

# *Crafting the Travel Guidebook*

*How to Write, Publish &  
Sell Your Travel Book*

**Barbara Hudgins**

*The Woodmont Press  
Liberty Corner, New Jersey*

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**Published by**  
**The Woodmont Press**  
**P.O. Box 16**  
**Liberty Corner, NJ 07938**  
**[www.woodmontpress.com](http://www.woodmontpress.com)**

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LCCN # 2007926365  
ISBN # 978-09607762-07

Manufactured in the United States of America

## About the Author

Barbara Hudgins is best known as the original author and self-publisher of *New Jersey Day Trips*. This guidebook sold over 110,000 copies in several editions before she sold the rights to Rutgers University Press. She also co-authored the 10<sup>th</sup> edition put out by that press. She was the subject of a chapter in the book, *Make Money Self-Publishing* by Suzanne Thomas, as an example of a successful regional author.

Barbara's travel column, which covers both local and foreign trips, has appeared in *The Madison Eagle*, the *Bernardsville News* and other newspapers in northern New Jersey. Her day trip articles have also been featured in *Garden State Woman* and *New Jersey, Yesterday, Today & Tomorrow*. National magazines such as *Signature*, *Woman's World* and *Foreword* have published her free-lance pieces on a variety of subjects.

The author has lived in New York, New Mexico, Hawaii and Virginia, but has made her home in New Jersey for the past 30 years. She holds a Master's degree in Library Science and has worked at the New York Public Library, Hunter College Library and the University of Hawaii. A former English major in college, she began writing music, movie and theater reviews before gravitating to travel writing. Her two children, Lani and Robert, now grown and with families of their own, helped her to research the many destinations that appear in her books and articles.

Her background and knowledge of self-publishing give her the expertise to successfully market in the publishing world. Her experience as an author for a traditional publisher, as a self-publisher and as a freelance writer, positions her as a unique expert in all of these fields.

# Table of Contents

<b>PART ONE:</b>	<b>GETTING STARTED . . . . .</b>	<b>7</b>
Chapter 1:	Introduction . . . . .	9
Chapter 2:	What's Your Concept? . . . . .	16
Chapter 3:	What's Your Category? . . . . .	25
Chapter 4:	Finding the Audience . . . . .	42
Chapter 5:	What are your Boundaries? . . . . .	56
Chapter 6:	What's your Format? . . . . .	66
Chapter 7:	Your Voice, Your Tone, Your Slant . . . . .	79
Chapter 8:	What are Your Credentials? . . . . .	87
<b>PART TWO:</b>	<b>CONSTRUCTING THE FRAMEWORK . . . . .</b>	<b>93</b>
Chapter 9:	Nailing the Details: Icons, directions, hours & prices, sidebars . . . . .	95
Chapter 10:	How Will your Chapters Flow? . . . . .	110
Chapter 11:	Front Matter: Title, subtitle, copyright page, foreword, acknowledgement, and table of contents . . . . .	117
Chapter 12:	Back Matter: The glossary, index, appendix, and other matter . . . . .	125
<b>PART THREE:</b>	<b>WORDS AND PICTURES . . . . .</b>	<b>135</b>
Chapter 13:	Travel Writing 101/ Writing Exercises . . . . .	137
Chapter 14:	What Goes In and What Stays Out . . . . .	153
Chapter 15:	Basic Research . . . . .	168
Chapter 16:	Plagiarism, Copyright Infringement and Second Hand Prose . . . . .	179
Chapter 17:	Photographs, Maps and Other Illustrations . . . . .	190
Chapter 18:	Editing and Proofing . . . . .	207

<b>PART FOUR:</b>	<b>THE PATHS TO PUBLISHING AND PROMOTION . . . . .</b>	<b>215</b>
Chapter 19:	The Paths to Publishing: Traditional publishing/ Self-Publishing/ Subsidy publishing/POD printing . . . . .	217
Chapter 20:	The Book Proposal . . . . .	239
Chapter 21:	The List of Publishers . . . . .	245
Chapter 22:	Publicity and Promotion . . . . .	262
<b>Appendix:</b>	1. Bibliography. . . . .	279
	2. Other Resources . . . . .	280
<b>Index</b>	. . . . .	283

*Part One*

*Getting Started*

## Chapter 1

# *Introduction*



So you've decided to write a travel guidebook! Perhaps you are a travel writer with a sheaf of articles about your trip to Australia and you feel you have a good enough angle to support a full book. Perhaps you're a travel editor who is fed up with the books coming across your desk since you feel none of them has really brought the reality of the place home. Or you could be an outdoor editor who notices there are more and more inquiries about mountain biking in your area but there is no guidebook on the subject.

Of course you may not be a writer at all. You might be a travel agent who became frustrated with the treatment of single parents by travel packagers. You might be the owner of a large Labrador who finds herself out in the cold on Cape Cod because there is not a motel in sight that will accommodate dogs. Maybe you're a volunteer guide on a travel website who is tired of giving away all your valuable insights and descriptions for free. If you've developed an audience, maybe there is a way to cash in on your work.

Travel books cover a wide variety authors and subjects. What first comes to mind is the traditional guidebook which features a mélange of descriptions, basic information and handy tips for the reader. But the travel category also includes the travel essay, which in the hands of an artist can become a meaningful adventure. The travel memoir is closely related to fiction: both need

narrative skills and a point of view. And then there is the vast world of the how-to-do-it guides that ignore destinations altogether to concentrate on one aspect of traveling, such as packing a suitcase or navigating around airports.

When contemplating the creation of the guidebook, the first thing one must consider is its marketability. Ask yourself this question: How many people will read my book? And the second question: Where will I find this audience? Will the audience be found in bookstores, airport gift shops, rugged-wear outfitter retailers, gourmet food shops or at online bookstores? Many guides can be found in more than one venue, since bookstores have a limited amount of space. Local guides are often found in neighborhood shops, while outdoor activity titles thrive at Outfitter stores. The Zagat Restaurant Survey got its big start when it appeared on the racks of New York newsstands.

Once you have an inkling of your audience, you then have to think in terms of boundaries and general format. How will you shape your book? How much territory will you cover? How will the chapters flow? What will you consider important enough to include and what will be tossed out. Will you include opinions and observations? Of course any non-fiction book has to be researched, and you may have the beginning of your research already on your laptop. Travel books are a combination of personal observation, interviews with others and basic research. It is the stitching together of all these elements that creates the unique work.

### **Who will publish the guidebook?**

If you are planning to send out proposals to a publisher you have a few more steps to take. For one thing, you will need to peruse a list of publishers that cover your field and there is a full list of such publishers in this book. There is no sense in submitting a proposal about kayaking in Canada to a publisher who specializes in Florida titles. Or if you are trying for certain big New York publishers, you will have to limit your search to literary agents because those publishers will not accept unsolicited manuscripts.

On the other hand, there is the possibility of self-publishing

since a large number of travel books belong in that category or started out that way before they blossomed into larger entities. Self-publishing now has a step-child in the form of POD publishers who dominate in numbers if not in quality. Today the stream of guidebooks comes from various rivulets.

## **The Accidental Travel Writer**

Despite the fact that most publishers expect you to turn cart-wheels before they will look at your endeavor, many travel guides were “birthed”, as it were, by accident. The author never set out to be a writer, but came to the field because he found a void that needed to be filled. Many of the names we now associate with big-time series were created by happenstance. Here are some stories:

**The 1930s: Duncan Hines.** Hines was a traveling salesman who criss-crossed the American hinterland as part of his job. Eating in local restaurants in many small towns was an adventure: sanitary standards were not what they are today. At the time more Americans died of restaurant food poisoning than they did from hit-and-run accidents. He began to keep a notebook of the best places he found. Since Hines’ travels took him all over the country, many other salesmen asked him recommendations. He finally decided to put all his “discoveries” into a book called *Adventures in Good Eating*.

This self-published book, after national publicity, took off and formed the basis for a publishing “empire”. His other travel books included *Lodging for a Night*, a vacation guide and a cookbook filled with recipes from the restaurants that he recommended. He eventually sold more than 2,000,000 of these volumes from his home over the next 19 years. He was so well-known that when Proctor & Gamble decided to enter the cake mix arena they purchased his name as a trade-mark. And so, although this early restaurant critic died and his titles went out-of-print, his name remains enshrined forever in the supermarket aisles.

(Thanks to Louis Hatchett author of *Duncan Hines: the Man Behind the Cake Mix* for this material).

**The 1950s: Arthur Frommer.** The Frommer series, now owned

by Wiley Publishing, seems to cover every aspect of the travel world. But this stream of books all emanated from a single self-published guide. Arthur Frommer graduated from Yale Law School but entered the army during the Korean War. However, he was posted to Europe. While there, he wrote and self-published a guidebook called *The GI's Guide to Traveling in Europe* which emphasized budget travel. It sold well, and so Frommer restructured it into a book for the layman called *Europe on \$5 a Day*. Published in 1957, it was considered revolutionary since previous guides had been aimed at the well-heeled traveler. Frommer's guide was invaluable to hordes of young Americans who visited Europe in the years when the American dollar really was almighty and could purchase incredible value.

Although Frommer practiced law back in the USA, he also continued to write and self-publish guidebooks. Destinations such as New York, Mexico, Hawaii, Japan and the Caribbean followed the original guide. In 1977, Frommer's trademark was sold to Simon & Schuster. In 2001 the series was bought by Wiley, but the author has kept a strong commitment to low-budget travel and to consumer advocacy. Still going strong, Frommer has his own radio show, a syndicated travel column and a magazine. Arthur's daughter, Pauline Frommer, now writes her own series of travel guidebooks and continues the family legacy. (Adapted from Wikipedia)

**The 1970s: Tony and Maureen Wheeler.** In 1973, a young English couple decided to record their lengthy journey across the continent from Turkey, through Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. The original book, *Across Asia on the Cheap*, was written and published in Sydney with scant money. Written with style and full of strong opinions, it sold well enough in Australia that it allowed the couple to expand it into *South-East Asia on a Shoestring*. And so the **Lonely Planet** series was born.

The early books catered to young people from Australia and Europe who followed the overland route between those two points via South-East Asia, the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East. This was becoming something of a rite of passage for young travelers and was known familiarly as the "hippie route". The new and rapidly growing market of backpackers and

a guidebook company that catered heavily to this community meant that Lonely Planet's readers developed a kinship to the company.

The books' voice has changed over the years as it has entered other markets, such as Western Europe, where more competition exists. The series now caters as much to middle-class travelers as backpackers. As of 2005, the Wheelers no longer control the operation although they still own a majority of the company, and Tony Wheeler still writes a few guidebooks himself. Multiple authors and professional mapmakers now dominate the style of the publishing house. (Adapted from Wikipedia)

**The 1980s: Rick Steves:** Steves is another example of an accidental tourist who becomes a beacon of common sense to the traveling public. Rick became enamored of traveling through Europe after his first experience as a teenager, visiting piano factories with his father. By the age of 18, he was traveling on his own, funding his trips by giving piano lessons. In 1976, he started a business called Europe Through the Back Door (ETBD) and conducted guided tours throughout the continent.

He also gave classes in traveling to Europe at a local college. For each class he created extensive itineraries, replete with notes. He soon discovered that people were stealing these itineraries! Why not flesh out the itinerary and create a book?

The first edition of his book, *Europe Through the Back Door*, was self published in 1980. His later works were put out by a small company in New Mexico. Soon there were a number of country, city and regional guides. In the 1990's Rick's PBS travel series put his guides on the map as it were, and now Rick Steves name goes above the title. In 2001, his original publisher merged into the Avalon Travel Group.

In addition to his guidebooks, Rick has also penned six phrase books and still runs his tour company which now has a staff of 60 full-time employees. He lives and works in his hometown of Edmonds, Washington and goes off every year for a long European trip. (Adapted from the website: [www.ricksteves.com](http://www.ricksteves.com))

**The 1980s: The Zagat Survey:** The Zagat Restaurant Survey entered the scene in 1979 and soon took New York by storm.

Up until that time, haughty restaurant critics from a few favored media could make or break a restaurant. The Zagat Survey was started by Tim and Nina Zagat, two Yale-educated lawyers who formed a circle of two hundred respondents to create a dining “club” in New York. The purpose of the club was to give ordinary people a chance to give their opinions on the places they liked to frequent.

At first, the survey was strictly a freebie for members of the club. Whether it was a deli, a watering hole for the famous, or a local eatery, when enough votes were tabbed up the place was rated. The rating system was devised by the Zagats. The tabulations were handed out and later collated and edited by the couple. What started out as a hobby was soon becoming too time-consuming and expensive, yet its popularity was unquestioned.

After several publishers turned down the concept, the Zagats went on to publish the small pocket-size guide themselves. At first they drove around New York personally stocking the newsstands and bookstores. After the guide hit the big-time, they hooked onto more professional distribution. One city led to another and soon there were Zagat Surveys out on all major cities. There are now guides for hotels, resorts and spas around the world plus a very active website. (Adapted from Wikipedia.)

As you can see from these stories, if you are the go-to person for voyagers off to the Andes, or if people keep stealing your list of the restaurants, or if friends ask you how you managed to drive your RV from Maine to Vancouver on a mere \$20,000 for the year, then you are ripe for transforming yourself into a travel guru and writing a book on the subject. And certainly, if the website featuring your trip around the world is garnering multiple hits and queries from strangers, that may be the catalyst for your new book.

You may not end up as the head of a publishing empire. You may not even make a full-time living from your travel guide. What you will discover is a life fulfilled by doing what you love, even if it turns out to be on a part-time basis. (Travel writers who live on royalties and magazine assignments do not reside in fancy houses. They do sometimes linger in fancy hotels but that’s because someone else is picking up the tab.) On the other

hand, plenty of people make a very decent living by creating a series or combining their guidebook writing with magazine and newspaper work.

Some neophytes think that only way to enter the field is to be accepted by the big-name series editors and ascend from writing a short piece to becoming the co-author of a book that sells 50,000 copies a year. That is one way, but it is not the only way. There are hundreds of small presses, dozens of university presses, and an untold number of self-publishers whose books line the shelves of bookstores, fill the Amazon.com “river” and can be found in gift shops, wineries, RV and sports outfitting stores and museum shops near and far.

Focusing on your travel guide means first and foremost focusing on the projected audience for that book and how you plan to entertain and inform that audience. But it also entails creating a format for your text, placing boundaries on your coverage, finding a voice that mirrors the concept and a style that shows you understand the audience for whom this book was intended.

Travel writing may be an art, but putting a travel guidebook together is a craft. And because creating the guide is only half the battle, this book will also cover the areas of publishing and promotion. Hopefully your new guidebook will become a worthy contender among the many titles on the Travel Shelf