

STUDY DIRECTORY a special report



My colourful life of travel

Earning a living writing about exotic locations around the world sounds like a dream career, but it's a reality for freelance travel writer Fiona Harper. **Oryana Angel** finds out what her job entails and how others can follow her career path

"ANOTHER travel writer once said to me that we get to have the experience of a lifetime at least once a year," says freelance travel writer Fiona Harper.

Harper, 48, who has been working as a full-time travel writer for the last eight years, says her only regret is not getting into the industry earlier.

"It's an amazing opportunity to go to amazing places. I'm very fortunate," she says.

So far this year, she has been on about 15 trips, some taking four days and others stretching up to two weeks.

"I'm about to do my eighth international trip this year and have two more domestic trips coming up. I easily spend half the year on the road," Harper says.

As she spends much of her time travelling, multi-tasking on the road is an important element of the job.

"I might be in Canada writing about the Whitsundays, pitching about New Zealand, planning for New Guinea and sorting images from Tahiti," she says.

Walking within 30 metres of wild polar bears in Canada and sailing through the Northwest Passage and around Cape Horn are some of the highlights of her career so far.

"I literally kissed the ground when I got off the boat. It was quite exciting," Harper says.

Before becoming a travel writer, she

spent a decade as a travel agent in Melbourne and Perth, and also worked as a yacht skipper doing deliveries all around the Pacific.

"I didn't do as much travelling as a travel agent, but I've always been interested in travel," she says.

This passion led Harper to set off cruising around Australia on a 50-foot yacht at which time she wanted to find a way to support her travels. She started writing about boating destinations and places that were often only accessible by boat.

Harper says her first break was with the magazine *Australian Traveller*.

The editor loved her work and kept commissioning more. She then branched out to other publications.

"I remember the first piece I had published in *The Weekend Australian*. It was on an Aboriginal tour guide doing tours in the red sand country around Monkey Mia. (Getting published) is not as exciting these days, but back then it was really exciting to know that someone placed a value on the work I was doing."

The job is not all fun and games, though.

"There are many hours that you

can't earn income on. For example, it took me four days of non-stop travel to get to the polar bears. I then spent a week there. That's 11 days out of your life to write one story. It's hard to justify those hours if you were to put a monetary value on them," she says.

Depending on the publication and the length of the article, freelance travel writers are paid anywhere from \$300 to \$1500 for a piece.

"You don't do this job for the money. It's about the lifestyle you have," says Harper, who is single and doesn't have children. "I have the time to sacrifice," she adds.

To succeed in the industry, Harper says freelance writers need to be resilient about rejection and have a flexible attitude.

"A good travel writer needs to be able to go with the flow and get a story in the bad and good times.

"They should also be inquisitive, not afraid to speak to strangers, look at things that aren't necessarily obvious and be able to put those things into words."

Harper isn't too bothered by the many changes taking place in the media industry at the moment, and believes the market is expanding, with more digital opportunities opening up.

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Adventure bound: Writer Fiona Harper meets a local in the village of Tufi, Papua New Guinea

GETTING STARTED

MOST people start with several years of experience working in media, or a related industry, before attempting to become a freelance writer.

To break into the field, it helps to do an undergraduate degree at university with a major in journalism or a similar

field. In Sydney, journalism is offered at the University of Technology Sydney, the University of NSW and Macquarie University, among others. The degree takes three years to complete full-time.

If your ATAR marks aren't high enough to enter the

competitive course, or you want to fast-track your qualification, private colleges, such as Macleay College, offer a one-year diploma in journalism.

Work experience and cadetships are good ways to build up on-the-job skills and a portfolio of published work.

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