

Travel Writing, SEO, & Boring Blogs

I'm a travel writer and I run an SEO business. For years, I kept falling back into the trap of always writing keyword-driven content. I'd spend ages looking at what competitors had written and how I could improve upon their posts. I'd frown at bloggers echoing each other. And then I'd do exactly the same thing. Why? Because that's one of the main ways a blogger can get their content noticed. And that's why the internet is full of boring travel blogs.

Here's why it's hard to remove the marketer mindset from the art of travel blogging and why click-bait style "best x for y" posts rule the travel blogging space.

Top 10 vs Narrative Posts

As a travel blogger and SEO "professional" (SEO is my main gig when I'm not writing about travel and my other interests), it's hard to walk away from the lure of free traffic from Google. Write content that Google's algorithm likes and you can enjoy the benefits of a very popular blog that makes money. Blogging about travel and making money from your content is the dream, right?

There's a reason why narrative blogs do not enjoy the same level of exposure as "practical" blogs. Long-form stories from experienced travel writers appear down on page 5 of Google's search engine results page, while the top 10-style posts get the clicks for most search queries. Why? Well, most people use the web to find quick answers. It's the skim-reading, headline-scanning, quick-fix manner of using the web for instant answers that we've all grown accustomed to. One might say that we've been programmed to behave like this.

Nobody types "*deliver me some thoughtful travel content that I haven't heard before*" into Google.

The truth is that "Top 10" listicle-style articles are what people want. Here's what makes up 90% of the travel-related searches on Google:

- The best things to do in [city]
- 10 things you should know before visiting [city]
- The top attractions in [country]
- 9 reasons why [city] should be your next destination
- Etc

Now, I'm not saying that these articles are worthless. In fact, they are very helpful. **They are important.** Vital, in fact. If travel bloggers didn't write these articles, we'd have to rely on the big corporate publishing houses and tourist boards for their opinions. My gripe is with the fact that

out of every 100 travel posts written, one might be thought-provoking.

The value in the listicle posts is in the headings. Tip: just read the headings or note them down somewhere and use them as a guide for when you arrive in your destination.

But I guess you're already doing this.

Note: In industries like health and money, having a wildly alternative view to the consensus might not be a good thing. But when it comes to travel, adventure and new experiences are what it's all about. Or so it should be.

I can think of many travel blogs that are 100% filled with content sculpted and manipulated to serve Google's algorithm. Every post title is an obvious SEO play. The writing is as plain as it gets. Nothing is memorable. Yet, the content is "read" by tens or hundreds of thousands of people a year.

These are utilitarian blogs; by definition, they serve a purpose. If you want to know which restaurants to try in Prague, you might type "best restaurants in Prague" into Google. You get your answer and off you go to join everyone else that looked at the same list.

But there's where this whole process leaves me cold. I know that when I read the first list of recommended restaurants, I'm getting the same information presented on 20 other blogs. Of course, some restaurants are just better than others. And many will appear on the same lists. But how will we ever discover new places to eat? If an eatery doesn't appear on the "best of" lists, is it even worth visiting? It must be bad, right?

I avoid these kinds of lists. I'm not a snob and I don't have a problem eating in restaurants filled with foreigners. But part of the adventure of travel is finding something new. The thoughts of using an itinerary, one based on the same stuff everyone else likes, fills me with dread.

And there's another reason I don't want to write listicles (anymore). I don't enjoy it. My experience with SEO and the current state of Google's search results triggers my gag reflex.

What SEOs Know

Here's what a lot of people don't know and what bloggers with a deep understanding of how Google ranks blog posts know: You won't get to the top of Google by being unique. If you could, there wouldn't be a need for tools like [SurferSEO](#) and [Page Optimizer Pro](#) (excellent software tools, by the way). These tools effectively look at what's already ranking, do some data crunching, and spit out a formula for what to write if you want to be first in the search engine results

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The result of thousands of blogs using these kinds of tools is that the first ten to twenty results on Google are all strikingly similar.

That doesn't mean they are copies. The actual writing is unique. Copying a post verbatim will get your post or site penalised (ignored by Google). But Google knows that there are words, phrases, and ideas within a topic that must appear in a blog post to be authoritative. Imagine writing a "guide to the Greek Islands" and not including the words "cyclades" or "island hopping". A quick search reveals that most of the top-ranking pages include these words. Conversely, most of the pages in position 50 and above do not.

You won't get to the top of Google by being unique

Let's take another example. Let's say you want to get the top spot on Google for the keyword "Best restaurants in Rome". The first thing to do is to check the results in Google. You'd be surprised how many bloggers and content writers don't take this simple step. That's a mistake. The **search engine is literally getting you what it wants**, so it's foolish to ignore this.

If you want non-personalised search results based on a particular search location, [use a VPN](#). You can also use [Accuranker](#)'s local search tool. Or use Keysearch and run a keyword search for the country you are interested in.

What do you see in the results? If the majority of places in the SERP (search engine results page) are videos, you'd better create a video post if you want any chance of appearing near the top. If every post is an infographic, a long-winded personal anecdote about restaurants in Rome will have little chance of ranking.

Let's imagine for a second that the top 10 results in Google are regular blog posts. If every article mentions the same restaurants, what are the chances that your own personal list of favourite restaurants will reach the top spot? Slim, I'd say. It would be smart to include what everyone else is including. And that's where things get boring. **The web is becoming a homogenous soup of content by people that are proficient at SEO.**

Don't get me wrong, SEO has served me very well. But every year, there is less chance of serendipity from a Google search. It's harder to find new topics. The chances of being surprised by something I read in the top 10 on Google are almost zero.

Maybe [Bing](#), with its imperfect and downright weird search algorithm is the answer.

Who Actually Reads This Stuff?

If I put my mind to it, I could probably do quite well with these “best of” articles and listicles. I’ve written many. But they are boring to write and boring to read. People skim them. They note down the names and move on from there.

Again, these posts are purely utilitarian. It’s a service. It’s hard to be unique when you’re essentially offering the same information, in the same format, as everyone else. Another problem is that Google will eventually steal all of these ideas and present them in Google Maps (complete with up-to-date opening hours – something that travel bloggers struggle with maintaining) or Google snippets.

A “feature” of the search engine results is the so-called **featured snippets**. Snippets appear at the top of the search results. They are presented as a sort of quick answer box. Google might show a bullet point list of the headings from a blog post. Featured snippets often answer the exact questions someone wants answered. So what’s the problem? Well, as a content publisher, you want people to go to your website, where the content lives. But users don’t need to click to the blog post when they get the answer they need inside Google’s own ecosystem. Why would anyone need to visit your travel blog to get the names of, say, the top places to visit in Ireland, when Google has just given it to them in a nicely formatted box?

Boom! Your ad revenue drops, affiliate sales disappear, and whatever other methods you used to monetise the blog are worthless.

The Bloggers that Milk the System

I’ve learned (through podcasts and other mediums) of many fellow travel bloggers who have enjoyed meteoric rises in popularity. It’s always amazing to hear the stories of websites that, within a year or two, get 100k visits a month. Of course, the nerd in me analyses the websites for SEO. Without fail, the top articles on these blogs are always along the lines of “inspiring travel quotes” and “how to use TikTok for travel” and other such nonsense.

Do people like this stuff? Would I want to be on this blogger’s email list? Have they even travelled?

Options for Thoughtful Bloggers

So what can the owner of a blog that doesn’t focus on click-bait SEO keywords expect? For one, they can expect a lot less traffic than their peers. Moving away from Google, you could always use

Pinterest as a marketing channel. Pinterest works pretty well in the travel niche. Forget about Facebook. Instagram works for people on Instagram but don't expect anything you do on that channel to convert to engaged readers on your blog.

Too Cynical?

You might be asking why I'm so upset at bloggers living off the profits from their travel blogs? I'm not. Congratulations to them. I wish them success. They figure out how the system works and they are making the most of it. **That's business.** And it's something I do myself. While I admire and even envy their success, I'll continue to do my thing. I'm not saying their way is bad. But only a handful of people actually make a full time living from following the same blogging path as everyone else. I've switched lanes to a much slower stream of traffic. In fact, I'll be lucky to get 10% of the readership.

But at least I won't be **bored out of my mind writing listicles.** Or I won't have to spend money hiring writers to churn out these posts (many of the most successful travel bloggers do this). And I can write about whatever I like. In one way, I'm lucky in that my blog is a side project and not a revenue generator. I guess it's nice to have the luxury of choice.

What's the solution?

I'm not suggesting that everyone should write personal stories or the minute details about how they were feeling at every moment of the day during their travels. Nor do I suggest that bloggers shun the writing of practical advice in favour of personal experiences. Leave the pointless and mind-numbing details of food choices, moods, and exercise routines to the Kardashians.