

Kathryn: Welcome to episode 27 of Compass, I'm your host Kathryn Hunter. Today Donna Long and I talk about the details of travel writing. We get into pitching articles, fear of rejection, and editor response rates. Before we get started with today's guest, I want to let you know that tonight, July 23, at 7 pm central, I'm doing a webinar with Kate Buck Jr on getting started as a digital nomad. We're talking about who long term travel is right for, navigating the challenges that will arise, the number one skill you need to develop. We'll also discuss bonus tips on travel hacking. And at the end of the webinar, we'll give you the details on our private program for getting started with your location independent life. Join us at compasspod.com/webinar. And if you can't make it live, still go ahead and sign up, we'll have a replay page set up so you can watch even if the time doesn't work for you. You're listening to Compass, where we talk with location independent womxn about their work and the paths that got them there. We get into their stories of struggle and success, finding clients, figuring out what to charge, and of course, we talk money. Join us and take the next step in finding your direction. Donna, welcome to the show.

Donna: Thank you.

Kathryn: I like to start with your early life and see where that influences you later on. What did you want to be when you were five?

Donna: Oh gosh, growing up I was a serious tomboy. I was always climbing trees and you know, that kind of stuff. I really was looking more to be kind of, more on the science end of the spectrum as far as, I wanted to do things like be a research scientist or an astronaut or you know, that kind of stuff. And I guess that's about it. I had all these different things of stuff that I wanted to do and it wasn't just one thing. I one week I'd be this the next week. I'm thinking that.

Donna: How has that changed by the time you left high school?

Donna: It didn't change a whole lot. I still wanted to be 1,000,001 different things, but life happens and things just kind of reorganize how they're meant to be. And I met the, the man of my dreams and we'd decided to um, move on together, like with our lives.

Kathryn: Did you pursue college?

Donna: I pursued a bit of college, not a whole lot. I did classes here and there that interest me, but I did not finish with a degree.

Kathryn: Were they just kind of your general basics courses or was there any kind of focus to them?

Donna: A lot of them were my, were the basic courses that you would need to start your degree and then I started taking classes that were more of a general type of interest for myself, um, such as writing classes and some photography classes and some art type classes.

Kathryn: The reason I ask is, I was wondering if there was anything you pulled from that that you use now?

Donna: Yeah, I would say my English classes I pulled a, quite a bit from, and then as far as pursuing classes that were just self-interest type classes, it kinda taught me to hone in my focus a little bit as far as, pursue what really interests me and not fit into a, a box that everyone expected me to be in.

Kathryn: How did you get into being location independent?

Donna: That kind of came around as an eye opening lifestyle change. For most of my adult life, I raised a family, I stayed home with our children and they became my identity it. That's who I associated with and it's what I felt my whole being was, was to raise our children. And when they grew up, moved out, I woke one morning and all of a sudden it felt like I no longer knew who I was and I felt like I did not have an identity anymore because they went on to have their own life, which is exactly the way it should be. But it was kind of a wake up call for me in that all of a sudden I had to redefine who I was and what I wanted. And I guess I wanted to see and explore more and in order, to see and explore more of the world.

Donna: So in order to do that, I felt that the location independence was really what I needed and what was, what I was pursuing, even though I didn't know how to go about doing it. So it's been a really big learning experience. Whereas everyday something is new and I'm, I spent the first probably two years trying different paths and then realizing that wasn't what I wanted and that's what started the whole location independence, was redefining who I was and what I wanted.

Kathryn: How do you describe your work to people when they're just being polite?

Donna: Well, I usually tell them that I am a freelance travel writer and that starts the conversation and they talk about, um, they ask me where I've been and what I, what are my favorite places to see and experience. And then I can share the stories of different locations that I've been and I can share the stories of people that I've met when I've been traveling on my own. Share some of the places I, that I go to eat or to drink at. And I try to pursue more independent locations as far as not chain run type businesses. I look for local hotspots and where locals hang out. And so I really like to share that information and people are very eager to learn about it and hear about it and they want to learn more. They, I find that people don't necessarily want to go where the rest of the tourists like to hang out. They want to go see and experience what a place is really like.

Kathryn: How did you get started with freelance travel writing?

Donna: I guess in the beginning it was, I mean like I said, it was, I started as a rediscovery of who I was and what I wanted. And one of the things that really is important to me is the continual learning and discovering experience that, that you can get out of life. So I guess in order to do that I had to travel and I love to travel. So that was definitely not a chore or, or difficulty. It just seemed to fit perfectly because I like to talk to people and I

like to learn their story on how they started and, and what they like and I like to talk to people about other locations and it just kind of one thing led to another and I realized that being a travel writer and sharing all that knowledge and all the information and everything that I have experienced just came naturally. And growing up I did not travel a tremendous amount. My family had had very little money and we were very, lived a very sustainable type life. So as I grew older and my husband and I with our children, we traveled a lot and we were constantly going and that just kind of, I think fueled the fire to where I am now. I kind of paved that path.

Kathryn: When you were first starting and you were first I guess, pitching ideas, how did you reach out?

Donna: Oh, that was, I think one of the most difficult things to learn is to, how to pitch to magazines and how to pitch to editors and websites. And it's just, I would introduce myself. I say I came across this really interesting person or this place and I would give a little brief synopsis. Like a small paragraph or so explaining what I was talking about, the place I was talking about or who I wanted to introduce. And then I would give a little brief history of my background experience and why I was a good person to write this story. Finding magazines can be a bit of a challenge and finding the editors information can be a little bit of a challenge, at first. Um, but you start your list and, and start a relationship with them and just chat with them. And you know, sometimes it leads to a story that they'll publish. A lot of my early pitches, um, honestly I didn't hear back from. And that can be very discouraging and especially when you're trying to learn how to pitch and how the proper verbiage to use and whether you're being too casual when you're talking in email or if you're being too, too formal, you know, and cause some editors prefer you to be more and some are very casual and it's like carrying on a conversation and it, it takes a little bit too learn that happy medium until you get to know the editor.

Kathryn: I think a lot of us are really afraid of rejection and it helps to kind of have a, a realistic set of expectations. When you're first starting out, what kind of response rate do you think is average?

Donna: Oh yeah. The rejection aspect is a very real thing and it's, you have to realize that it's not necessarily you, it's maybe this story just wasn't fitting for the right time frame for that magazine, for that issue. The response rate that I would get from editors in the beginning was very, very minimal. And that was honestly something that was difficult for me to deal with because I spent so much time agonizing over what to say with the pitch, and the right words to use and to not be too wordy, but you have to be a little bit, you know, cause you have to get your point across and your story across to make it interesting. But if it's too long of an email, then they just won't bother reading it.

Donna: So, I would spend a lot of time agonizing over how to phrase everything I want and then I would send it out and I would never hear anything. And I would not know if the editor even saw the email or if it went directly to their spam, which definitely happens. So something that, that I used to help alleviate some of that, that anxiety and the emotions that I was feeling by not hearing, even just a simple "no" response. Not, not asking for, you know, an elaborate explanation or anything. Just something, so I know that went to

the right email. I started using an email tracker just so I'd know if it was opened. I wouldn't necessarily get a response back from the editor, but at least I had a peace of mind knowing that somebody saw it. But I think in the beginning the response rate is very low, until you get your footing.

Kathryn: We talked a little bit about the struggles when you're starting out. What was your first major success?

Donna: What I would consider my first success, even though I'm kind of looking at it now, is probably kind of a small success, but it was meaningful to me and that it, it made me feel like I had accomplished something significant. And it came about in sort of a roundabout type of way. It was a winery that I do social media marketing for. They place ads with a magazine and they reached out to the editor of that magazine and put me in contact or referred me. And through that reference I was able to land my first published story in a print magazine. It was a, a small magazine, just a regional magazine for my area here. But that has blossomed into a continual working relationship to where now I have two standard contribution pieces with every publication, with every issue that they put out. And it's, I write a travel section for them and I write a restaurant review section for them on a regular basis now. So that started small and has improved and increased and, and it's, it's a good feeling to know that you have a regular place in a magazine.

Kathryn: If you could start fresh today knowing everything you already know, is there anything you would do differently?

Donna: Probably not because everything that I went through brought me to where I am now. And I don't know if changing any of that, if it would be different than it looks, it would make the outcome totally different. I really like what I'm doing and I'm finding a lot of satisfaction in what I'm doing now. I see it being a great thing for my future, a great progress and a great activity for my future and for, um, my husband and I for our retirement areas. You know, we're, we plan on continuing to travel and to explore and see new places and talk to new people and share all that with everybody that that follows us. Um, and I kinda think that if I change anything, maybe that would change our future outcome.

Kathryn: Odds are there's no such thing as a typical day for you. Do you want to give us what a random day looks like?

Donna: Yeah. This is anything but typical. Um, I usually start with checking my social media and my email pretty much as I am rolling out of bed and making coffee and touching base with people to see if there's anything that I need to immediately deal with or immediately follow up with. If there's no emergency fires that I need to put out or stories that I need to write immediately and get to an editor. And then I'll start working on my own editorial calendar lineup. And I kind of do that by going through either pictures I've taken recently to get some ideas of where I want to start and how I want the story to flow. Sometimes I will central stories around special holidays, obscure holidays, something unique and fun to write about.

- Kathryn: And I'll spend the first couple hours of the day formulating stories and getting the stories written and lining them up with where I want them in my calendar. My typical hours are anywhere from 7:00, roughly 7:00 AM to 6:00-7:00 PM. And then after my husband gets home from work and he's relaxing, I'm at the end of my day. I'm again touching base with emails and following up with social media and seeing if there's any editors that are um, placing out calls for articles that they're looking for stories for coverage on. I'm a member of several Facebook groups where editors will post their calls for looking for stories. And so I'm, I'm constantly scanning that throughout the day and in the evenings more particularly, later in the afternoon after I work on my stories and take care of any issues that are going on, that's when I will start a lot of my editing for magazines that I edit for.
- Donna: I have a couple of travel magazine that I do just like edits, proofreading other articles for and I'll do those and then get those out to the editors, so they can get their magazines out to publishers. And I guess that's pretty much it. I mean it's, it's not really where I have meetings scheduled all the time or I have a real strict schedule or strict calendar. I have to be more fluid in rearranging. Sometimes like I said, editors will reach out and they'll say, we need this story right away or can you edit this real quick and get it back to me? So I need to be able to stop what I'm doing too. Address those types of needs.
- Kathryn: You mentioned a couple of Facebook groups that you use. Do you mind sharing those with us?
- Donna: Sure, not a problem. I'm a member of quite a few groups and some of them are specific to travel writing and learning how to travel right. And getting your stories out there. And then other groups, I am part of they're women helping women, women entrepreneurs. And it's that mentoring women and helping each other to, to succeed in what our dream is. So one of the groups is called Women Helping Women Entrepreneurs. And then another, I'm a member of a food writers, a Binder Group and there's, another one is Travel Writers of the Binder. And, and when I say binder binder is kind of a, a generic type name for a, a collection of groups. So there'll be a main binder and then you have these sub binders like travel writers and women entrepreneurs.
- Donna: And in things like that, that are all part of this collection of different, uh, assisting type things, to help people get their feet under them, to help women get their feet under them. And other groups that I find this pretty helpful, it's called Women Who Collaborate and it's women entrepreneurs involved in different types of walks of life. Sometimes they are service based, sometimes are product based and it's these, the women will get together and they will help each other with their businesses. So they will help to help them promote a product. If they're coming out or if they're coming out with a new product or a new line, they'll help them promote that either by maybe writing a story about it or by featuring it in one of their Facebook Live conversations. Um, different things like that. And if anybody has any questions, they can reach out to me and I'm more than happy to answer any questions about Facebook groups.
- Kathryn: Ok, and we'll also get the links for those groups into the show notes for the episode, just to keep it simple for everybody. Do you keep up with any kinds of continuing education?

Donna: I do. So I take, um, some writing classes just to, a variety of writing classes just to kind of hone my skills a little bit. And I take photography classes and I take videography classes and all that just ties in together, you know, to just hone your skills. And some of those classes are available online and some of them are through continuing education through my local community college university that's real close to me.

Kathryn: What are you excited about right now in freelance writing?

Donna: I am super excited to see other women make their mark and to read other women's stories and to share stories of people, women, families that are living their dream. However that is, whether they're out exploring or whether they started a restaurant or a winery or a distillery or, or whatever that is. They're exploring someplace either close to their house or far away, doesn't matter. I am super excited to find those stories and to share them with people. I really love learning the why behind people do what they do; why they wanted to, to start their business, why they chose the path that they're on. And I love sharing that with people because I think that sometimes we forget that there's other people out there like us. You know, we're not alone in our thoughts and our ideas and our dreams. And sometimes when you, when you hear about other people that are in the same situation that you're in, you go, "okay, I can do this." Or "Oh, that sounds great. I want to try it."

Donna: You know, and I, and that's what makes me excited to share different stories and to see that reaction or to hear about that reaction from people when they respond to a story that I've written and they tell me how great it was and they were thinking the same thing, or they can't wait to see or experience or to travel to this place that I wrote about. So that makes me very excited to, to write. And it makes me excited to be a freelance writer, to be, to have that freedom, to share that, that story.

Kathryn: Now it's time to get into the numbers. What would you say your income range is and how long have you been doing this work?

Donna: I have been specifically in the freelance writing field for about four years. And honestly, it took a very long time. And by very long, I'm mean at least the first two years I really didn't make hardly any money at all. A lot of it was pro bono, a lot of it I had to pay my way to travel to get to the story. Most of the stories that I wrote were very much on the low income field to where I would sell a story for like \$25, which is below minimum wage, when you consider all of the effort and everything that I've put into it and all the travel and the time writing and editing and that kind of stuff. Um, I'm still working on increasing my income so I, I still consider it very low, but I am starting to pay some of my own bills, which is great. I definitely needed somebody with a full time income to help support me to get this going. Top of the line type of income, people can make six figures if they're really dedicated, they're really pushing very hard.

Donna: Sometimes it's not, to get to that type of income. It's not always just about writing articles. Sometimes is also you supplement income with affiliate links on your website and sometimes you're working with different brands and destinations and as you increase your following and your readership then, you can leverage that to where the destinations, they'll pay for all your travel expenses in addition to paying for your story.

You know, they give you, they pay you for your time, not, not your story, but they pay you for your time. And then when you have your relationships with editors, you get to know them. It's easier to place your stories and then an editor will recommend you to another editor and you kind of grow your field like that a little bit. And by growing that, you increase your pay rate for stories because you are not such a risk anymore.

Donna: So the higher end magazines feel more comfortable hiring you to write a story and that, all that increases your income. So it's not just one specific thing that you create your income from. It's a wide range. One lady that I listened to quite frequently in the beginning, she referenced a lot of it to kinda like, um, kittens in a basket. So you have all these different colored kittens and they're all different, but they're all the same and it all contributes. So it's um, it's kinda like that. You have a lot of eggs in your basket, a lot of kittens in your basket, whatever you want to use, whatever kind of terminology. Um, but it's not one specific thing that, that applies to your income. It's, it's very broad and varied and that keeps it a little interesting as well because you're always doing something slightly different but yet a little bit the same to create your income.

Kathryn: Right. So it sounds like at the beginning you may well be operating at a loss, because you're paying for your own travel, you're paying for the experiences that you're going to write about and you probably aren't getting very much for the articles does that sound about right?

Donna: Yes. In the beginning there is definitely a loss.

Kathryn: Obviously this is going to be different for everyone, but what kind of timeframe do you think it takes to kind of move on to the next level?

Donna: I would say you, an individual once to plan on a four or five year at minimum to move up to different levels and sometimes it can be a little bit longer. And I think some of that also depends on your background. Cause I had no journalistic background history whatsoever, so I was absolutely starting from scratch. I was absolutely starting from zero knowledge base, zero contact base. So, if you are starting with, if you have some sort of a journalistic type background, then that is just a step up for you, for that person and they will attain their goals just that much faster.

Kathryn: You said you're, you're four years in and it, it takes about four or five years in what kind of range can people expect after that time commitment?

Donna: So I'd say now I'm starting to sell my articles anywhere from a couple of hundred dollars per article to almost, I'm getting up towards, let's see, my last one was closer to about \$700. It was per article, so it really varies on the publication and their budget and depends on the word count and whether or not you supply the photos for the article and if that publication pays for the photos. Sometimes the publications have their own photographer that they have on site or they prefer to use stock photography and that's all stuff that you'd take into consideration when you get paid and when you're, you're pitching a publication. But there's definitely, I've seen where magazines will, will pay for

articles that range up into the like the \$1500 to \$2,000 price range also, so there's definitely room to grow.

Kathryn: Is there any room to negotiate or are these pretty set rates?

Donna: Most of the time there is room to negotiate and it never ever hurts to negotiate. Even if you think there's not room. I would always say negotiate, ask and the worst that's going to happen is the editor's going to come back and say, no, we can't do that. You know, but I'm still interested in the story, and then it's the ball's in your court and you go, well, I really can't write this story for that amount, and then you can pitch that story somewhere else, you know. And hopefully you can find a publication that will pay you a little bit more or will be a little more open to the negotiations. But yes, absolutely negotiate and ask questions and just see what kind of room they have. And if it's a first time that someone is writing for this publication or for this editor in particular, then sometimes they're not as welcoming to negotiation, but if they've worked with you for a little bit, then they're they're more flexible.

Kathryn: Are there any apps or tools or anything that you recommend beginners would start with?

Donna: The number one program that I would recommend is called Grammarly and they have a free version that you can test out, but I would highly recommend just buying the program. It's a yearly subscription. It helps with you're the verbiage, it helps with spelling, it helps with passive voice and all the different types of nuances. So if you use a particular word too often, it'll tell you that the word you use in is too common, try something else, try, it'll give you a suggestion as far as, you know, maybe try this word instead. Or it'll ask you, this sentence is a little confusing, did you mean to say this instead? Or this is too wordy, you know, condense it. So it's very helpful for new writers to learn and it's helpful for editing. You know, sometimes you're just writing and you're not really thinking about what you're writing. So you run the article through Grammarly and picks it all up and it makes the editing quite a bit faster. That'd be the number one program I would recommend right off the bat.

Kathryn: What's your number one tip for women looking to get into freelance writing?

Donna: If that's your passion, that's what you want to do, don't give up. It is so easy to, to want to give up and it can be very discouraging and disappointing, especially in the beginning when you're, you're trying to make those connections and you're trying to build those relationships and it feels like you're not making traction, you're not getting the exposure, or sometimes you just have really discouraging days like you've worked on this story and you absolutely love it and the editor's seems to be great with it. You send it in and they send you back a response and you know, they, they tell you it's not what they were expecting. Edit this, edit this, cut this, cut that, and you're like, ah. I just, I spent so much time on that and then you start to question, are you where you're supposed to be? You know, and that's just the way it is.

Donna: Just don't give up. Don't give up. That'd be my number one thing. Don't give up. Just keep plugging away. And eventually it turns around.

Kathryn: What are your next steps?

Donna: My next step is to keep pushing my envelope up, to keep pushing my roof up. As far as the publications I'm in, what I'm getting paid for the publications and I would love to be able to help other women that are trying to realize their dream, whether it's in travel writing or whether it's anything, anything that they want to do, if they have a dream, but they're unsure about how to progress or how to realize it, or even just the support to know that they're on the right path. You know, maybe there's nothing I can do to help them other than to say, that was great, keep it up. You know? That's, that's part of one of my next steps is to help empower other women to improve themselves and their, their life and where they are.

Kathryn: Where can listeners find you?

Donna: Check out my website. My website is empty-nestopia.com and Nestopia is spelled N. E. S. T. O. P. I. A. They can read my articles, they can send me emails. They can also find me on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter. Those are all TravelingDonna, Traveling_Donna. Instagram is [traveling_donna](https://www.instagram.com/traveling_donna). Twitter is [traveling_donna](https://twitter.com/traveling_donna) and Facebook is [travelingdonna](https://www.facebook.com/travelingdonna). Those are probably the easiest ways to get ahold of me. My email is donna@empty-nestopia.com

Kathryn: Donna, thank you so much for joining us. This has been great.

Donna: Thank you so much for having me. It's been wonderful talking with you.

Kathryn: If you want your own location independent life and are eager to take that next step, join us in compass insiders where every week I send you actionable tips, inspiration, and motivation so you can take that next step towards going remote. Join us now at compasspod.com/insiders Did you enjoy this episode of Compass? If so, please take a moment to write a review. Leaving a review helps other women find us so they can find their direction too. Thank you for listening to Compass. You can find today's show notes at compasspod.com/027 that's compasspod.com/027. Next week we'll be talking with Casey Marriott, digital marketer.