

Fieldwork Report: The Making of Lonely Planet Guide

-On the ground research for the Encounter Guide Amsterdam, published in 2009 by Lonely Planet, and written by Zora O'Neill

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I have just stepped out of the hotel common bathroom, when a woman bumps into me. Clutches a notebook wide-open in her hands, while a black leather bag swings on her left shoulder. She zooms inquisitively around, touches the flowers arranged in a vase on the sink, and then scribbles something in the notebook. Sniffs the air several times, and dashes off again. *Are you Ana?* - she asks. *The concierge told me you were in the loo!* Zora turns her head around several times again. *Artificial flowers and a cheap distasteful room-refresher, does that make a four-starred hotel? Give me five minutes, to write this down.* On our way to the lobby, swiftly peeks behind the long opaque curtain, and stares at the only couple having breakfast in the restaurant. Then sits on the sofa and writes something down again, before raising her head towards me: *Can we go up in your room? I want to inspect the room! I'll take advantage of the fact that you're staying here, and add an extra hotel to the listings!*

Zora casts a long glance at the elevator buttons, and then scribbles. We arrive. I open the door, she enters first. Hardly have I set foot in the room before she exclaims: *Oh, look at this disgusting stain on the carpet!* In a short while she bursts out again: *Look! Look! There's another stain on the cover blanket!* I spent two hours in the room resting, and didn't notice the stains she's referring to, but once she's pointed them out, they seem inexcusable. Zora sits in the armchair, cuddles the upholstery, bounces several times. Then she moves on to the bed, touches the bedding, and seems to smell it.

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After a while, she directs herself towards the bathroom, where she unhooks the shower and lets the water run: *This is a rain shower. No good water pressure. And the water doesn't get really hot.* She rolls her eyes, and murmurs: *Let me know tomorrow morning whether the bathroom gets flooded. I bet it does!* Pauses for a moment, fixes the shelf above the sink with a gaze, and smiles: *When you've tried the toiletries let me know how you like them? O.K?* Stays another while in the bathroom, and then asks: *Can you really sit on the toilet without having to tuck your knees under the sink? Not really, unless you're a dwarf! And, no fluffy towels either. How much do you pay by the way?* Writes this down and concludes: *I know it is really difficult to find a decent place to stay in this time of the year. You don't really get value for your money.*

She suggests taking the stairs instead of the elevator. Along the way, she pauses briefly to look at the paintings. *Well, I'm not impressed! These paintings seem to have been done by some second-rate artist. But this is Amsterdam, and a hotel like this can jack up the prices. But I think I'm going to include it in the guidebook, anyway. It would be a pity otherwise. I've checked everything, and cannot afford to miss out on it, now. At least, I can vouch for this hotel.*

We stop for a moment in the lobby. Zora seems hesitant because she doesn't have any specific plan for the day. It's early in the morning, and she eventually decides we need a breakfast, something light. Unzips her bag and pulls out a guidebook. Then she leafs through it, trying to find a place for breakfast. *I have been so many times in this bar* (points her finger at the bar's name in the guidebook), *and I continue to go almost every day I'm here. I always say I should change bars and check out something else, so that I get more bang for my buck, as we say in the States. But this is an excellent one, I can't resist it. I assure you.* How could I not trust a guidebook writer?! Yet, I understand that if she'd chosen another bar that she hadn't been to, then she would have accrued new experience. And then she could have written about a new place with more authority.

It starts raining. Zora pulls out an umbrella. We take the bicycles (she's procured one for me). On our way, a couple with a small kid asks us for directions. She looks at the map, but cannot pinpoint the street they're looking for. We part. She seems a tad troubled. Then she sees something, runs back towards the couple and tells them she has just found their street. *This is why the map is really really important in a guidebook. I have*

truly a difficult time putting together a good map. I love giving advice. I am passionate about giving advice. In 2000, as soon as I graduated from college, I came to Amsterdam. I was working in a bar. I was making sandwiches and giving tourist-type information. I was new in town, but the job is a job. I was dispensing travel tips all the time, something like “go to that bar” or “take that bike tour” or “that’s a nice restaurant”. And since then, giving advice comes so naturally to me. I feel compelled to give advice when people ask me or even when they don’t. Then I became a travel writer. What you do as a travel writer is give advice and I’m giving advice all the time.

By now it’s pouring with rain. We’re soaked from head to toe. Zora considers stopping off at some random place. As we pass by a bar, she hesitates for a moment. I hope we are finally going in. But she is adamant: *This bar is totally uninspiring. No, I won’t lower my criteria. This is not a good bar. Let’s go a bit further. Our bar is somewhere here. But I was here two years ago and I can’t remember exactly every street, and by the way it is a maze here.* I somehow manage to ask what’s wrong with the bar we’ve just passed and, for that matter, with another half a dozen along the way. *It has neither a fancy aura, nor a cosy feeling. It is just ordinary – Zora replies.*

We continue. After another five minutes roaming we find *the ‘bar’*. It’s overcrowded. We manage to get a small table near the window overlooking the canal. She orders a goat cheese sandwich and a juice. It’s her favourite. She assures me that ‘goat cheese sandwich’ is going to definitely earn a write-up in the guide.

I ask about her life as a travel guidebook writer. And Zora rattles off in reply: *I’m a stereotypical travel writer - lucky enough to marry a rich man!* We both burst into laughter. And she adds: *A man that has a steady income, at least!*

I have a degree in Arab literature. I was a graduate student in Bloomington, Indiana. One of these towns where nobody wants to go. It was so boring I got my MA and then moved to New York. I love New York. I live there with my husband Peter, who is a professor in criminal justice. We live in a zone called Queens in a big house. Well, it’s my husband who has the mortgage because he has a steady income. He gets his salary every two weeks, and that’s great, we can count on that. If I was alone I would never have got a mortgage on such a big house. As a freelancer the catch is always money management. One should be always on the lookout: who

owes you what, where, when. You have 100 dollars here, 40 pounds there, 68 euros on the other side of the ocean. One must keep track of all that. And payments are delayed. Oh, that's a nightmare. I feel more secure with Peter. Before it was so much stress – infrequent pay and so little. Peter thinks my job is great, but he dislikes the fact that I'm away for so long and that we can never go on holiday together. For example Lara and Terry [she mentions them because Lara confided that she had talked to me] they travel together and they travel a lot. That's different; that is a win-win situation. What they do they do together, and travel together so they can be more dedicated to writing. That's why they earn a lot and are successful. I worked lately with my friend on a cookbook, and that is where I will continue once I stop working on guidebooks. Travel guidebooks are a slog, and after a while they become a grind.

May I deduce from what you've said that you draw a stark line between work and holiday. Do you manage? Is it possible?

Zora knits eyebrows and replies briskly: That line is difficult to manage. That is travel writing, desirable and a bit appalling. I have a love-hate relationship with it. Sometimes my husband will say let's go somewhere for 'just a vacation'... But, I write the stories in my head anyway, take pictures, judge meals, think of my next blog post, a possible new guide maybe... So what's the difference really?

Pauses. Thinks intensely for a moment or two. And then resumes:

Take this gig for example. I accepted it mainly because my in-laws live here. They have a big house and I'm welcome to stay as long as I like. That contributes a lot to my budget. Lonely Planet pays a flat fee. I got a lump sum of US\$14000 or this one. From this pot, I need to cover all my expenses. What remains is my take-home pay. I paid almost \$2,000 for my flight. I expect to spend another \$1,000-1,500 for daily stuff. Imagine if I needed to pay another \$3,000 for accommodation. Factor in pensions, taxes, health insurance, and I am left with nothing. The net pay per month is actually below the American poverty-line. But then, I get to see wonderful theatre pieces, sample delicious cuisine, listen to concerts, go to exhibitions, attend language classes. My husband is flying over. So we'll spend a month together here. Have fun and enjoy the city. I hope to see most of the restaurants then, and bars as well. To kill two pigeons with one stone, you may say. But I know also that my husband will slow down the pace of my work. But I can't do anything about that. Eventually I hope to pitch some magazine editors, and knock out an editorial piece about Amsterdam. That

is how I leverage the expertise and get a string of magazine or newspaper gigs. Once you have Lonely Planet on your CV, nothing is impossible.

You say having fun, enjoy the city. That makes a travel writing job extremely attractive, doesn't it? Is travel writing really a good job?

(Laughs) A dream job? Maybe! A fun job? Most probably not. It is sexy and a lot of people think it's so sexy that they can get laid anytime and everywhere. As you may already know, there are plenty of people who want to do my job for free. I respect them. I don't deride them. But I must be better than all of them, in order to convince the editors to keep me on their roster. Guidebook writers get paid peanuts anyway. But I also try to do as good work as possible, anyway. And there are always those small ethical puzzles that loom large. Even though you're going to spend all your pay on the trip and research expenses, there's no way you can visit all the places you're supposed to write about. Am I going to write about that expensive diving school I never had enough money to afford? Am I really competent to review a golf course? At the beginning I used to feel miserable every time I failed to see something. After ten years in the guidebook writing business I've had to tell myself: "OK, I don't have to pick the best thing after surveying all the options – I just have to be sure that my recommendations are genuinely good. I must be intimately sure that I have done the best job possible on time and within budget". And then get the hell out of whatever place, all the while having this horrible feeling that I've missed the most amazing thing, or that the most amazing thing was just around the corner I decided not to turn. In all these years slogging round the world, I've learnt to put profit aside, make my life on the road as pleasurable as possible, and convince myself that I've done a solid job.

It is time for us to move. Zora opens up the guidebook again, and unfolds the map. I can now see her name emblazoned on the book. It is a Moon Handbook to Amsterdam. *I wrote it for Avalon Publications almost four years ago. They paid a flat fee and I signed away copyright. I use it as a reference work now. I can't possibly use my own words, because they are effectively not mine. That is a pity. But it was this guidebook that earned me a gig for Lonely Planet. This time is different though. The preferred audience is somehow different, and the choices are different as well.*

Can you be more precise? What is different? When you write do you write with your audience in mind?

Not only with my audience in mind, but also with my editors in heart. As a writer in the "Encounter series" I need to follow strictly the editorial brief. This editorial brief describes my audience. I need to cater to an audience that is youngish, accultured, smart, that lives in a big metropolis, is probably childless, and can afford to spend a day or two, or a long weekend, somewhere nearby, and not be particularly bothered with the prices. That is basically an audience that would spend a few dollars on a guidebook, to assure it doesn't miss out on the most chic and cool places so it can boast heavily about it all when home. That is something that my brief obliges me to do. And the editor told me because short trips are usually booked on-line, I need not waste time on hotels. Yet, for a picky audience, I need to be choosy and recommend some funky, cool places to stay and things to do. Plus, I have been told by the editor that they need something quirky and design-oriented for this edition. That is interesting for me. I'll include several art galleries, some trendy thrift shops and the like. When the book is short one must feel strongly about what one writes. I look for not-so-touristy places and I follow my gut feelings. I feel responsibility for my readers. I include places with a story. I look for the angle. That very twist I can spin to a story. Something like when the bar has opened, something about the first owner...it is stupid to have only an ordinary review. If you have an accompanying story then one can read and enjoy it, but maybe not visit the place. I want to write an interesting read, that someone will enjoy even though she fails to go inside. Plus, I have a global audience in mind and at heart. You cannot just dash off slang or dialect, so someone from say Australia will be turned off. Global audience is a challenge but a sweet one. It is like trying to satisfy the tastes of the whole world!

Zora opens up her bag again, and pulls out yet another guidebook this time a *Lonely Planet* one. *This is Lonely Planet last year's city guide to Amsterdam. It is from another series, the regular, big-format guide. It is bigger, and caters to a wider audience, and it's more comprehensive, than the Encounter guide. Encounter guides are more like pocket guides, packed with info – something like "see more for less". I can use any words, any ideas, any write-up I like, because it is also work-for-hire. But it's more update than mine from 2002, so I use it. I think my colleague who did it has done a really good job. And look here* (she points at her notebook where she had cut and pasted, glued snippets from yet another guide), *this is a different guide, and I use it as a basis for the new one. It is a direct predecessor, an earlier format and series, called Best of Amsterdam. To be fair to the authors of that guide, they might've gotten a brief to write a slightly less hip and cool guide. But it is well, obvious to me, that they very not that much familiar to the place well. I have much more to work with it, if it is be usable for me. Only now do I realize that her notebook isn't an every-day notebook. She has made a custom-made working-copy guidebook where she has copied the previous edition on Amsterdam and*

left blank every right hand page where she can edit what she's written or write new stuff.

You say 'good job', but what is a 'good job' really? How do you know what's 'good work'? Or in other words, what constitutes a 'good job' or good work in general?

Well, for example, this author is reasonable and balanced. I can feel his presence, he has been there. He knows what he's talking about. And he writes succinctly. He has got the details right. I also can feel he knows the pulse of the place. It's a lot more easier to work in the footsteps of someone who has already done a good job. Good work is when you put yourself in your readers' moccasins, and try to imagine what they would like to do, and say. When one is passionate about the job, nothing is impossible. But why be coy? I must admit that if travel guide writing is done well and conscientiously, it is a really hard job to do for more than a few years. We joke that no travel writer lasts for more than 7 years. It takes the stamina of a goat, and a lot of charm to dig the most arcane information out of talkative concierges. I didn't have the chance to write more than 45 words on any given subject in about five years; that is why, maybe, I began to write a blog. No one really writes or publish a review of a guidebook, or accords it any other kind of acclaim. I simply thrive on random e-mails from readers and feedback from editors. I take pride in writing efficiently within editorial formulas and with my audience in mind. I want to merge seamlessly into the background, listen to the city sounds and sort of touch the place. I have a nose for quirky places. A good writer must be able to follow her nose and discover the place instinctively.

Zora insists on paying. As she does so, she strikes a conversation with the waitress, who obviously remembers her from before. They talk about local musicians, and Zora lauds the goat sandwich. *There is live music every Thursday evening from the end of June. I didn't know. I'm going to add this in the write-up. My secret weapon is to talk to as much people as possible. They supply the freshest info ever. I try to maintain a local network of informants; they keep me up-to-date, and they are fantastic insider connections. I can call them up anytime and ask random questions. Hotel owners top the list of informants. They are opinionated and knowledgeable about a place, but they won't volunteer info unless I chat them up with a beer in the hotel bar. Then they are more likely to send e-mails when something important changes. I don't have very much invested in Amsterdam since this is work-for-hire, and the company doesn't give you first crack at doing the job second time. I don't get updates from hotel owners, as I do for Santa Fe (for Moon) or Mexico (for Rough Guides),*

which are both for Rough Guides and pay royalties. I must be honest, in all these years of work, I haven't seen any royalty pay-check, but at least there is a promise of one one day.

Zora wants we visit several bars in the area. She doesn't plan on our staying for a drink at any of them, though; she just plans to inspect them. We whizz along in front of several bars in a radius of 2-3 kilometers. She stops, peeks through the window, grabs a copy of the menu, sometimes takes a photo of the menu, collects all the brochures that come her way, but more often than not talks to random customers. People in bars look askance when they notice us lurking through the windows. *I don't feel embarrassed. It's part of my job.* She somehow knows how to detect tourists, not locals. Approaches them unobtrusively, and enquires about their experiences of the food, the atmosphere, the ambience, the staff. It has stopped raining. The sun is barely out, but the outdoor café terraces are full. We pass in front of what Zora thinks is 'a very chic bar' and, according to the menu appended on the tree, a very expensive one. *Hi, how are you? Do you like that dish? We were wondering whether to have dinner here later today. Would you recommend it?... Oh that looks delicious! What are you having? Is the salad as fresh as it looks?* Zora approaches an American couple having lunch on the terrace. Writes down what they say, thanks them, and moves on. In a matter of two hours we inspected ten bars.

According to Zora, the early afternoon *the midday gap*, until around 3 pm, is the perfect time to visit hotels, because the crazy rush of the morning, with people checking in, is over. Late in the afternoon everyone is tired, so, that is not an option, either. That is why Zora wants to see at least a couple of boutique hotels in the area now. We enter one, a big ritzy place. She actually sneaks in *incognito*. We take the stairs to the third floor, where by chance a chambermaid has left the door wide open after cleaning a room. Zora sneaks in unnoticed, and hurriedly scribbles in the notebook. *I'm certainly not paid enough to stay in these hotels. I've become very judicious, so staying in a hotel is about the only way to evaluate it and review it. Now I don't know whether there is mould under the windows, or the owner is homophobic. I become picky, yes, but if I don't ask for freebies there's no way for me to visit a place like this. Now, I definitely don't take freebies when I'm on the job for LP. Some people say that LP's freebie policy is somewhat ambiguous. I don't agree that LP should be righteous about their policy because it's not written well, I still don't take freebies, because I know that's the essence of what they want. The problem is that on paper, LP and RG (Rough Guides) have the exact same policy. In practice, LP is no-freebies, and RG allows them. But LP acts as though their policy makes them better—even though it's written the same. The crux is the "in*

exchange for" part. The "loophole" is that I could take a freebie and still technically be in compliance with LP's policy so long as I didn't promise the hotel anything "in exchange". That is at least how some people interpret the policy, and LP insists this is a wrong interpretation. But for some reason refuses to amend its policy to just say "Our authors do not take freebies," full stop, which would clear the whole thing up. But of course this is exactly what I do when I do take a free hotel night when I'm working for RG. My letters to hotels always say "While I can't promise a positive review, staying at your hotel overnight would give me a better appreciation of your services and facilities" or something like that. It's really a separate issue of whether a freebie automatically makes me want to write a glowing review. Obviously LP thinks free stuff makes authors lose their critical judgment instantly, so that's why they have their no-freebies policy (even though they phrase it ambiguously). On the other hand, RG's policy (yes, which happens to be written the same way) assumes that you can take a freebie, then judge whether a place is good or bad, and that's fine as long as you haven't promised the hotel anything.

What is your own attitude to freebies? How do you manage them?

When I started to work, I used to get freebies. The idea of getting something for free appeals a lot. A lot of people are in this for the freebies. But with time I realised that it causes too much hassle. If you reveal your identity as a writer then you have all the PR people sneaking their noses into your work. As soon as they see you, they run after you. Sometimes even stalk you. Conversation with people excited about my job is endless and that sucks up time. It's basically a time loss. In the end it's usually the good hotels that let you stay for free. They know they're good and that is that. The problem is with the average ones. They are the ones who don't let you do your job. They consider it an advertisement and PR people are always there. You then have to lie to them about how fabulous the place is when it's not, and then, hideously, fail to include it in the guide. I am not beholden to people that offer freebie. It is my expert judgement that matters in the end. I trust my craft.

Right after this, we head for another glitzy boutique hotel. She asks staff to take us on a tour of the hotel. They readily accept. A light smile hovers over Zora's face as she looks around what seems to be an immaculately clean and tastily furnished room. In the bathroom, to Zora's and my own surprise, we come across a big fat cockroach in the bathtub, which against the white background seemed ever larger. Aghast, Zora scribbles something down again. The receptionist with us makes profuse

apologies, with excuses that cockroaches are common in a wet city like Amsterdam, which is crisscrossed by myriads of channels.

We are out, ready to pound the pavement again. Zora turns to me, brimming with energy. *Here is one conundrum. Should I mention the creepy-crawly or turn a blind eye? Will I pump up a small glitch if persist on paying attention to it. If a small malfunction becomes exaggerated, so much so that it defines a total hotel experience, that's unprofessional. I think all writers know this. Is this bug worth paying attention to in the write-up? No! This hotel seems so well-run that one isolated bug becomes an accident, rather than a standard. Once also in Mexico, I noticed a stain on a fluffy towel in a German-run five star resort. Well, maybe the laundry man had a daydreaming moment, maybe the ironing man just happen not to look carefully on that side. In a superbly run hotel, those accidents are more a matter of refinement than something really calamitous. If I am actually so stubborn to write about, even think about, the smallest random accidents, I would just unhappily equate myself to any other Trip Advisor or Wikitravel hopeful that dashes off hyperbolic and naive reviews, a bit nasty, and scare off that 'the cockroaches will eat your ass off'.*

Have you at other times been faced with what we may call 'ethical dilemmas', or as you called them, 'conundrums', such this one? Or should I say situations where you need to defend your professionalism?

All the time. And we all (writers) are faced with that all the time. I remember someone telling me that they approached him when the BBC, now the owner of Lonely Planet, decided to revive an old series of bike guides. The instructions were in fact instructions about driving, not biking. It takes so much time for the writer to bike and therefore it's expensive for the company, so they ironically asked writers to write about biking while driving. He declined because it was so ethically corrupt.

Zora decides it is time now for a serious write-up and invites me to her place. En route to her in-law's apartment, she confides that Andrew (brother of Peter, her husband) owns 'a very funky' theatre where expats work. This represents another ethical dilemma for her. *I have a conflict of interests here. Andrew owns this theatre, which is really famous and dovetails perfectly with the scope of the book. As a writer, I don't have doubts about whether to include it in my guidebook. Yet as a professional, I feel somehow uneasy about it. My editor doesn't know, but she could easily find out that he's my relative. I'm supposed to include interviews with some locals in this guide. Andrew would be perfect for that; after all, he's been*

living here for 11 years. Let's see what happens. If I can't interview him, Andrew can recommend some of his friends here.

We arrive at her place, an old house in the very heart of Amsterdam. Zora's apartment is small, but with all the things necessary to live on while on holiday, plus wireless internet. She turns on her laptop. All the guidebooks that *Lonely Planet* has published on Amsterdam in the last several years are stashed on the big table. Zora pulls out the notebook.

I must do the listings now. I use the previous edition, take the listings: that is where what we call 'points of interest', like bars, restaurants and hotels, are listed. It's something I have to double-check. I should combine all these guidebooks into one. And now what I'm doing is sort of a mosaic job, recombining all the information from the previous editions into a new book. The problem is how to blend together all that clamour. I need to bring the content into a productive dialogue.

She takes the Moon Handbook to Amsterdam that she penned for Avalon in 2002. Slowly opens it and with a wistful tone explains: *Right now, I'm in an awful situation. I've written a whole guidebook to Amsterdam, but for another publisher. I must have made a confused face, because she promptly adds. For example take this, [she reads a bar review] it's such a nice turn of the phrase. So colourful, and a right-to-the-point description. I'm so tempted to reuse that phrase. But...it is mine, and not mine at the same time. I have written it, but I do not have the copyright. That is why one shouldn't work on the same guidebook all over again. Especially if you're pleased with your work.*

She sits down and prepares to work. She puts all the guidebooks she has around her. Turns the computer on. *I am feeling the burnout even in this first week of research. My head is filled with addresses and URLs and random mental notes I have yet to commit anything to paper because I've been biking whole day. I feel the time pressure. Being late in LP creates a black spot – a stain. You can be a bad writer, but being late means that you aren't going to be hired any time soon. Hence, people might do a crappy job to avoid being late and to catch up.*

I sit besides her, so I can look at the screen. She opens an Excel file, where a grid appears. Zora needs to key in the content in a square that does not allow more than the pre-set number of words per item. *LP loves spreadsheets. Most of the background documents they send are in Excel. I*

spend most of my time figuring out how that works, why some cells are bigger than others, and so on. I must follow the pattern they give me. How many words I am supposed to use for a hotel review, or for that neighbourhood. I should write here the photos the photographer is to take of different buildings, monuments. But, that is usually a mess. I don't know why they don't send us both at the same time to do the work. And I should add the premises on a map here in Acrobat professional. LP uses an incredible number of abbreviations. It took me forever to learn them. For example they say POI for Point of Interest referring to the process of updating info –like the names of hotels, addresses, telephone numbers. They have tons of these abbreviations. Here's the brief. It's an important document which contains all the necessary information for the guide. It represents a sort of outline of the work I am supposed to do. I'm really grateful they did it because it says everything here and I just need to follow it. I always keep that at hand when writing. Just to make things in accordance to what they ask and expect. Actually, the more constraints I have, the better job I do. That may sound strange but it is true.

Zora proceeds to go through the contents of the previous guidebooks and prepares what she calls *listings*. She writes the names of the premises in her notebook, and then scrolls down and checks whether the contact info is still relevant. She also styles the text, in a way doubling as a typesetter. She enters separate codes for headings, body text, boxed texts and so on. She considers this part of the job to be very tedious, a kind of 'slog' or 'grunt work'. *This is the sort of a job that I was supposed to do in Puerto Rico on the beach. ... If only I could get a nap. Maybe then it might work better. I'm just about to get out my bike, and bike endlessly, rather than write this. The amount of styling and write-up is the most shocking thing in guidebook writing. All those bars seem like an endless string making up one generic bar, nothing special. How the hell am I supposed to differentiate between them in this write-up?*

What is it that comes difficult? Why are you so annoyed?

Travel guidebook writing is a very demanding style of writing because the genre itself is really demanding. First of all you have very tight and precise word-lengths; you have to learn how to express ideas very succinctly, leaving aside a lot of flowery language or descriptive excess. What is even worse, the editors at Lonely Planet have announced a crusade against clichés. And I'm sure that the readers don't purchase a guide to hear clichés either. Clichés like charming cul-de-sac, coconut palms on long pristine beaches, and you know tropical paradise or rustic cosiness must be replaced by otherwise fresh ideas. The problem is to learn where to tap for

fresh ideas and find the next fresh adjective. Yes, words can become banal, blasé and almost meaningless if overused, but how is one to talk differently about hundreds of hotels, for example, or beaches, or squares?. The other day, I had written something like "this place is a hidden gem" and the editor took it out, and went over and over again about the "way they wanted it to be". I found it exacerbating to always need to come up with a fresh perspective, or fresh turn of phrase. It's almost robotically searching for freshness.

Look now, for example, about how best to describe the restaurants and bars we visited today, and those of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. I go tasty goat sandwich, yummy olive spread, delicious lentil soup, then try mouth-watering, lip-smacking and then what. This is gruelling.

She is reviewing meticulously her notebook. I am nervous. It seems like I have missed a bar somewhere down the street, and that is giving me too much hassle now. One previous author has translated something and if it isn't correctly translated, then it might offend someone. This is something I must see with my own eyes and decide whether it's like that or not. I usually think that I'm going to do more. But at the end of the day, I am nowhere near what I have planned. However, I might return some other day or look up the information on the Internet. It's more difficult in this sense if you work in Cairo. There you have to collect all the information yourself. There are no chances of looking it up on the Net, plus people happen not to have telephone numbers. Or you face simple practicalities like the lack of a street name or the name of a shop.

Zora is overtired. Decides to postpone the write-up. I always procrastinate She plans to divide the city into manageable chunks. She is hesitant, but in the end decides to work on the Eastern Docklands area, which is not a central area and doesn't have that high a concentration of shops and cafes. This area is small; it has only three pages in the guidebook. It's so tedious to do this. I am not as systematic as I should be. She is obviously stressed out because she cannot make any plan. Obviously she's disturbed by my presence, since usually at least this part of the job she does in the privacy of her house. She asks me to leave her and suggests that we meet in an hour at my hotel.

She picks me up in an hour. When I go downstairs, she's outside talking with someone on the street. We bike to the Eastern Docklands. As we pass by different buildings she explains what they are, telling me stories about the area. As we cycle along, she tries to remember as much as

possible. From time to time she stops to write down some of the landmarks and to put them on the map. She uses the old map and guidebook as a starting point. We continue and she inquisitively looks around. *If I don't write it up immediately, I tend to forget.* It seems to me that, apart from the things already mentioned in the previously published guidebook, she only randomly and without much of a system stops to write stuff up.

Zora, do you know where we are going? Do you have something special in mind?

Not really! I've developed an inner compass of the place. I can feel the place. I've got the place at my feet. I've developed a mental sifting process. I sift through the data and rely on my taste and judgement. I don't care any more if I'm not capable of seeing everything. I just want to be sure I do the best job possible.

Zora charts out the map in the guidebook, inserting our trip. But she is not happy. *I love doing the maps. You can see here in this guidebook that the one who has been working on the guide had troubles with the maps. I can see that the authors have been checking the information on the Internet and using Google maps, probably. I'm sure that for this book I am going to have a lot of problems because of that.*

Zora stops again. We are in front of a shop. It's a strange place, with outlandish corsets in the window. *This is something. I love it when I discover something by accident. That's interesting. So bizarre, an unusual shopping item. I'm going to include this. It's something my readers would want to see. In travel guidebook writing there is no room to stretch your wings, but things like this, the choices one makes, are about the only place where I can be creative.*

Zora suggest we stop for dinner. She knows a place in the area. *This is a cosy place. There are candles on the tables, fresh flowers, and the food must be good.* She asks me to order something different, so that she can sample two dishes. We chat about unimportant things. In the meanwhile the food is served. She tastes it. *Oh good! I feel vindicated because I mentioned this place in my 2002 Moon guide when I just walked past it, but included it all the same. Now I can re-include it with clear conscience.*

Before we part she confides: *There's something strange about going and stopping. It's like being in a museum all day. I feel so tired. My profession requires, among other things, being in good physical condition. Those young authors just don't know how insane job this is. Sometimes they think this is going to be a paid holiday in a gap year before university. And sometimes it is. But when they learn the hardships they quit. If you have the free spirit of the hippy days inside you, then you might be a good writer.*

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