The Glamorous Life

Longing for the kind of writing career that makes other writers envious? Maybe a regular gig where you’re hobnobbing with Hollywood celebs, trekking through the mountains of China or living the “Sex and the City” life? Sure, some of the best jobs in journalism have glossy magazine cover appeal, but what are they really like? Here, a celebrity correspondent, an exotic travel writer and a sex/dating advice columnist give their first-person accounts of the “job” behind the glamorous façade.

THE CELEBRITY CORRESPONDENT

BY JENNIFER ARMSTRONG

My brain was, to put it generously, scrambled.

I’d already spent 25 minutes that morning weaving through the streets of L.A.’s Los Feliz neighborhood—whose only distinguishing feature, as far as I’m concerned, is that it’s where Sunset and Hollywood
Boulevards merge. Getting lost, of course, never makes anybody's day, but every little mishap is magnified when you’re traversing the celebrity world.

Days like this one—in this case, a visit to the set of “Grey's Anatomy”—come less frequently than you might think in my life as a staff writer at Entertainment Weekly. And, to be honest, I thank God for the fact that most of my time is spent back in my office in New York, poring over TV ratings, interviewing network executives, debating the finer points of “Project Runway” with fellow staffers and watching advance DVDs of shows (from a WE documentary on Vietnam nurses to the season premiere of MTV’s “Laguna Beach” to every last clinker on the fall schedule).

Trust me, I’m not about to complain: I have my dream job—I watch television for a living. Far be it from me to whine when someone expects me to write a little something about it or fly to L.A. to talk to a bunch of pretty people.

But back to business. The most important contacts in my line of work aren’t celebrities. The important people for me—and for my fellow staffers and editors—are publicists. They control the access we need. They make our lives so easy that sometimes we want to hug them and weep with joy, and so difficult other times that we fantasize about committing graphic violence we never knew we had in us. We don’t become BFF with famous people: We cozy up to publicists and network suits who can give us the answers we need. We call celebrities as a last resort.

Set visits are our bread and butter. They’re what make those big feature stories come to life, and I think they’re what most people imagine when they hear my job title. Ah, and what fun they are. A set visit day takes about a week's worth of energy and concentration; it requires that, in just a few fleeting hours, I collect all the raw materials I need to cobble together a feature story. It requires months of negotiations beforehand. Before I’ve come onto the scene—sometimes before I’ve even gotten the assignment—one of my editors has haggled with at least one publicist over which cast members and producers must talk to me, how long they must talk to me and what they must talk to me about. In this case, despite the Pentagon-type secrecy enforced on the “Grey’s” set, I’ll be allowed to watch some scenes being shot so I’ll have descriptive details—an absolute necessity for that key opening anecdote.

When I did finally stumble upon the studio lot, it turned out I was at the wrong gate—so it was another 10 minutes before I could park my car and run, in the 98-degree heat, to the production offices. The good news: I was still on time for my first scheduled half-hour interview with
the show’s creator, Shonda Rimes, and she had air-conditioning and cold bottles of water.

This was my make-or-break day. If I didn’t deliver, we’d have no story to back up the pretty picture of Patrick Dempsey scheduled to grace our “Fall TV Preview” cover.

Because I’m not the kind of person who asks awkward, probing questions in everyday life, I have to get into character: Remember, the people I’m cross-examining are freakishly attractive tabloid targets. I figured it might take some doing to not let Dr. McDreamy’s hair—not to mention those eyes, that smile—distract me. I once interviewed Rob Lowe and was doing fine until my brain started screaming at me, “Oh my God, that’s Rob Lowe!” You can’t let the gravity of their celebrity get to you. But I find it’s the childhood crushes who get under your skin. Never mind visiting the Hawaii set of “Lost” or meeting Paul Newman on a red carpet—I think talking to former New Kid on the Block Jordan Knight was the biggest thrill of my career. I was doing it for my 12-year-old self.

On the “Grey’s” set, I plowed through one cast member after another, asking about bonuses and gossip-column reports of diva behavior and the widespread public debate over whether Meredith Grey is a boozing slut. I find that sweet, unassuming tact goes over best with prickly celebs—which means my questions were more like: “Now, did I read somewhere that you guys were getting bonuses because you were so awesome last year?” “What’s with all these silly rumors that there’s a bit of ‘Desperate Housewives’ stuff going on behind the scenes?” and “Why do you think Meredith is so polarizing to fans?”

It all flew by so fast, I didn’t fantasize for even one second about running my fingers through Dempsey’s perfectly coiffed locks.

Once I’d done most of my interviews, I was still missing the most important piece of my story: I now had to watch them shoot the same scene over and over. (Watching television being made is like watching your favorite sausage being made—you’d rather just enjoy the final product.) I kept hoping one of the actors would crack a joke or flub a line in a manner that was not only entertaining but also metaphorically representative of my story’s thesis. It never happened, exactly—the actors were in too much of a smooth, professional groove. (Sadly, I couldn’t figure out how to use “Should I pause more before the second line?” to demonstrate that “Grey’s” has become wildly popular by using an old-school soap opera formula with fresh, thoroughly modern plot twists.) In the end, I decided to play off some of the dialogue and supplement with a funny quote from one of my actor interviews.

When I returned home, of course, the only question anyone asked
was, “How was Dr. McDreamy?” Honestly, if I hadn’t tape-recorded it and taken notes, I’d barely remember. But to be a good sport, I always come up with a go-to answer instead of launching into some annoying treatise about how my job isn’t all that glamorous, and I don’t spend much quality time with celebrities. So I said, “His hair was pretty” and left it at that.

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THE TRAVEL WRITER

BY VICTOR PAUL BORG

In my work as a freelance travel writer, I’m like the proverbial village fool who goes abroad. Always wandering; dawdling; snooping; tagging along with strangers; fishing for anecdotes, tips and quotes; or asking probing questions with giddy carelessness.

I’m writing this in China, while lingering at the gateway city for a few days at the end of a trip. My guide and interpreter for this trip was a meek 21-year-old named Jack. He’s just finished his degree in civil engineering and moved to tourist-ridden Yangshuo to become a guide. Jack loves Yangshuo—a land of big rivers and karst mountains. He boasted to everyone I needed to talk to that I’m an international freelance travel writer and photographer. He bragged that I’d write six different articles about China.

But unfortunately, not everyone we met shared Jack’s enthusiasm. The man selling grilled rats at the market considered my questions and picture-taking a distraction, and the fisherman taking tourists up and down the river wanted more money solely because I was a writer.

Jack himself didn’t fully understand my needs, especially my keen interest in the exotic fare—rabbits, snakes, rats, scorpions and dogs. I explained that it was material for my food-and-travel column, but he responded to my interest with puzzlement. Why would I order food I was averse to and then eat a bit so I’d know the taste?

There were other things Jack couldn’t comprehend. Why did I become insistent when someone was sparse with information? Why was such a hotshot writer so frugal and always haggling over prices? And Jack couldn’t come to grips with my shamelessness, such as when I asked the owners of a rock-climbing agency to take me out for a drink. Jack hissed with embarrassment, “You can’t just join people who didn’t invite you.”
“It’s my job,” I said. “I need to find the best bars for the magazines.”

Travel can either kill you or make you wise. It hasn’t killed me yet, but the bus journey from Yangshuo to the city gave me a terrible backache. The bus was full, my seat was taken and I had to squat on the aisle floor among a tangled mass of passengers. And the direct 12-hour trip I was promised when I bought the ticket became a 17-hour detour. Jack had taken me to the agency where I could get the cheapest ticket. My fellow passengers were downtrodden factory workers.

So I had taken the wrong bus and learned once again that travel is full of unpredictable twists, but in many cases I endure hardship by design. I don’t take subsidized travel, and I accept few free services. I pay my own way and, to turn a profit, I have to spend a relatively long time at a destination to research many different stories. Moreover, to cut down on flight expenses, I base myself in regions I’d be exploring—Bangkok in recent years, because it’s the best regional hub for east and south Asia.

Yet even without budgetary constraints, immersion travel is still laborious. Last summer in the Himalayas, for example, I could’ve joined up with a trekking agency that would have organized everything. Instead, I went to a small village with my interpreter, found a farmer and three donkeys, and every night of the five-day trek we were hosted for dinner in small villages scattered in the mountains—thus earning the chance to get closer to the locals. Likewise, in the Philippines last year, spending three days sleeping on the floor of a fisherman’s house was more rewarding than the stay in an upscale resort on a private island in the same trip.

It’s also a way of travel that suits my temperament: I can think of few things more boring than lying on a beach. Sure, independent budget travel is so tough I tend to lose weight during travels. Anxiety is also part of the package—worries about injury, theft and diseases; of the loss of notes or camera film; of bad weather. Many times I arrived in a strange town at night with no map and only a vague idea of where to lodge. It’s the kind of travel that requires stamina, fearlessness, an ability to overcome bouts of loneliness and doubt, and a carefree attitude toward being lost half of the time. Yet I get a high from travel—the unpredictability of it all, the cavorting with different people, the movement through unknown landscapes, the taste of strange foods. I’m lucky to have a job that teaches me more about the world than any other occupation could. That’s why, despite everything, it’s still the only thing I really want to do.

VICTOR PAUL BORG is a freelance travel writer based in Asia.
I live in Manhattan and write a sex column, but my life is nothing like “Sex and the City.” True, I’ve gone to rooftop parties where I’ve mingled among B-list celebs. I know what type of liquor goes in a Cosmo, and I’ve dated the stereotypical New York men: bike messenger, musician, hedge-fund manager.

But unlike Carrie Bradshaw, my most expensive shoes cost less than $100, and I’m more likely to use my cats as a sounding board for my latest column than discuss it over brunch with three fabulously dressed friends.

I write an advice column called Miss Information that appears weekly on the online magazine Nerve, which is dedicated to sex, relationships and culture. The format is typical—readers write in with their intimate questions, and each week I select several and compose a response. It’s like Dear Abby if Ms. Van Buren had ditched the pearls and used medically correct terms for body parts.

Many of the letters I receive are ho-hum. Should I date a co-worker? How long must I wait to get physical? Is cheating ever a forgivable sin?

But every now and then I get a question that stumps me. Actually, “stumps me” is too gentle a term. How about “makes me wish I’d chosen a less arduous outlet for my creativity, like writing Death Row obituaries or translating Chinese algebra texts.”

This was a question that had been loitering in my inbox for weeks—the e-mail equivalent of a hangnail I couldn’t wait to clip off:

“Dear Miss Information: How do you break up with someone who has cancer?”

Each week I’d copy the question into a blank document, and each week I’d make it halfway through a response. Then came the irresistible urge to trash the whole thing as the voices in my head took over: You’re being too sensitive to people with cancer. You’re not being sensitive enough. How dare you write this column? What makes you think you’re qualified? I recognized one of the voices as Mrs. Haley, my third-grade Language Arts teacher. She made me write the word “breakfast” 300 times when I missed it on a spelling test.

I could make it easy on myself and just forgo a reply. My editors don’t have access to my e-mail, and if I hit the delete key, no one would know.
But after a year as Miss Information, I know that the most important mandate—for my sanity as well as my growth as a writer—is to tackle the question and write a solid response. I might not be happy with it. There might still be lingering doubts. But I will move on. Because being an advice columnist is about perspective, and there are no “right” answers.

The topics of my column may be sexy—threesomes, fellatio and seduction techniques are de rigueur. But the writing process is anything but titillating.

I start by reviewing the week’s letters. If I’m lucky there’s a bumper crop. More often the selection is thin or full of issues I’ve tackled before. And I can always count on a few fakes from teenage boys, one of whom lifted his source material directly from a Marvel comic.

Once I select the letters, I do some serious condensing.

This often requires turning mini-novellas into two- or three-sentence summations. Deciding which supporting details to leave in and which to omit in the interest of space is crucial. I once banged out what I thought was a lucid, elegant response, only to have readers write in to say: “Great advice. But is this letter from a man or a woman?”

The next step is to compose rough drafts of each answer. These are my unadulterated, gut-level reactions. If I were to speak this way to one of my friends, she’d start crying or slap me in the face. But honesty and bluntness are what make advice columns entertaining. My favorite advice columnists are the ones who have a definite opinion but may, on occasion, offend. I strive to do this, as well (the opinion part, not so much the offend).

After the initial brainstorming, I go back and fashion the gut feelings into cohesive prose. I go online and research if necessary to back up what I say. You wouldn’t believe some of the Google queries I’ve done (“panty-wearing boyfriend” comes to mind). My browser history could burn holes in your retinas.

I sometimes contact experts for opinion and quotes. Compared to my other writing gigs, where I interface with dot-com execs and stuffy PR agents, this is fun. It’s not every day you get to talk to an adult-film star or the owner of a sex toy shop.

When it’s all put together, I let it rest before giving it one final run-through. Then it’s off to the editors. I flop down exhausted, in the mood for anything but the romance I spent so much effort writing about. My boyfriend knows to expect little from me on Tuesday nights.

Although it can be challenging, I do love this job. At the heart of it, really, is helping people. When I’m not writing, I volunteer with senior citizens, playing bingo at nursing homes on the Lower East Side. It’s quite
a different scene than writing about seduction techniques and romantic entanglements, but the overall spirit is the same. I often wonder how the residents would react if they knew my alter ego.

And telling strangers what I do for a living is always an interesting conversation. Much better than my first job out of college, working in human resources. My quirky advice columnist persona gets a much warmer reception.

People sometimes ask if I follow my own advice. To be honest, I don’t know. When I’m feeling troubled, I do what most people do—I call my mom or my sister. They may not have an Emily Post-style answer, but they help me laugh. And that’s exactly what I try to do for the people I’m answering. [WD]

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