



Andrew McCarthy: Off the Beaten Path

The former Brat-Pack actor and director followed his passion into a new career: award-winning travel writer. Here, he shares his best tips.

BY KERRIE FLANAGAN

Although he's best known for his roles in '80s classics such as *Pretty in Pink* and *Weekend at Bernie's*, Andrew McCarthy isn't just another celebrity dipping a toe into the writing world—he's a writer who happens to be a celebrity. In the years since his first published article in *National Geographic Traveler* in 2006, McCarthy, 51, has proven himself to be the real deal, being named Travel Journalist of the Year by The Society of American Travel Writers in 2010, and hitting the bestseller lists with his travel

memoir *The Longest Way Home* in 2012.

Ten years prior to his first byline, McCarthy was spending his time off from his acting career traveling the world and filling notebooks with anecdotes. As he read travel magazines, he found they weren't capturing the sorts of deep transformative connections he experienced on his trips. Someone suggested he write professionally about his travels, and a friend put him in touch with the editor of *National Geographic Traveler*. When the two met and McCarthy asked to write for the

magazine, the editor said, "You're an actor." McCarthy replied, "Yes, but I know how to tell a story." After a year of emails in which McCarthy pleaded his case, the editor finally relented and sent him on assignment to Ireland.

The profound affect of travel on McCarthy's life is the undercurrent in every piece he writes. After years of success on screen, he's grateful to have found his way to the page.

"It is our job as writers to do the work, have the courage to bring it out and present it to the world, because that's why we are here," he says.

Here, McCarthy shares his three keys to fantastic travel writing.

1. WALK THE TERRITORY.

The best way to learn about a locale you're documenting is to get out of the hotel as soon as you arrive, walk around, get a little lost and pay attention to details. "Walking gives you a rhythm in a place, and you need to begin to understand the rhythm so you're not an outsider," McCarthy says. He believes asking for help is a good way to connect with people and begin to gain a deeper insight into where you are. A good travel writer must do whatever he can to approach a story from a local point of view, instead of as a tourist—and that means connecting with people, and true immersion.

"Getting quotes from taxi drivers shows me a lazy travel writer," he says.

McCarthy always carries a notebook with him, and he jots down more than lists of where he's been and what he's seen. He captures feelings, anecdotes, vignettes, scenes and moments that truly reflect his experience of a place. The basic facts about a destination, he points out, you can get later if you need to. Good travel

writing is about far more than the hours a place is open or a rundown of nearby tourist attractions.

There are days when McCarthy takes copious notes and other days that pass with nothing. And often toward the end of a trip he does exactly what he did when he arrived: He walks around. "Lines, phrases, entire paragraphs will come up and I

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will stop where I am and write them down; often they end up in that form in the final draft. It's important not to start writing too early in the process—but when it wants to start coming, you have to be open to it."

2. FIND YOUR HOOK IN THE DETAILS.

McCarthy believes a singular, seemingly minute detail or incident can embody the essence of a place, and give a piece real depth, taking it beyond a mere travelogue. "Once you find that nugget you can hang the whole story on it," he says. "The rest is basically arranging furniture." In other words, you follow that hook with a *nut graph* (explaining the story "in a nutshell"), give three or four supporting examples, and then circle back to the lead at the end.

Finding that telling detail isn't always easy, but it's worth the effort. "I was in Seville and I had wonderful vignettes that I was going to put in the story, about bull-fighting, about flamenco, but I didn't know what the story was," he says. "I still needed to find the thread to give the story

any kind of purpose." Eventually, McCarthy began to notice a picture of a Virgin Mary statue crying crystal tears in every restaurant he visited, and he went on a quest to find the actual statue—and, in the process, his hook.

"I'd seen the picture of the Virgin Mary 20 times before I realized, *Wait a minute—that's Seville*. ... [The

Statue is] laced in history, it's mysterious, and those were all the things that Seville was to me."

Another example: In 2011, McCarthy wrote a piece called "Courting Vienna" for *National Geographic Traveler*. His assignment was to go to Vienna and live the most "local" life possible. He ended up hanging the whole story on a one-sentence conversation he had with a café waitress. "I had gone to that coffee shop every day while I was there, and she waited on me every day. ... Finally, one day, I asked, 'How long have you worked here?' She said, 'Too long.'" She became the lead to the article, which ended up focusing on Viennese coffee houses. "It wasn't just about some grumpy waitress. It captured something about the whole culture. Those coffee houses and what life is like—how you endure."

3. TELL A STORY, DON'T SELL A DESTINATION.

One of the reasons McCarthy feels he has found success in travel writing ties back to what he told his *National Geographic Traveler* editor years ago:

He knows how to tell a story. He points out that one of the biggest mistakes travel writers make is they write about *destinations*. But it's *storytelling* that grabs people. "It is how we communicate, and that is how we should approach travel writing," he says.

He's partial to quest stories, for instance, because they have a strong built-in hook, a clear direction that naturally engenders a story—like when he went searching for the perfect cup of tea in Darjeeling, India.

And then there's the time McCarthy wanted to write about Tahiti, but needed an angle to pitch to the editor. In the course of doing some research, he discovered that 95 percent of all black pearls come from Tahiti. Because his mother had a big birthday coming up, he combined the two ideas and went on a quest to Tahiti to find a pearl farmer who would let him dive down, pluck an oyster from its bed and bring home a black pearl for his mom.

That became the article's narrative, which then gave McCarthy a means to detail the country and its pearls (the resulting piece, "In Search of the Black Pearl," ran in the October 2010 *National Geographic Traveler*). He could have easily written a simple destination article, but by making it a concrete tale with a beginning, middle and end, he created something that connects with readers on an emotional level.

And *that* is the difference between telling a story and selling a destination—and the heart of great travel writing.

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