Antonio—On \$20 a Day!" complete with a sidebar of driving

directions and local prices. Don't get me wrong: Such articles are still the meat-and-potatoes of travel writing. But should you stop there?

Instead of seeing the world only as a travel writer, I try to experience new places and new people as a writer who travels. Hundreds of publications are looking for business profiles, human-interest stories, real-life dramas, basic service pieces. As writers

who travel, we are in a great position to find these kinds of stories. We just have to look.

During a driving trip to explore downtown Detroit, for example, I realized that green

spaces in the city seemed to be increasing. Previously, I equated Detroit's central city with glass-strewn vacant lots and boarded-up buildings; the presence of so many trees and parks surprised me. I got curious.

Back home, I did some research and learned that Detroit had once been known as "The City of Elms," until Dutch elm disease and urban expansion took their toll. I also learned that the green spaces I had noticed were there thanks to a volunteer organization called The Greening of Detroit, a group working to fill the city with new trees and parks. That sounded like a good story to me, and I found an editor who agreed. My story about The Greening's efforts to revitalize central-city neighborhoods and encourage community involvement in tree planting and upkeep was my first sale to *Preservation*.

## But is it really travel writing?

SOME PEOPLE MIGHT SAY such stories aren't really "travel" stories at all. I disagree. Like the best travel writing, they focus on a unique story of interest that is set in a specific locale. In addition, travel plays a key role in finding and researching these stories. Because we have been there, we can fill our queries and stories with a rich sense of place.

Consider this passage from a travel-based query of mine that sold to *Working Mother*:

Deborah Payne smiles as she mentions the comments that greeted her four children after the family opened their new ranch in the Texas Hill Country. "The first couple of weeks, they heard a lot of jokes like, 'Bet those herds are pretty hard to lasso!' and 'Isn't it kind of hard to keep them in the corral?' It didn't take too long for that to get old," she says, laughing. Of course, she should have expected it. After all, this part of the country is known for its

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cattle and horses and the occasional llama. The last thing you'd expect to find is a rancher whose herds flock and flutter. But then, the Fredericksburg Butterfly Ranch and Habitat isn't a typical Texas ranch.

Owner Deborah Payne ... urges guests to spend time relaxing in the landscaped butterfly habitat of water fountains and plant varieties that provide nectar and food for her colorful herds. She leads the curious on tours of her new 1,500-square-foot walk-through butterfly house, a temperature-controlled environment where orange-black clouds of adult Monarchs and Painted Ladies flutter past. Armed with a wealth of knowledge and a passion for her work, Deborah is like an enthusiastic park ranger who can hold the wonders of her natural world—eggs, chrysalises, caterpillars—in the palm of her hand.

I think your readers would enjoy Deborah's story. In less than two years, she has turned a fascination with butterflies into a thriving business with a growing national reputation. I'll take readers on a tour of the Fredericksburg Butterfly Ranch and Habitat and describe the curious business of butterfly ranching. But most importantly, I'll focus on the way Deborah has fully integrated her family life with her business, creating a nurturing and stimulating world for her butterflies as well as for her husband and young children.

Imagine trying to manufacture these quotes, these scenes, from a telephone conversation. It just wouldn't happen. Travel was an essential

part of the process.

Whether you're traveling on your own or as part of an organized group, you can usually take the time to step back, look where other people aren't looking, ask questions that probe a little deeper, and nail down the details that will give your article or query the individuality and freshness it needs to succeed. That means going after the traditional story while also keeping an eye out for the hidden angle.

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### Finding the hidden stories

IN NASHVILLE, TENN., I met a tour guide at the Country Music Hall of Fame (getting the traditional story) who also works as a Patsy Cline impersonator at local clubs (discovering a hidden story). I didn't pursue that angle, but I can imagine other writers spinning off stories about non-Elvis celebrity impersonators, how to take the backdoor route to a music career, and Nashville's diverse nightclub scene.

In Berkeley, Calif., I was visiting the Judah L. Magnes Museum (traditional story) when some older folks began arriving for a writing group that met upstairs. The group consisted of Jewish Holocaust survivors who were writing about their life experiences (hidden story). An inventive writer could probably come up with a dozen story angles based on this discovery—from how the arts have enabled this community to deal with great pain and loss to how to turn personal experiences into publishable memoir.

In Johnstown, Pa., I stepped into a nondescript restaurant called The Back Door and discovered a menu that included corn rings with ginger butter and Belgian chocolate mint torteleets. Finding inventive food in such an unexpected place would add an interesting element to a traditional travel story about the area. But I also discovered that the menu changes daily as the owners raid their garden for the freshest ingredients and forage for more than a dozen varieties of local mushrooms. Someday I might write about restaurants that grow their own ingredients, how to forage for tasty mushrooms yourself, or even a story on the emotional satisfaction of finding a hidden treasure (like an out-of-the-way gourmet restaurant).

It isn't hard to find stories like these and get assignments. Wherever you go, you just have to be willing to look beneath the surface, ask a lot of questions and let curiosity be your guide. #