FEATURE *By Navjot Singh*

How to write a China guidebook

A writer shares the secrets of his craft

To write any travel guidebook is a huge challenge, and even more so if it's about a large country such as China. Normally, guidebooks are written by a number of people collecting various bits of information from numerous sources. So, for example, it could be that someone has the task of researching and collecting information about the places of interest in a particular city; and somebody else is responsible for actually going out on the street and trying out the various restaurants that would make it into the book's final recommendation list, and so on. Some people, however, tend to think that guidebooks are written by people sitting in another country, and all they do is just cut and paste from the Internet and create their latest tour guide to Shenzhen or something. It doesn't quite work like that.

It also helps that the writers and contributors have a passion for, and most importantly, have detailed knowledge of the city or country they are writing about. You are not going to do yourself any favors by writing about Guangzhou if you have only been as far as Baiyun Airport, while on your way to, say, Beijing!

Personally I had never written any book before, let alone a guidebook, and the biggest hurdle I faced was that I had no assistance from any other writers or advisors. Nevertheless, I did have this cunning idea of creating a guidebook from the first day I arrived into the country. Writing a guidebook involves a lot of field work, including actually making sure those hotels, restaurants, cinemas and so on, are located where they should be. It does involve a lot of research in terms of perhaps calling up certain government agencies to confirm any useful data which you may wish to include in your book, such as official country statistics (population and other geographical data).

The modern tourist's guidebook was separately invented by Karl Baedeker in Germany (1835) and by John Murray III in England (1836). The first comprehensive travel guidebook on China was written in 1973 by Ruth Lor Malloy, a Canadian of Chinese Heritage.

For my first book, I decided to make it different from your average travel guide, so it's not quite like your "Rough Guide or Lonely Planet Guide to so and so", because I did not aim it directly at the tourist. Instead, I saw it as an a reference book-cum-comprehensive guidebook which gives advice about how to go about living your everyday life in China as an expatriate. Effectively, when writing a guidebook, the writer needs to always put himself in the mindset of the reader and always ask questions before writing. After all, you are giving priceless advice to the reader, so that they do not have to go through all the challenges that you (the writer) have been through, and even if they (the reader) do face those challenges, then at least they have the peace of mind that they are not the only ones, because they can follow from your written personal experience. I had to think of answers to questions like: What would I do if I needed a doctor in the middle of the night, or if I was detained, or if I needed an international school for my children and so on. Sometimes as a newcomer to China, it's much more beneficial to know these things before you come to the country than when you are actually here, because prior reading prepares you for what you may face once you are in the country.

Focus on the unusual

Focusing on what's interesting and unusual about the place will make your book more appealing to the reader. Unearth details that are significant in some way - they might be extraordinary, vibrant or amusing - just look for something that makes the set unique. Usually this will be a blend of the location and the inhabitants.

Information for certain chapters in the guidebook can be collected from everyday experiences, and the amazing thing is that sometimes none of it is intentional. Like for example, for me, it just so happened that since the day I arrived in China, I decided to keep a daily diary with me and note down any unusual occurrences that may have happened during any particular day or time. For example under the accommodation section of the book, I have used the personal example of the time when I had faced difficulties renting a place to live in Luohu District, Shenzhen, and how I dealt with all the challenges I faced with the local people (including the landlady, property agency etc.); and in another part of the book I have described what one should expect if they are hospitalized in China because it happened to me on a few occasions in Guangzhou and in Shenzhen. Travel writing on the whole is meant to emphasize the positive, not the negative aspects of destinations. (Unless, of course, you're doing an expose- but don't get carried away with this one!)

Sometimes it's not easy to get a first-hand primary source of information from your own personal experiences and this is where you may have to gain some information, with permission, from other sources. For example in order to write chapters on "Marriage in China" and "Adopting Chinese Children" (because I have done neither while in China... yet), I had to get copyright permission from the American and British Consulates General (in Guangzhou).

Also, always ask yourself questions like: "How would you feel if you have never been to Guangzhou or Shenzhen before?"

The final stage is having all the chapters laid out correctly, making sure that the photos are the latest ones and making sure that all the information is accurate as possible. It goes without saying that staying current on China's tourism is impossible if not difficult. Good restaurants open and close on a frequent basis. Shopping malls, Hotels and even cinemas change names and locations; and management companies, new hotels and tourist attractions sprout at a dizzying pace. Telephone numbers and e-mail addresses change not more than omce. When one wanders in a place like Guangzhou book city in Tianhe, it is impossible to miss the fact, that just like technology; travel books on China are out-of-date before they are even printed! //Navjot Singh is the author of "Newcomer's Handbook Country Guide: China: Including Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Shenzhen", and has also written "China: Business Travelers Handbook", which is due for release in early 2009.

ALWAYS:

- Make it different from other travel guides. Simply describing Yuexiu Park as hundreds have done before you is no good. Think of a situation which maybe made you like/dislike Yuexiu Park.
- Remember the reader! Ask yourself questions that a traveler to China would.
- Include personal examples (if giving advice) that are related to the city in question.
- Include pictures. Very important for a guidebook.
- Make sure the information is up-to-date. China is changing rapidly.

NEVER:

- Criticize anything or anyone. It's a "guide" book, not a personal review.
- Make up your opinions. It has to be verified facts (especially with China)
- Go silly with representation. Avoid clichés. Do buildings ever really smile? I don't think so.
- Use the first person. Mesmerizing as your thoughts might be to your immediate friends, the rest of the world doesn't give a damn what you thought as you took your first mouthful of dim sum on Beijing Lu!