

Rough Planet

*The deep, dark downsides of travel writing - your guide to the worst things about the best job in the world, by Tom Bohemia*

<http://roughplanet.blogspot.com/>

## **Introduction**

Hi, I'm Tom Bohemia - globetrotter, explorer, observer, documenter, journalist, *Weltbummler*, hellraiser and renaissance man of the world. In the course of my many year's work for Rough Planet guidebooks I've been to the back of beyond and back a thousand times, drawing from the lifeblood of my experience to distill perfect informative prose; now I, the icon, can finally share with you, the reader, the real story behind the books that make you go round the world, dispensed from my desert stronghold. Yes, dear followers, this is: *The Downsides of Travel Writing*. Prepare to be shocked, appalled and utterly depreconceptioned. Be warned: this is not for the faint-hearted.

Welcome, traveller - come enter my world!

### **Downside #1**

*Everybody thinks you have the best job in the world*

If I had a beer for every time I've heard that... well, actually I've probably had at least that many beers, and it certainly hasn't done me any good. The fact is we do NOT have the best job in the world. The best job in the world ought to be something like running Columbia, or taste-testing cake, or bludging doles, or writing controversial books about famous people, or just anything that doesn't involve explaining to some slack-jawed teenager exactly what it is you do so that they can say 'wow, that's, like, so cool, wow, you must have, like, the best job in the world'. I'll have you know that it's work, and it's hard work, and how the hell are we supposed to get any sympathy at all for our constant complaining when everybody thinks it's the best job in the world? It's just no fun at all moaning about how much you hate your job when no-one actually believes you.

The really annoying part is that it's our own fault for giving everyone the idea that all we do is swan around the world getting paid, lashed and laid at someone else's expense. Which of course is true. But it's NOT THE POINT. If I want to tell you how much better my job is than yours, trust me, I will. Don't put words in my mouth, I don't know where they've been.

But I digress. At the end of the day, in all seriousness, if another person tries to tell me I've got the best job in the world I will turn them into a ladyboy. And none of us want that to happen. Right?

## **Downside #2**

*You can't switch it off*

No matter what you do, it's impossible to cleanse yourself of the research mentality. Information is suddenly a valuable commodity - every phone number, web address, physical detail, quirky anecdote about the owner's mother is a potential nugget, to be recorded, treasured and, if at all, possible, syndicated. You can never again simply go into a restaurant and order a meal without automatically noting the price range of main courses, the qualifications of the chef and the cleanliness of the waiters, and however hard you fight it, you know by the time you leave you'll have formed a full review mentally, from the dryness of the steak tartare to the tartness of the dry St Leger. Even in hotels your last thought before sleeping will probably be 'clean, smart, slightly tatty carpets, good value halal minibar'. Travel writing turns you into a hoarder of the mind, an obsessive note-taker, an anal retainer of the minutiae of existence. Of course chances are you already were one, but you'll certainly notice it more once you give yourself over to The Life. One more freedom stripped away like dodgy wallpaper...

## **Downside #3**

*You have to live out of a suitcase*

OK, so plenty of people do that from time to time. As a travel writer, though, you're not just living out of any old suitcase - you're living out of *the same* old suitcase, time after time after time. After a few years in the job half your stuff never leaves the suitcase between trips and the other half gets worn all the time as you've pretty much forgotten that you own anything else at all. Your life is a constant procession of creased, faded T-shirts, underwear you fully intended to throw away midway through your last trip, crushed packs of Immodium you couldn't find when you needed them, dozens of travel packs of tissues, half-empty bottles of sunscreen and insect repellent, photocopies of out-of-date documents, several hundred dollars of foreign small change, some random ugly bracelets given to you by shopkeepers 'for your sister', eleven corroded cigarette lighters, a sackful of hotel soaps and at least one passport you thought you'd lost. You have created, in one suitcase, the living definition of Stuff.

Of course you know this perfectly well, but somehow there's never enough time to repack properly before you leave again. The Suitcase has taken over. It lives only for itself. Ever wondered why so many writers renounce personal possessions and go and live in yurts? Karrimor my sunburnt behind.

## **Downside #4**

*You become an alcoholic*

Well, are you really going to go into bar after bar, club after club, night after night, week after week, and mix with horribly drunk people for hours on end, without having a single drink yourself? Hey, feel free to try, but as soon as you hit a country with a national drink you need to sample, you're a goner. The only way of doing it is if you're on drugs, and trust me, you'll enjoy the write-up way less doing cold turkey than hung over. Just make sure you stock up on cheap Nebraskan sherry for those long, cold withdrawal mornings on trains.

## **Downside #5**

*People eventually find out what you really do*

It's the double-edged sword of star power - as soon as people get over the initial shock and awe of actually meeting a real live author they start asking those awkward questions about what the job really involves. It's a Catch 22: you can lie, make out it's a piece of glamorous piss, talk up the trimmings and fulminate all the frustrations and bitterness into bile within your twisted, tortured soul. Or you can tell the truth.

Sadly the truth means telling a bunch of people who have lived and breathed your every word for the best part of 10,000 miles round, say, south-east Asia are suddenly confronted with the fact that you probably spent even less time in the country than they did; that you stayed in maybe one hotel per town, often did three towns per day, and never actually went near the local food/museums/herbal cures/masseurs yourself; that you speak even less of the language than they do, apart from the word for 'whore'; and that you're so blasted you thought you were actually writing the guide to Cotswold Safari Park. Picture their delighted faces while you run for cover.

At least there is one consolation: now you know exactly why everyone in the PR department earns at least 20 times your average salary. Then again, that still doesn't explain why they keep using that terrible photo of you with 80s hair and dysentery in every press release. But that's another downside...

## **Downside #6**

*House style*

Well, what more can I say? If I'd wanted to spend the best part of my working life agonising over the minutiae of what should be bold, italic, boxed, unboxed, US-spelled, underlined, overlined, by-lined, skylined, outlined, line broken, list formatted, subheaded or properly researched, I would have stuck with typesetting Dogon phrasebooks. In fact, come to think of it, even when I was doing that I was paying more attention to racing results and the office girl's backside. I became a travel writer to explore brave new worlds, not cross my own t's; editing is for editors - the clue's in the name, see? Pish tosh to the lot of itt.

## **Downside #7**

*You spend half your life on public transport*

Yup, it's just one more thing you didn't consider when you signed up - how are you going to get between all these wonderful places you'll be dossing in, I mean reseaching? Well, simple answer: on buses. And trains. And planes. And pick-ups. And lorries. And mopeds. And tuk-tuks. And mules. In fact, a few weeks covering any kind of medium area and you'll realise you're not a travel writer at all, you're a transport writer.

It's a shame you're not actually paid to write about the intimate features of, say, every matatu in Somalia, because you will have spent way more time on them than you ever did in any of the piss-ant towns they pass through. Travellers may recognise your face from the picture in the book, but you can bet all the locals will remember is the regular thud of your head against the window of Mr Miyagi's Toyota Arsecruncher as you keep falling asleep for 1000km of pan-Asian potholes. 'Hey, Mr Noddy!', they'll

cry, mocking your head rolls, and you're left with seat-sores, a slight migraine and one more reason to get a day job.

### **Downside #8**

*You can't accept freebies*

Of all the unfair things in the world. Impartiality's all very well, but if you can't even use your clout as an arbiter of travel taste to reap the odd all-inclusive suite here and there, what's the point?

And you really do have that clout as well, don't doubt that for a second. Flash your press card to any self-respecting receptionist and they'll have the manager out for fawning duty quicker than you can say 'full room comp'. There are entire tables reserved in Vegas just for journalists taking advantage of one of the few perks of the job. But you can't, just for the sake of 'integrity'? 'Objectivity'? Read 'cheap bastards'.

Remember, the pen really is mightier than the sword, at least as far as conning free stuff is concerned. (Of course, the sword still comes in handy for quieting the occasional ructuous desert warlord.) Otherwise, what are you left with? Hotel toiletries. And I'm just coming to them.

### **Downside #9**

*You get addicted to hotel toiletries*

Someone once said you know that you've made it when you no longer feel the urge to steal hotel toiletries. Well, then you clearly haven't made it. In fact, as a travel writer those little soaps and shower gel sachets rapidly become an obsession, as they can entirely remove the need for you to buy your own. As soon as you pick up the first set, that's it - you're already calculating how long they'll last (screw top or tear-open? fingerful or double shot?), if they'll do as shampoo as well, whether the fragrance smells manly enough, if you can smuggle that block of Bulgari soap past reception in your underpants, and possible reasons why you should take the sewing kit and shower cap (note: you will never, ever use these). Use any long-serving writer's bathroom and you'll find a whole bowl of hotel soaps accumulated from around the world; if they're really serious, the room's probably papered with the labels as well.

Of course, this is a gift for housekeeping staff, who know that all they have to do to throw you into a complete panic is *hide the soaps*. I mean, you can't very well go and ask for them, can you? That would be pathetic...

### **Downside #10**

*No-one really reads what you write*

More to the point, no-one you care about ever reads what you write. After meeting a few of them you won't give a monkeys about those lucky travellers sift heedlessly through your delicately crafted prose for brute facts, but at least they went out and bought the damn book; your friends, family and business contacts, however, will under no circumstances get any further than the inside front cover before slinging six months of your life's work aside like the Finance section of the weekend papers. Even if you hand out free copies chances are they'll instantly be installed on a shelf somewhere, where they'll pass the rest of their days gently mouldering into a sick yellow colour. No, if you want compliments on your nicely-turned sentences, ironic

counterpoints and telling similes, you'll just have to find a mirror and do it yourself. And don't try to tell me you're not doing that already. 30.6.04

### **Downside #11**

*Your feet must suffer*

No two ways about it. However trusty your footwear, however thick your insoles, anything you do only puts off the ineluctable moment when you remove your shoes to find your firm, Grecian toes mysteriously replaced by misshapen, oozing digits from the planet Wrong. Any job that involves objects more than 100m apart begs pedal punishment, and once the blisters arrive, they're settled in for good - hell, they *breed*. City authors in particular tend to end up bent double and confined to wheelchairs, using their useless old feet as lampstands. Buy thick socks, and resign yourself to pain.

Of course it could be worse: back in the 70s fashion required any self-respecting author to do all their research in full platform soles. If the falls didn't kill them, the marauding pygmies probably did.

### **Downside #13**

*You always get asked directions*

Every. Single. Time. It doesn't matter what you do, step off a bus and ditch your bag for more than five minutes and someone will come up and ask you for directions to some place you never would have heard of even if you could speak whatever language they're asking you in. (In fact, I once even got asked for directions by a Nepalese train driver while carrying 40kg of luggage and wearing a Union Jack greatcoat, go figure.) All your careful cultural camouflage and purposeful walking is destroyed in an instant as you're forced to look puzzled, shrug inanely and say 'uh, me turyst' loud enough for all your fellow passengers to look at you and tut knowingly. You might as well wear a T-shirt saying 'I'm not really a local, please expose me'. And of course while your interlocutor rolls their eyes and apologises, their accomplice steals your wallet.

### **Downside #14**

*You're constantly exposed to terrible TV*

You know things are bad when you find yourself anticipating German satellite TV as a great treat. It's a toss-up what's worse, trying to follow incomprehensible Bolivian sitcoms in the original language or watching the wretched dubbed remains of a US show you vaguely liked (although Buffy the Vampire Slayer is indisputably better acted in German). Worst of all, though, are those wretched tinpot countries that show American movies in the original, but with every line translated over the top by a single voice-over man who's either terminally depressed, totally disinterested, or exhausted from having to do this 24 hours a day. Even if you do understand the local patois you're eternally stuck in the semantic purgatory between two soundtracks, crying out for a linguistic coup de grace. And then you realise you're watching Sister Act 4, with Eric Roberts in the Whoopi Goldberg role and that guy from Police Academy. Foreign TV? Kill me now.

### **Downside #15**

#### *People steal your spare chairs*

You travel alone, you eat alone. It's fine, you're a grown-up, you get used to it, you start taking books to restaurants, it's no big deal. But do they ever have one-person tables in restaurants? No, because that would be like putting up a sign saying Sad & Lonely Enclosure. So instead you have to take a table with two, or three, or even sixteen spare chairs. And sooner or later, no matter how empty the place is, some group of laughing happy people will come along, see your chairs and ask if it's OK to take them. Except that's not really what they're saying - look in their eyes and you'll see it's more like 'haha, I see you are a sad and lonely person with no friends, whereas I myself (look at me!) have lots of friends, in fact so many that they urgently require me to relieve you of your spare seating so that we may all sit within three feet of you and grant you no respite from our inane chatter about, say, hair gel, networking and the war in Iran'. When I open Tom Bohemia's House of Ribs, the Sad & Lonely sign will be the first one up.

### **Downside #16**

#### *You start to use the word wanderlust*

A quick experiment: pick up the nearest travel guide, flick to the front end and read through the author biographies. Then count the numbers who *don't* use the word wanderlust when describing their exciting lives. Apparently it's not just a mere restless feeling; it's an epidemic of industry-sized proportions, driving whole fleets of previously sensible people to earn their living traipsing around Bhutanese drag bars and Bedouin hotels. If the work itself wasn't quite such an effective cure, we'd probably all still be fumigated at birth.

### **Downside #17**

#### *Hotel walls*

At some point in their life everyone's been forced to listen to the delightful sounds of someone else having inept sex in the room next door. Obviously the odds on this happening are higher if you stay in a hotel; if you stay in hotels professionally, for four months at a time, it's practically a certainty. Someone up there must have decided that there could be no better way to emphasise the essential solitude of the travel writer's condition than to dispatch fleets of horny town criers to every hotel in Christendom, and then *make them follow you around*. You're left with two options\*: either get so drunk you pass out, or go out and get noisily laid yourself. But doing these every night for four months? One way or another it just ain't healthy. Buy earplug shares and think of England.

\*Yes, the third option is trying to join in. I really, really wouldn't recommend that one.

### **Downside #18**

#### *You forget how to speak proper languages*

It's not that you forget the languages themselves, or all those words you've carefully learned in Serbo-Swahili to explain you want to see the rooms, menu, manager or money shot; you just forget all the stuff that links these words into some semblance of

semantic sense. Gradually you will cease using grammar, then lose your syntax, then any form of nicety, and eventually you will left speaking only pidgin, with hand gestures replacing personal pronouns and exaggerated faces to indicate yes, no and hopeless confusion. Spend too long in country and the effect will spread to any other language you speak as well, until it finally conquers your English centres and you wake up naked one drunken morning in a monk's bodega in Azerbaijan unable even to say 'what the fuck...?'.

Interestingly, this is the real reason why older travellers always talk to foreigners in loud, slow, very correct English, even when it's patently obvious they don't understand a word. They're not being patronising cunts, they're just grimly aware of the debilitating effects of pidgin syndrome - believe me, after six years of primal speech therapy you'd be enunciating everything too.

### **Downside #19**

*Your stories go on for too long*

Of course this is partly a side-effect of spending half your working life trying to work up 30 seconds visiting a town into 17 pages of informative text, but then as you spend the other half trying to cut down 100,000 words of fulsomeness into a pithy hotel review, your self-editing skills should really be up to scratch too. No, the real problem is that every single story has to start with an explanation of what the hell you were doing in this situation in the first place, how it came about, and, in many cases, who you actually are. It's bad enough having to recite every movement and random twist of events that led up to, say, that time you had to leg-wrestle an angry crocodile in the Buenos Aires jungle while chanting Portuguese poetry to settle a khat-fuelled bet with the angry father of two pregnant lambada dancers; when you take into account a few natural embellishments, digressions and bar pauses, and then have to actually explain the context of the trip, your exact route and how much the flights cost as well, you're into Homeric territory before you even get to the 'and then he bit me' part. Either way, everyone ends up thinking you're a boring, long-winded, self-obsessed, bull-shitting conversation-dominator, when under normal circumstances it might have taken them way longer to work that out. Curses.

### **Downside #20**

*You become a morning person*

Not out of choice, mind - the main reason you come to know the grey smell of the dawning morn is that the alternative is to spend your nights on public transport instead of in hotels. It's all about maximising time, of course, and it doesn't take long to figure out that if you get up at noon and spend 6 hours on a train, you're going to miss anything worth seeing in your destination, hit your first hotel around 8pm and not even get a sniff of a bar until well after 3am, by which time you certainly won't be getting up before noon the next day. Woe betide you if you thought this travel lark would get you out of rising early for a 9-5 stint in the office; you'll soon become the type of person who hops out of bed at 4am, eats muesli and laughs at the doleful faces on the Sao Paulo metro. Then you'll wake up, realise you're actually at home with no work to do, it's still 4am and you feel like absolute crap. Enjoy.

## **Downside #21**

### *Weights & Measures*

There really is no such thing as an international standard, even in things you take for granted. It's one thing going to buy a pair of cheap shoes, asking for size 8 and coming out with the kind of toe-bending mini-slipper that would have Nureyev cringing. It's quite another to go for a haircut, ask for a number 3 and come out looking like a Nazi war criminal with cancer. Of course this is a hazard whenever you travel, but when you're on the job chances are you just don't have the time to check out these little differences first, and by the time the razor's made its first strafing run across your scalp, well, it's a bit late. And when you hobble up to the Siberian border in your miniscule booties, fat man's trousers and gleaming bar-brawl crew cut, you start to realise a) why people send you off to find these things out for them, and b) why David Attenborough always wears the same shirt & chinos. On the plus side, at least you won't look much worse after a few nights in jail.

## **Downside #22**

### *You're always saying goodbye*

Any occasional traveller gets used to the two-week round of goodbyes before departure: boozy handshakes for man friends, boozy hugs for galpals, boozy waves for family and boozy tear-drenched farewells for wife, mistress, girlfriend etc. But as a writer, the minute you arrive you have to start saying goodbye to everyone you meet, generally within 24 hours of meeting them. It'd be easier just to buy a T-shirt with 'Hello' on the front and 'Ciao' on the back, and it'd certainly be less emotionally scarring. Given this constant cycle of Freudian abandonment, it's hardly surprising that you won't find many co-dependent travel writers, though after a few years in the game there are plenty who lose faith in human contact, withdraw so much they're practically autistic and may scream when touched. We call them the lucky ones.

## **Downside #23**

### *You can't write negative reviews*

Lest you forget: you are not a free'n'easy journalist or columnist paid to spout off about anything and everything. Your role is to describe things and, preferably, to give people an idea exactly why they'd want to visit/eat/drink/stay in whatever you're writing about. If you can't recommend it, cut it, simple as that. So, no matter how shitty a place is, no matter what animals bite you, what waiters tip gravy on you, what tramps you wake up next to, you just can't justify including the scathing, skin-flaying, acid-penned review you've been crafting in your mind for the rest of the week. Worse, you have absolutely no recourse to your habitual first-choice means of expressing disgruntlement or taking professional revenge on the various crappy hands that travelling life inevitably deals you. Even for us hardened frustratees, that's a tough break to handle.

And it's the frustration that's the killer. Imagine the amount of bile that builds up over the course of a single trip, just from having no outlet for the horrible rage of the disappointed writer (it's not like you've got anyone to rant at, either). Combined with all the other petty irritations of life on the road, it's a wonder we don't all burst with swollen humours and other feudal symptoms. Maybe those medieval doctors were right about the leeches after all. Or maybe they just never got a bad review.



### **Downside #24**

*You use truly unseemly amounts of massive hyperbole*

It's the flipside of not being able to write negatively (see #23) - having to find something positive and interesting to say about every single hotel/restaurant/church/tour etc quickly leads down the slippery slope to talking things up too much, with effusion taking over from objectivity. Before long the good things are amazing, the amazing things are absolutely stunning, the stunning things are probably the best in the world, and even a fairly average, mediocre place becomes the most average, most typical, most stunningly mediocre place in town. Luckily the only people who notice are the ones who pick up guides, head off to cool-sounding bars and then realise you've pinned a whole paragraph of praise on one tiny design element . Oh, hang on - that's your target market you're disillusioning. Damn.

### **Downside #25**

*Your photos never have you in them*

Not entirely a bad thing, of course; the world can do with fewer inane holiday shots ('this is me in the airport', 'this is me passing through customs', 'this is me pondering the Turkish Question in Crete', 'this is me near a brick', ad et ceteram), and if you were really that good-looking you'd be on telly. That said, some evidence of your presence in a country is always nice, and when you get back from another marathon slog around the swamps of Saigon with nothing but thick sheafs of landscape shots, your friends and relatives will switch off in droves and rush back to auntie's holiday snaps of Bournemouth ('this is me tutting at a taxi driver who said a rude word'). Even worse, the only pictures that do include you were probably taken on the rare nights you met fellow travellers and got extremely embarrassingly drunk with them, so are unlikely to be suitable for auntie, mother, the tabloids or anyone with a weak stomach ('this is me passed out under a camel having my tongue shaved'). Luckily, it's easy to get round this one - make sure you steal local signs on any such drunken nights out, then head to the nearest photo booth once you've recovered. Instant proof, worth every penny.

### **Downside #26**

*You don't just get to travel*

Most people's reaction when you start bitching about your work grievances is just to say 'Yeah, but you still get to travel and get paid for it'. Which is a good point. Unfortunately, it's not quite true - you don't *get* to travel, you *have* to travel. The moment you sign up you're committed to going to whatever destination's available, to visit places other people tell you to and see sights determined by tourist whim, and all in the knowledge that if you screw up the write-up you not only won't get paid but could be back flipping burgers within the week. There's no free will involved here, it's a financial and existential imperative. An inactive travel writer is like an out-of-work actor, just a busboy kidding himself better things will come along.

### **Downside #29**

*Your attention span kind of*

You won't realise until you get back from a trip, but the constant travelling, the procession of town after town day after day, the eternal lack of rest relaxation and distraction, will have a stupendously adverse effect on your concentration once you

get home and try to write for 18-hour stretches. In fact, generally you won't manage more than 5 minutes before your mind wanders and you resurface two days later having abandoned what you were doing in the middle of a sentence and gone off on some kind of weird tangent not unlike those caused by heavy narcotics use. Speaking of which, did you see that Cocaine programme on Channel 4 the other day? I didn't, but that guy keeping the coca leaves as a carpet in his room in the trailer, not very subtle! You'd think these Colombians would figure something better out. Then again, they're probably chewing their way through millions of dollars every weekend, their teeth must be fucked. Although I guess they won't be feeling their gums much, and it must taste nicer than khat, that mings big-style. And, um, that's the problem with travel writing right there.

### **Downside #30**

#### *Professional Rivalry*

As in every profession, it's natural to keep an eye on how your fellow workers are doing. When you're freelance, though, the element of competition is blown right out of proportion - if someone else has got a job, it means you haven't, which essentially means they'll eat that week/month and you won't. And as every job you get gives you a better chance of getting the next one, you're constantly surveying your rivals to see who's where on the great freelance food chain, trying to spot the gaps, grinding your teeth for every extra notch on someone else's bookshelf, firing off frantic emails for any pitiful hack work that comes along just to try and beat that fucking guy who always somehow gets there fucking first. Of course the ones you do get will then somehow prevent you from taking the next thing that comes along, which will be ten times more exciting, a hundred times better paid and a million rungs up the career ladder, and will of course go to the colleague now known as That Fucking Guy. They should produce figures on the numbers of byline-related murders every year, it'd make interesting reading. But guess who'd get to compile them?

### **Downside #31**

#### *You live in thrall to technology*

Your first laptop always seems like an exciting purchase - slimline, seductive, sexy, full of the promise of a world at your fingertips, plugging you in to the universe, shooting your creativity across the globe like fire and reaping bountiful, wristbending harvests of pixellated porn. One technical hitch later, however, you realise this is no benign angel perched on your desk; even the slightest hiccup can destroy years of work, email filth to all your crucial business contacts, set fire to your in-tray or kick you right out of the house just to find a willing internet connection. And then you compound the agony by trying to take the damn thing abroad. By the time the guy in the Entebbe branch of PC World knows you by name, your friendly working tool has become a squat, leering beast of Baal, sent straight from the bowels of hell to enslave you to its every whim. Soon you will be jumping through hoops to keep it happy, from the initial hopeful 'it'll download properly if you hold down F1 with a stapler' to the hysterical endstage of 'don't breathe near it! it can smell your fear!'. Why do you think God threw in that thing about not worshipping false idols? You can bet your neighbour's ass he'd just lost the other 490 commandments from some dodgy prepharoanic Palm Pilot. If religion teaches you one thing, it should be to make sure you always back up.

### **Downside #32**

#### *Procrastination becomes your main occupation*

Let's face it, when you've just come back from travelling halfway round the back of beyonce in a dugout tractor you're hardly likely to be in the mood to sit in front of your poxy word processor and churn out 100,000 words of chirpy informative text for the sake of all the lucky stiffes who actually get to go on holiday once in a while and may even enjoy it thanks to the slog of your bleeding guts. Suddenly even the most mundane chore assumes a preternatural sense of urgency - washed your hair lately? hoovered under the chaise longue? scraped the barnacles off your grandma's coracle? watched the Parliament channel? trimmed the clumped-up crap whorls from the fetid arse-end of your favourite pet sheep? Well, now'll be the time to do it. While you're at it, might as well change those business cards to say 'Professional Timewaster'. After all, that's pretty accurate whether you finish your work or not...

### **Downside #33**

#### *You always travel alone*

OK, so you meet people occasionally. Sometimes you may even like them, love them or spend a couple of days in their company without regurgitating. At the end of the day, though, you are definitively On. Your. Own. Pretty ironic if you're the kind of gregarious gregorian who would actually consider travel a career.

Forget about getting your mates to come with you either - those 'proper' jobs you've been mocking for years now give them such huge incomes and long holidays that they can take exotic adventurous trips to exactly the places you've always dreamed of going, and they won't have to note the number of hand towels, review the drinkability of the jacuzzi gel or field-test the tiger-proofing in matatus. And of course after all those years rubbing it in about your great travellife, it's hardly coincidence that these trips are always timed to clash with your latest forced excursion to the Siberian meat raffles, once again leaving you to lament your karma.

Alone.

### **Downside #35**

#### *Time zones*

OK, as a travel writer you're probably not much cop at maths (face it, if you could even add up properly you might realise you're actually earning less than the guy who does your laundress's laundry). But come off it, how can working out time zones somehow be so complicated? Calculating a simple adjustment of 9.5 hours between London Alabama and Bognor Regis Indonesia poses more problems to the jobbing author than remembering exactly which bits of your tax return were fictional and which were just made up. It seems the moment you cross latitude 33.7 on your way to the Islamabad Kielbasa Olympics you lose track of where GMT is, how many hours ago breakfast was, which month you promised to call your mother in and what time that Finnish cheerleader said her mafia boyfriend would/wouldn't be home. In fact, the only thing that ever sticks clearly is the time you had your last drink. But then it's always easier to count in seconds than hours.

### **Downside #36**

*You're held responsible for everything*

As soon as anyone finds out you're a writer, well, welcome to the world of culpability, my friend. It doesn't matter if all you've actually written was the blurb on the back of the company's inhouse polo club newsletter; long-term travellers in particular will remember the minutiae of every single cent the price was out on that Iranian warehouse they tried to download their email in way back in 1902, and dammit, they want answers. You can try explaining all you like that the author of that book was dyslexic, alcoholic, delusional, bald, a compulsive liar, communist and member of the Bush family; you can point out that he's been dead since before they were Bjorn; you can even ring up his widow/widower/sixteen illegible children and make them confess it was all their fault, but at the end of the day you're the one on the spot and you're the one who has to carry their can. The buck stops here, buddy boy, and the only thing you can do is smile consolingly, apologise on behalf of the entire authoring community, and secretly tip a street kid \$1 to throw the moaning bastard's bags in the nearest sewer

### **Downside #37**

*You become a bar bore*

What, you? Master of continents, trotter of the globe, raconteur, ravisser and person of the people, an incorrigible ear-bender? Sorry, but yup - sooner or later all that travelling alone will make you so desperate for some sympathetic company that at the first sign of someone being nice to you you'll be drivelling in their uncaring lughole for the next six hours about life, travel, food, sheep, porridge, underwear, your job, how crap your job is, how great you are and why oh why did that Greenlandic turtle-hunter's wife six years ago never return your calls. Eventually you'll get to the point where you instinctively try to avoid yourself every time you see a mirror, by which time there will hopefully be a law allowing barmen to euthanise you on sight.

Luckily the wonders of modern technology can provide an outlet for these tragic urges: it's called a blog. Deposit your woes electronically, kid yourself that someone actually reads it and voila, instant sanity. Sadly this essentially involves replacing people with computers in your life, which means you'll be even lonelier and probably resort to stalking people online, perhaps the only activity in the world more tragic than wanking into your own socks. So if anyone does fancy a chat about, well, me, my Librarianian handphone number's [\*removed for the sake of public order -Ed.\*]

### **Downside #38**

*You can't do anything else*

I mean, what else are you going to do? Whether you're qualified for anything vaguely respectable or not (which given the amount of time you've spent in strange corners of the uncivilised is highly unlikely), the fact is there are very few jobs that attract quite the same amount of instant kudos. Forget everything else, how can you possibly walk straight into another job that offers you the same mini-celebrity status? Or more to the point, how can you possibly accept a job that doesn't?

It's not just your kudos, either - your friends will get microkudos just from telling people they know you, everyone you meet gets to tell the folks back home, shopkeepers hang your picture on the wall next to the King, or President, or Bela

Lugosi or whoever it's supposed to be. Dammit, handing out your business card is practically a public service. How could you ever give that up? They've got you by the vanity balls and they know it. Bastards.

### **Downside #39**

*There's no such thing as a 'break'*

No siree Bawb. Fancy a month off, a week's R&R, a day kicking back, even a couple of hours off from the grind? Tough. Like all good haulage carriers you just gotta keep on truckin' until your eyelids can no longer hold the weight of the accumulated road dirt and droop like the flaccid member of an alcoholic monk. (Unlike the long-distance Claras of this world, however, the times you're en route are the times you can actually permissibly fall asleep, so at least you don't risk mashing yourself into polyfilla on some Mauritanian bypass flyover.) Every meal, every beer, every nice cup of tea and sit down plays a small part in putting together the cultural 3D jigsaw of wherever the hell you are, and even if you're just going to jam the pieces together haphazardly with a hate-gnarled fist later, you still have to be conscious to collect them. The WORK is all around you. You can never forget it. You can never turn your back on it. And above all, you can never rest...

### **Downside #40**

*You don't know whether to fit in or stand out*

Actually, you don't often get a choice, and it's always the wrong one. In those countries where it'd make your life so much easier if you could just blend in, where you spend 6 years carefully learning every bit of local slang, body and click language, you're hamstrung by the fact you're the only person in a six-mile radius who's not black/white/female/4 foot tall/wearing full purda/American. And when you really want to attract attention, to get some conversation, information or just a bit of help when you're helplessly stranded without an ounce of the relevant currency, lingo or common sense, everyone assumes you're One of Us and breezes past with not so much as a 'ooh, that's gotta hurt'. Or they might ask you for directions - but don't get me started on that again...

### **Downside #42**

*You're never really writing what you want to*

Unless of course your lifelong ambition has always been to pen mediocre non-committal paeans to every fleapit dipshit youth motel you ever stayed in every two years for the rest of your miserable coach-tour couch-class life. No, a pound of Momma's best Thai stick says when you first imagined being a writer you still hazily envisaged some romantic ideal of days spent in solitude in some intensely intellectual garrett crafting prose to cast a mirror on the world and ultimately change the way we read, rather than weeks spent hacking at your dyspeptic laptop producing tepid puff-piece copy that even you view with the kind of contempt that would have flared from Mussolini's bulldog nostrils if he had ever come across the Super Mario Brothers.

Fear not though, that novel *will* come - unfortunately it'll be about you, not by you, and you'll either be unremittingly dead or prevented by law from profiting from your crimes. Better just stick to those bus timetables then, eh?

### **Downside #43**

*You get into a tick-box mentality*

Well, it stands to reason really; if you're constantly running around all day ticking stuff off maps, lists or in general, it'll come to a point where you approach everything in the same manner. Bus to shitsville - check. Train times - check. That hotel - check. That restaurant - check. Pay check - check. Read to elderly - check. Drown sorrows - check. One for the road - check. Perfunctory quickie - check. Deliver child - check. Find socks - check. Find god - check. Experience amazing emotional moment of heartrending euphoria - check. Remember own mortality - check. Attempt suicide - check. Hospital - check. Therapy - check. Return to work - check. Attempt suicide - check. Check list - check. Tick box - check. Check ticked off tick box on ticked off check list - check. Update blog - check...

### **Downside #44**

*You never get a tan*

Or more accurately, you never get a *proper* tan. Sure, you may spend half your life swanning around countries where it only drops below 45C in an Ice Age, the midnight sun boils eggs and the ozone layer is so thin that small animals get sucked into space, but unless you plan on wandering topless into 101 aghast hotels, restaurants and mosques every day, the one thing you will never get is a nice all-over even brown sheen. And even if you do fit in a bit of beach-lazing here and there, nothing will ever balance out the hideous iniquity of the everyday bitch tan on the parts which do get constant exposure - in fact, after a few years you'll even forego rampant backpacker-groupie-sex just so no-one can laugh/scream/vomit at the contrast between the pasty zombie pallour of your clammy white bits and the black leather melanomic crackling of your sun-fried forearms and neck. The savviest writers simply plaster on the factor 150 and claim to be goths, which of course comes with its own downsides, but does at least obviate the burns, skin grafts and constant whiff of burning pork...

### **Downside #45**

*Practicalities take over from enjoyment*

Because there's simply way more of them to think about than there are amazing experiences to be had. So when you do finally manage to track down the ultra-rare last surviving chamae-lemur in the Gobi desert, and get to see its famous 'fuck-off-I'm-mating' call as it performs an elegant courtship dance involving six leopards, Hitler's buried treasure and unicorn-blood caviar served on Shergar's mane by Elvis and JFK's secret love child, instead of drawing in that awe-inspired breath of gasp you should by rights be feeling down your tingling spine, or at least formulating your bragging rights, all you can actually think about is how the hell you're going to make it out of there in time to catch the last zebu-handcart to the next three hell-forsaken townettes that were originally on your list for the day. Now that's just plain wrong.