

The
Wow

e-newsletter

by Ken and Dahlynn McKowen

Principles

Volume 4 No. 3 March 2008

On the Road...Again!

Our apologies for a last-minute March newsletter! If you don't know this already, Dahlynn and I are seasoned travel writers, with award-winning travel books and thousands of travel articles to our credit. Travel is our main bread-and-butter, and we love sharing our many journeys and travel tips with readers.

We spent much of March in southeast Asia, gathering materials needed for developing travel stories for various publications over the next year. Matter of fact, Dahlynn has traveled over 45,000 miles in the last ten weeks, all on business. That's the equivalent of nearly going around the world twice!

And this is our topic for March—travel writing and tips on making the most of your travel time, especially if you're on a guided tour as we were in Vietnam. As with all of our travels, a lot of planning is required, and you need to be able to change those plans midstream and adjust should your schedule vary or you see an unexpected opportunity for new material.

There are benefits to taking a guided tour, especially if you're visiting a foreign land for the first time (this was my second time in Vietnam—I was there in 1969-71, toting a gun): you will see more sites in a given period of time than you can possibly see on your own, and it's often cheaper. If it's a good tour company (like ours was—Gate 1 Travel, www.gate1travel.com), you also have the benefit of a guide who will translate for you and provide more background and history than you could research in weeks. Plus, with a good guide, you get personal anecdotes that can really add punch to your stories. The downside is that while you see a lot of places, you generally don't get to linger at any of them as long as you might like; the guide has a



School children in uniform.
The red scarves identify
honor students.

P . S . 

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tight schedule to keep, so you can feel rushed and exhausted at times.

Preparing for a guided tour or going it alone is pretty much the same. Our trip started in southern Vietnam in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), then we flew halfway up the country to the coastal region of Hue, then popped down to the silk district of Hoi An, then caught a plane north to Hanoi. Dahlynn and I did research on these cities and villages long before we left the U.S. We knew the general history of each and identified questions to ask our guide. We purchased reputable travel books (i.e., the *National Geographic Traveler* series is wonderful), as well as a translation dictionary in case we needed to talk with a local in their



Worker wearing motorbike helmet, ready to head home.

language. And we planned photo opportunities and plotted our daily “extra” excursions, as travel companies usually give you time on your own at each destination.

We also made sure our equipment was ready. That included extra batteries for our still and HD video cameras, plenty of tapes for the video cam, and several memory cards for the still camera. When we travel domestically, we take our laptops to download and label photos as we go, but we travel light overseas, thus the reason for taking lots of extra memory cards and tapes. I prefer to use a video camera that takes digital tape rather than a hard drive; I can buy tapes for a few dollars each if I run out. Hard drives have limited space for a long trip and can be expensive. Dahlynn likes smaller cards (2-gig) for the still camera rather than one huge card. Should a card go bad—which has happened to us—you still have the photos on your other cards. We also made sure our remote microphones were working and had extra

batteries, and I took extra disks for our digital tape recorder.

Something else to think about regarding equipment: if you’re using rechargeable batteries or taking a laptop to a foreign country, count on their electrical outlets not fitting your plugs. In Vietnam, we encountered two different 220-volt outlet types in different parts of the country. Fortunately, we had a voltage regulator and outlet adaptors for both. And make sure that the regulator/adaptor you’re using is capable of *reducing* the voltage enough for low-voltage cameras and battery chargers, or you might burn up your equipment.

Dahlynn and I have the added benefit of working as a team. Dahlynn shot most of the still photos and gathered brochures. I shot the video and took notes. Actually, I seldom take many


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notes; it's much faster for Dahlynn to take a quick photo of signs and exhibits, or I read their text into my digital tape recorder. If you're still using one of those old analog tape recorders, you need to dump it and go digital. Digital recorders allow you the ability to index and set up separate files, which makes identifying and finding recorded segments a snap.

Another tip is to keep written logs. It makes locating video footage, audio pieces from the recorder and still images much easier once you get home. In twelve days, we shot nearly 3,000 still images (and those are the photos we kept...never mind all the photos we erased), five hours of video tape, and about six hours of notes on the tape recorder, much of it the narrated history and background stories provide by our guide. If you're wondering why we shot so many photos, it's not because we expect them all to be useable for publication. Most we use as references about how a place or the people looked and what they were doing—helping us remember the “flavor” of different places for our wordsmithing needs.

Now that we have the info, we will begin penning our story ideas. How many different stories can be written about Vietnam? Lots. For instance, John McCain is all over the news, and we visited the “Hanoi Hilton” (Hoa Lo Prison) and took tons of photos and notes. There's lots of business angles: Vietnam is rapidly changing with the influx of Chinese and American dollars and the Vietnam of today will not be the same a few years from now. Then there's the general travel bits and people features: we'll write one article then multiple submission it to hundreds of print media, just changing the lead to fit that paper's needs. And we can't forget magazine articles and selling our photos for covers and stock photography. There's even talk of a photo gallery showing, with proceeds from prints going back to nonprofit organizations that help Vietnamese communities.

For us, our business is travel...and if Dahlynn's home too long, she gets antsy and drives me nuts! If you love to travel and write, then consider a go at travel writing. To get you started, check out three e-newsletter back issues for more information: June, July and August 2006. They can be found on our website. Happy trails!  -- Ken



Cell door at the infamous “Hanoi Hilton,” the place where John McCain spent many years as a POW.

HOT STUFF! HOT STUFF!

The following Chicken Soup books need stories from you!

IMPORTANT: Please submit stories for the following titles to www.ChickenSoup.com.

High School Student's Soul: The high school years are some of the most difficult but, at the same time, some of the best. Deadline: April 30, 2008

Middle School Student's Soul: Stories focused on the middle school years. Deadline: April 30, 2008

Actively-Retired Soul: Just as the title suggests, there is no "retiring" after you retire! Most retirees are busier than ever and this book will share humorous and fun stories from those who are actively enjoying their "senior years!" Deadline: May 31, 2008

Getting In...To College: There are over three million high school seniors who graduate each year and more than half of them apply to college. There are many books that tell you *how* to get into college, but this book will be different; it will provide emotional support to both students and their parents. Deadline: June 30, 2008



Writer's Digest

77th Annual Writing Competition

Deadline: May 15, 2008

Per WD's website posting, "...there will be 1,001 winners and more than \$30,000 in cash and prizes. Top winners will be listed in the December 2008 issue of *Writer's Digest*." The Grand Prize winner will receive \$3,000 and a trip to NYC to meet with editors and publishers.

With ten great categories to choose from, what are you waiting for?
Go to www.writersdigest.com/contests to learn more.

Go for it! Get published! 