



feel plus/Shutterstock



HOW TO  
MAKE YOUR  
**TRAVEL  
WRITING  
MORE  
INCLUSIVE**



A guide to avoiding writing  
solely from the Western gaze.

**BY MARIANA ZAPATA**



**2020 changed every aspect of how we travel, from our ability to do so to the safety measures we now take.**

As the world comes to grips with the failings of many of its systems, particularly as they pertain to marginalized communities, especially people of color, who have been disproportionately affected by the double pandemic of COVID-19 and police brutality, there is one more aspect of travel that needs to change: how we write about it.

The origins of travel writing are frequently tied to colonizers meandering around the lands they've taken, reporting on the customs of the locals, who are often portrayed as less civilized or even as "savage."

Our idea of travel today may not be all that different. Online travel groups are often filled with fantasy posts about laying on a beach while a sexy Brown person serves you drinks or pictures of White people surrounded by Black children whose lives they claimed to have changed on their two-week trip to "Africa."

Travel writers aren't responsible for the behavior of tourists, of course, but we are partly responsible for the images that

inform collective perceptions of places. The beach fantasy and the white savior complex were most likely first concocted by travel writers of yore, then sustained by travelers.

When we write for a white Western audience that we assume to be cis, heterosexual, and able-bodied, we effectively close the door to everyone else – and that's not acceptable. Here are some steps travel writers can take to ensure a wider, more inclusive lens.



Nadia Snopce/Shutterstock





### Stop and consider

Hold yourself accountable at every step of the writing process, beginning on the road.

"Make sure that the places you're exploring aren't just white-owned and operated. Instead, seek out local businesses and places of interest that are owned by members of the community...and that are inclusive of people of all abilities," says Priscilla Blossom, a queer Latina journalist specializing in travel, culture, health, and parenting.

But don't tokenize these places in your articles to earn diversity points — authors need to treat them with the same respect as they would a white-owned space.

Before pitching a story, "consider if you are the right writer for an assignment," advises Uruguayan-American travel journalist Lola Méndez, adding that writers should consider whether they should write about places they've never been to or have merely passed through.

Don't promote places or tourist practices in your content that are disrespectful or exploitative. For example, as a Colombian-American, I find it painful and infuriating to see promotions for Pablo Escobar tours that glorify a mass murderer. Would mass-shooting tours in the U.S. ever be OK? Would you want foreign tourists coming to gawk at the poorest neighborhoods in your city? I hardly think so. Grant other

## DIVERSE TRAVELERS BY THE NUMBERS

### \$109.4 billion

The travel market value for Black travelers.

### 73 million

Annual trips taken by adults with disabilities.

### \$73 billion

The amount Hispanics spend on travel.

### 6%

Percent of all air travel in the U.S. done by Asian Americans.

### 50%

Black adults interested in taking trips to places connected to their ethnic or cultural heritage.

### \$17.3 billion

Contribution to the travel industry made by adults with disabilities annually.



places the same courtesy you'd want for your own community.

### Diversify your sources

"Whose voices do you value in your trip planning and research?" asks Bani Amor, a gender-queer Ecuadorian travel writer, in the Bitch Media piece "Check Yourself Before You Wreck Someplace Else." They add that "travel guides overwhelmingly reflect those who hold the most power in this world – white folks from the West."

To combat this, Black travel blogger Kay Kingsman advises writers to diversify the media they consume. When you do this, she says, "your writing naturally becomes more inclusive."

Award-winning travel journalist La Carmina from *LaCarmina.com* uses her personal experience to inform her approach to writing. "[I] think about the broad spectrum of individuals in my life and include perspectives that they would find most helpful and meaningful," she says.

But you have to do more than follow a couple of bloggers of color and pat yourself on the back. While researching and interviewing, use local sources and experts who represent marginalized perspectives. Kingsman does this by reaching out to travel bloggers who are local to the destinations she covers on her blog, *The Awkward Traveller*, and actively smashing stereotypes and misconceptions in her content. Seeking the most authoritative voices to speak about a particular place is essential in travel writing.

### Watch your tongue

"In addition to proofreading for grammar and flow, we should look over our writing carefully and consider whether our words are thoughtful to all," says La Carmina.

## Countries are not static postcards but complex webs of intersecting histories, cultures, values, and identities.

Blossom nails the heart of the language problem as "anything that really embraces white culture but 'others' the culture of non-white [people] or anyone/anyplace deviating from the standard."

For example, American writers often use the word "exotic" to describe eating bugs, even though it's a common global practice. Yet the word is rarely used to describe unusual European dishes like calf's head. This sends a message that travel content is meant for a Western traveler.

The way we write can and often does erase and invalidate the culture, history, and experience of marginalized groups and locals. One of the best examples of this is the use of the word "discovered," both in a historical context and as a personal claim of travelers. It is often said that Western settlers discovered the giant sequoias of the Sierra Nevada in California, despite the fact that indigenous groups had known about them for centuries. Likewise, travelers don't "discover" a spot that locals have always known about, they simply become aware of it. Calling instances like this a "discovery" implies that something only matters when outsiders (usually Westerners) know and care about it. Local

knowledge and perspective is not given importance and is thus erased.

It's not enough to avoid problematic words. You can cut out all controversial words and still write a narrative that focuses on the Western gaze and treats locals as caricatures that simply provide flavor to the story. Again, treat locals with the same nuance and respect usually given to white Western communities.

### Don't glam things up

Countries are not static postcards but complex webs of intersecting histories, cultures, values, and identities. The tendency to glamorize destinations to appeal to fantasies of leisure effectively prioritizes the wants of Western travelers over the lived experiences of locals.

"Be honest about the complicated history that formed the place – colonization still impacts each and every place around the globe that was conquered by foreign forces. Don't erase that history in favor of gushing over beautiful architecture," says Méndez.

For example, many solo female travel writers tout their safe experiences in Mexico as proof that the troubles in the country have been exaggerated. This ignores the crisis of



trafficking and femicide that local women have suffered for decades.

Black travel writer Teresa Lynn Hasan-Kerr explains that while we don't want to perpetuate incorrect stereotypes about the countries that former President Trump would call "shithole countries," we also shouldn't use our limited experience in a country to gloss over its realities.

Acknowledging problems is also a way to keep readers safe, particularly travelers of color, who often experience discrimination and harassment around the world.

Before moving to Morocco, Hasan-Kerr thoroughly researched the country. None of the information she found prepared her for the anti-Blackness she faces daily. "I really wish someone had briefed me about the racial harassment [in Morocco]," she says, stating that having that information available would have been helpful to her.

Guidebooks already include disclaimers and warnings pertaining to the safety of female-presenting travelers, so extending the courtesy to travelers of color should be a given.

Inclusivity in travel writing goes well beyond the scope of writers' influence. However, we do have some say in how we present our own work, in the sources that we use, and in the nuance we add to our content. The lack of diverse editors in the industry is not an excuse to continue writing from a Western gaze. 🌍

Mariana Zapata is a Colombian-American travel, sustainability, and lifestyle writer. She has lived and worked around the world, making a home in cities like Miami, Paris, Seoul, and Bogota. You can usually find her at street food stands, judging fashion inaccuracies in period films, or falling victim to her non-existing sense of direction.

## SOURCES TO FOLLOW

### Black Travel Alliance

A group of international Black travel content creators holding the travel industry accountable on the issue of diversity.  
[blacktravelalliance.com/about](http://blacktravelalliance.com/about)

### Fat Girls Traveling

A body-positive travel community and guide.  
[fatgirlstraveling.wordpress.com](http://fatgirlstraveling.wordpress.com)

### Conscious Style Guide

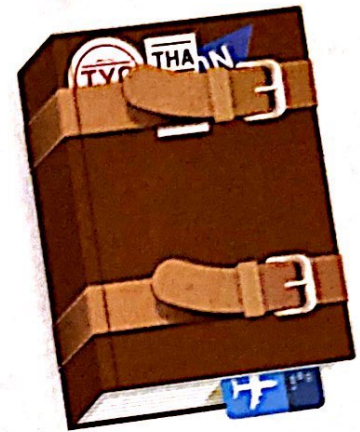
A guide and newsletter covering linguistic style choices pertaining to health, race, gender, and more.  
[consciousstyleguide.com](http://consciousstyleguide.com)

### Unpacking Media Bias

A newsletter full of articles, op-eds, and writing tips on how to unpack biases in our writing and the media.  
[subscribepage.com/unpackingmediabias](http://subscribepage.com/unpackingmediabias)

### Let's Go Together Podcast

A Travel + Leisure podcast that covers inclusivity and diversity in travel.  
[travelandleisure.com/lets-go-together-podcast](http://travelandleisure.com/lets-go-together-podcast)



### Impact Travel Alliance

An NGO dedicated to socially and environmentally sustainable travel.  
[impacttravelalliance.org](http://impacttravelalliance.org)

### American with Disabilities Act

Guidelines for writing about people with disabilities.  
[adata.org/factsheet/ADANN-writing](http://adata.org/factsheet/ADANN-writing)

### Anti-Oppression Toolkit, for Travel & Culture Creators

Toolkit by She's Wonderful with resources for travel content creators who are committed to inclusivity.  
[sheswonderful.com/equity-toolkit](http://sheswonderful.com/equity-toolkit)