

Do Travel Writers Go to Hell?



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Review

After pursuing an advanced degree in Latin American studies, Kohnstamm reluctantly took a position as a researcher at a large Wall Street firm. The restless author quickly tired of the corporate drudgery and, after some hesitation, accepted an assignment to update Lonely Planet's guidebook on Brazil. The resulting book (a "chronicle [of] events that took me from bourgeoisie working stiff with a repressed travel habit to a full-time mercenary travel hack, with all the good, bad, and surreal shit that it entails") is a wonderfully picaresque journey through the vibrant Brazilian landscape. Following a marathon bender through the streets of Manhattan with his friend, "the Doctor" (one of the book's many parallels to the work of Hunter S. Thompson), Kohnstamm departed for Rio de Janeiro with little more than his laptop and a few changes of clothes. He awoke the first morning in bed with Inga, a Lufthansa stewardess who proved to be one of many female companions bedded by Kohnstamm, who comes off here as quite the Casanova. Amidst the hard partying and endless nights, however, the author began to realize the difficulty of gathering adequate information about the countless locales he must visit. With his paltry funds dwindling, he reached out to previous Lonely Planet scribes, most of whom were far from reassuring: "Remember that if you are in your room at night writing, you aren't doing enough bar research." Along the way he befriended numerous memorable characters: Nils, a baggage handler from Copenhagen and singer for a grunge band, Synthetic Jesus; Inara, a Brazilian beauty who shares an apartment with the author for a couple of weeks (and who turns out to be a prostitute of sorts); Otto, formerly of the Israeli Defense Force; Mr. Yay, so named for his prodigious coke habit; and Bobby, from whom the author buys Ecstasy tablets in an effort to make some quick cash. Readers will relish the countless stories of the author's misadventures, but Kohnstamm brings more than just anecdotes: He offers a solid understanding of the mechanics of the travel-writing industry and a unique ability to illuminate that world to readers.

Notable for its spirited prose and insightful exploration of the less-romantic side of travel writing. Kohnstamm is one to watch.

Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

Product Description

For those who think that travel guidebooks are the gospel truth.

The waitress suggests that I come back after she closes down the restaurant, around midnight. We end up having sex in a chair and then on one of the tables in the back corner. I pen a note in my Moleskine that I will later recount in the guidebook review, saying that the restaurant "is a pleasant surprise . . . and the table service is friendly."
—Thomas Kohnstamm, professional travel writer and author of numerous Lonely Planet guidebooks

WANTED: Travel Writer for Brazil

QUALIFICATIONS REQUIRED

Decisiveness: the ability to desert your entire previous life—including well-salaried office job, attractive girlfriend, and basic sanity for less than minimum wage

Attention to detail: the skill to research northeastern Brazil, including transportation, restaurants, hotels, culture, customs, and language, while juggling sleep deprivation,

nonstop nightlife, and excessive alcohol consumption

Creativity: the imagination to write about places you never actually visit

Resourcefulness: utilizing persuasion, seduction, and threats, when necessary, to secure a place to stay for the evening once your pitiable advance has been (mis)spent

Resilience: determination to overcome setbacks such as bankruptcy, disillusionment, and an ill-fated one-night stand with an Austrian flight attendant

As Kohnstamm comes to personal terms with each of these job requirements, he unveils the underside of the travel industry and its often-harrowing effect on writers, travelers, and the destinations themselves. Moreover, he invites us into his world of compromising and scandalous situations in one of the most exciting countries as he races against an impossible deadline.

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