

# ON ISLAND TIME

## The writing workshop as cultural tourism

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### Abstract

This paper provides an overview of writing workshops as cultural tourism, and the increasing preference for them to be located on islands of all kinds. It will examine the great diversity of workshop experiences available; narrow the focus to those workshops based on islands and finally concentrate on one particular island-based writing experience. Seemingly 'exotic' locations and a unique form of islomania distinct to aspiring writers are used to promote island writing workshops to potential participants. This in turn attempts to account for the popularity and growth of this form of cultural tourism. Several key questions will be raised and discussed: what makes these workshops so successful and appealing to writers? How are 'exotic' locations and the concepts of island and writing time used to sell writing workshops to non-writers and writers alike? How might these workshops be utilised by the tertiary education sector?

### Keywords

Islands, cultural tourism, writing, creativity

### Cultural tourism

Cultural tourism in the Western experience has its origins in the Grand Tours of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. These travel experiences, made largely by aristocrats, were often regarded as an integral part of a classical education (Richards, 1996: 11). As travel became more affordable for the middle classes, the focus on educational outcomes was reduced in favour of "culture as a source of pleasure and entertainment" (Richards, 1996: 12). By the 1970s tourism was a major global industry and the tourist market created the 'short break' holiday, with most geared towards visiting cultural attractions. Writing workshops can be considered a continuation of this evolution and a niche form of cultural tourism.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics' (1977) definition of a cultural tourist is "a person who stayed more than 40 kilometres away from home for at least one night to attend a cultural venue" (cited in National Centre for Culture and Recreation Statistics, 2001). This definition will be used for the purposes of this paper, as will Richards' claim that cultural tourism is "the movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence, with the intention to gather new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs" (1996: 37). For the purposes of this paper, McKercher's assertion that "a definition of cultural tourism can be developed by considering two issues: the main reasons for the trip and the level of experiences at the destinations" (cited in Yun et al., 2008: 2) is a useful starting point. These factors are important to this research because they provide a way to narrow down the focus to the level of the island-based creative workshop and the people who seek it out. This is what Stebbins would describe as "specialized cultural" tourism and tourists (1996: 950).

### Writing workshops

It is necessary to take a closer look at the writing workshop experience and its increasing popularity. Simple Google searching provides an abundance of writing

workshop experiences, from all-inclusive holistic retreats to treks in the outback. With very few exceptions, these workshops are promoted through their marketing strategies as cultural experiences, and rely upon the use of images and descriptions to promote this perception.

To refine the scope, searchable databases have proven to be quite useful: Shaw Guides are an example of this – they offer “more than 6,000 Learning Vacation and Creative Career Programs Worldwide” in everything from Cultural Travel, Language Vacations and Photography and Film Workshops (Shaw Guides, 2011). Their Writing Workshop and Conferences pages offer 1018 listings. Some fall outside the focus of this paper because they are short course and online workshops. However, the number of residential workshops available point to an emerging and growing form of cultural tourism.

The location, duration and cost of workshops and retreats vary widely. Each is priced according to accommodation and location, as well as the popularity and qualifications of the facilitators.

To gain a quick overview of the writing workshop experience available, it is useful to examine two more closely, to demonstrate the breadth and variety.

1. The Paris American Academy Writers Workshop is a month-long workshop on travel writing and creative non-fiction, which features renowned travel blogger Rolf Potts. The cost is US\$3,600 for the workshop, which includes “4-5 days a week of instruction, formal orientation and introduction to Paris and the Latin Quarter, welcome and farewell banquets, and ‘survival’ French language classes”. Not included are airfares, accommodation or meals. The most basic (shared) accommodation available is US\$1,900 (Paris American Academy, 2011).
2. The Wrangell Mountains workshop is conducted in Alaska. It costs US\$595 for all meals, workshops and camping over 8 days. The workshops are held in the Wrangell Mountain Center and offer a broad focus: memoir, poetry and nature writing and run by local Fairbanks writing and visual art academics, and MFA (Master of Fine Arts) graduates with backgrounds in the National Park Service (Wrangell Mountains Center, 2011).

In the interests of further research, I have attended two residential writing workshops, one in Australia and one in Indonesia. The results of that research gave me valuable insight into how other workshop facilitators operate, but also very useful data regarding writing workshop clientele.

- *Writing, Yoga and Improvisation in Bali* was an eight-day workshop held in Ubud. The cost of attendance was AUD\$1620 and included accommodation in bungalows, breakfast each day and three workshop sessions a day<sup>1</sup>.
- *Storyworks: You in the Desert* retreat of August 2010 featured camping on Ormiston Creek, for AUD\$1590 which included five days accommodation in swags and tents, all meals and workshops<sup>2</sup>.

In both cases, the workshop is promoted as a cultural and spiritual experience. Sessions in Bali are held in a *wantilan* (an open-sided pagoda structure) set in a rice paddy, and outdoors on dry creek beds. In the workshops attended, participants came from all walks of life and were primarily female. All were Australian, some British expats. Many of the attendees were returnees; several were already acquainted through social connections.

These examples offer a sample of the variety of focus, price and location. There are writing workshops for every budget, every writer and every genre of writing. To provide context and focus, the writing workshops examined as part of this research are live-in,

residential experiences at resorts and conference centres, or in specific experiential locations. They are smaller in size than local workshops, with less than 30 participants, and usually have a theme.

Narrowing that down further, the workshops examined here will be those wholly located on an island for the duration of their program. To gain an appreciation of island-based workshops, it is useful to focus on several to discover how they function, how they have been developed and how we might account for their success and popularity.

### Island writing workshops: A survey

Writing workshops located on islands run the experiential gamut from luxury to very basic and back again. The Karlovasi Workshop on Samos Island Greece in 2011 ran for 14 days, and was priced very moderately: at \$100 per person per night, which included accommodation and two meals. Tuition in their workshops cost an additional \$450 (Greece Workshops Karlovasi Samos Island, 2011). Less inclusive in terms of lodging and meals was the writing workshop held as part of the Orcas Island Writing Festival. \$335 provided access to the workshops only, with every other expense being the responsibility of the participant (Orcas Island Writing Festival, 2010).

A more inclusive package attracts a higher fee: In 2011, Write by the Sea on Star Island in New Hampshire, United States of America (USA), provided all meals, accommodation and workshops over seven days for \$2000 (Joyce Maynard, 2011). Many writing workshops ask participants to consider sharing a room with others; otherwise a single-supplement fee applies. However participants who travelled to Inis Mór in the Aran Islands, Éire, were offered a guaranteed single room, meals, workshops with only 11 other people in the workshop for five days, €1295 (AUD\$1795) (The Creative Writer's Workshop, 2011). Evidently a smaller sized workshop will not only attract a higher fee, but affords the participants the opportunity for more individualised attention.

The highly commercialised Paradise Courses offers workshops in art, writing and yoga, conducted in Fiji, and are very much in the mould of package-deal holidays. All inclusions are offered, including booking international flights from Australia and New Zealand if the participant is so inclined. 2011 packages were in the range of \$2180-2980, including local transport, accommodation, meals, and five days of writing workshops. Also included were domestic flights and outings with the group, although little indication is given of the number of participants attending (Paradise Courses Holiday Retreats in Fiji, 2011).

A private cabin to oneself is a highlight of the Norton Island Writers Workshop conducted in Downeast Maine, United States. In 2011, five days cost \$1250, which included all meals, tuition and transport from airport to island (Eastern Frontier Educational Foundation and Norton Island Residency Program (2011). Similarly, the Ossabaw Island Writers' Retreat in Savannah Georgia, United States is all-inclusive: a relatively inexpensive \$1450 for four days of meals, lodging, ferry, workshops and individual consultations (Ossabaw Island Writers' Retreat, 2011).

These small-scale workshops pale in significance however next to the behemoth Skyros – an entire Greek island offering every kind of workshop imaginable – including the Skyros Writers' Lab, which was voted the world's best writing holiday by The Guardian (2008). The workshops are attended by hundreds of writers each year and are all-inclusive: nine days of writing workshops in 2011 cost for €795-995 (AUD\$1078-1281), with rooms and two meals provided (Skyros, 2011).

The challenge is to select a writing workshop based on one's budget and interests. While many would thrive in the hustle and bustle of Skyros, others may be more inclined towards the solitude and quiet of the Aran Islands. If there is any doubt about the style and ethos of the individual writing workshops, a plethora of websites, promotional material and enticing images is available.

### Imagining the exotic, exploiting Islomania

The Aran Islands writing workshop capitalises on the notion of 'island time' and its links to creativity in their website's promotional material, advising potential participants to "Experience island life as you learn to kick back to a pace conducive to writing and thinking creatively" (The Creative Writer's Workshop, 2011). Similar foci are offered by the Samos, Star Island and Fijian workshop experiences, with the added enticement of stunning images of tropical paradise locations, complete with palm trees, Technicolor-inspired sunsets and sandy beaches devoid of traffic and the other demands of 'real life'.

Each of the writing workshops described above uses this strategy to appeal to the aspiring and accomplished writers' need for time and space in order to create their works of art. While it is a given that each island would presumably be populated with other writers, staff, caterers and workshop facilitators, the images presented depict the much-sought after "room of one's own" (Woolf, 1929) on a large scale.

### Kanomi writers

The *Idiom 23* collective is named for the Tropic of Capricorn. They publish the *Idiom 23* Literary Magazine, administer the Bauhinia Literary Awards and organise the annual *Idiom 23* Writers' Workshops, with the support of Central Queensland University (CQU). The Writers' Workshops have been running since the early 1990s in several locations near Yeppoon, Central Queensland (*Idiom 21* Literary Magazine, 2011). Since 2005 I have been the writing workshop coordinator and co-editor of the magazine.

Since the 2000s, the location has been North Keppel Island, home of the North Keppel Island Environmental Education Centre (NKIEEC). NKIEEC can accommodate 42 participants and staff and provides catering and transport on their own vessel. Accommodation is in cabins, with bunk beds and composting toilets. The Centre is owned and operated by Education Queensland. Workshops are conducted on the beach, and in a dining hall and longhouse (North Keppel Island Environmental Education Centre, 2011).

The *Idiom 23* Writing workshops attract a varied clientele; teachers, retirees, students, local artists and members of community groups such as the University of the Third Age (U3A). The age range of attendees varies too, with the youngest being 16 and the members of the U3A in their 70s. Almost exclusively female participants attend the workshop. According to attendance records, between 2005 and 2011 only 12 men attended out of almost 200 participants. This disparity is reflected in the participation rates for men in the other workshops I have attended.

The cost is very reasonable, although between 2005 and 2011 the base price to attend the NKIEEC rose, and thus the fee to attend the workshop was increased from \$160 to \$220 per person.

The workshop runs from Friday morning to Sunday afternoon. The attendance cost includes all meals, accommodation, transport and the workshop sessions themselves. Each participant pays the base cost to attend the weekend, and being a community-based event, no profit is sought or made. This ideology will necessarily change in the

future due to a lack of funding support. The workshops can now be considered a true cultural tourism opportunity.

However, it is doubtful that the workshops on North Keppel Island will ever charge the sorts of fees that some of the more expensive workshops discussed earlier attract, for two reasons: the style of accommodation used, and more significantly, the community-based focus that has been the hallmark of the workshops from the outset.

The community-based ideology and the low cost are just two of the reasons to account for the high return rate of attendees. Many of the participants return to the workshops and are already acquainted with each other via work or social connections. Returning attendees and the existence of prior connections are also reflected in the other workshops I have attended.

The numbers of attendees and workshop themes have gone through various changes in line with changing expectations. The most recent workshops, with 25 and 32 participants respectively, provided ample space in cabins and teaching spaces; in future numbers will be deliberately limited. The numbers are still far greater than the majority of writing workshops, especially the more expensive ones.

Workshops focus on writing and the environment, with sessions on poetry, prose and song-writing, all conducted in outdoor teaching spaces to highlight the natural environment and develop a sense of place. Sensory-based writing workshops are held on remote beaches and inter-tidal walks conducted to facilitate an appreciation of the historical and ecological importance of the island. In 2010, in response to feedback requesting a change in focus, life writing and memoir sessions dominated the workshop. In 2011, the program featured food writing, which was very favourable with participants. Over recent years, more writing time has been incorporated into the workshop, with great success.

This is a key component of the workshop experience, and incorporates notions of 'island time' and a writing sabbatical. While relatively short, the time out and time to write reflects practices by well-known islomaniac writers like Robert Louis Stevenson, Joseph Conrad and Jack London.

## Analysis

The success and appeal of these workshops appears to be based on several factors: the facilitators, the location and importantly, the inclusions. Providing meals, accommodation and workshops is the equivalent of a package-deal holiday. Budding writers need simply to travel to the location of the workshop and venue and enjoy the experience. The addition of other lifestyle activities – yoga, bushwalking, or surfing – adds to the allure of the workshop and provides a holistic experience.

Images of exotic locations and experiences abound in the promotional materials for the island writing workshops described above. The focus is on lifestyle and leisure and inspires initial interest. Websites feature professional photographs, mostly scenic photography, and provide evocative descriptions of the locations on their websites. Writing workshops advertised through the Shaw Guides database use this method extensively (Shaw Guides, 2011).

Workshops promote their locations in far greater depth than curriculum. The focus is primarily on travel and the cultural and spiritual experience rather than educational outcomes. This in turn capitalises on the romantic perception of islomania: the wind-swept black sand beaches of Ireland; the barefoot paradise in the Tropics. The additional

attraction of writing tutelage is secondary to the evocative imagery and focal point of 'writing time', which surely must be synonymous with 'island time' in terms of sought-after yardsticks for having left behind the so-called real world.

The focus on travelling to an exotic destination to embark on a residential writing experience is at odds with the educational outcomes favoured by university writing programs. The evidence from the case studies I've done suggests writing workshops cater to a different kind of consumer than writing programs. Attendees are older, wealthier and largely retired. They attend workshops focused on spiritual and personal development over theoretical knowledge and publication. Women attend writing workshops in far greater numbers than men, and this is mirrored in a sample of writing subjects at a regional Australian university.

While writing workshops do not compete with existing writing courses and programs, they can enhance the curriculum offered and provide a useful entry point for students wishing to enrol in tertiary institutions. This has been the case with the *Idiom 23* workshops. Writing activities developed over several workshops have been incorporated into new writing subjects in 2010 at CQU and several previous workshop participants have enrolled in CQU degrees (Central Queensland University, 2010a, 2010b).

The popularity of writing workshops might also benefit tertiary institutions if they were able to extend writing programs to include short courses and retreats in their offerings. This would be largely dependent on the tertiary institutions geographic location and access to the kinds of exotic locations which predominate in writing workshop promotional materials. The *Idiom 23* workshops have the advantage of a unique and exotic location.

## Conclusion

Writing workshops and retreats provide specific experiences for a particular clientele. They largely exist outside of the university sector's scope and combine travel and writing, highlighting access to lifestyle activities. Writing workshops provide an ideal option for budding writers not seeking tertiary qualifications. Universities with access to exotic locations or unique facilities could provide workshops to enhance existing programs or to compliment non-degree programs. Writing workshops occupy a unique position in the tourism industry, and continue to develop as their own form of cultural tourism. This burgeoning cultural tourism experience would benefit from increasing cultural immersion activities, as has been attempted at North Keppel Island. This in turn will provide a more authentic cultural tourism and could inspire writers further.

## Endnotes

1. See [www.sarah-armstrong.com/](http://www.sarah-armstrong.com/)
2. See [www.storyworks.com.au/index.html](http://www.storyworks.com.au/index.html)

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