

Fluffy Towel Travel
Newsletter #7



Fluffy Towel Travel

Newsletter #7

Hi guys! I know it's been a minute; well, actually, quite a few minutes. It's hard to believe we're closer to 2027 than to the beginning of the year. Given the maddening pace of my workload, I've emerged from my deadline dungeon and changed the format of my newsletters for the time being.

I thought it might be fun to bring you along on assignment with me. I get a lot of questions about what it's like to be a travel writer, and hopefully these behind-the-scenes anecdotes offer some insight.

Perhaps it dispels the glamour or inspires you to get out there and explore the world, even if it is from the comfort of home, not that there's anything wrong with that given the state of the world. In the meantime, I've included a recipe at the end to add some flavour and spice to your life. Without further ado, here's a little story to hopefully brighten your day.



Welcome to the Jungle

It's stupid o'clock in Kuching, the capital of Sarawak in Borneo. As I'm in the lift heading to my hotel room after a long day and night, I suddenly realise I can't remember my room number. I think it's 846, but then again, it could be 848 or 845? I stealthily swipe all three doors, and neither responds with a green light. Hmmm, I assume I have the right floor, or I wouldn't have been allowed access, right?



It's the last night of a three-week trip of back-to-back famils (familiarisation programs also known as media trips) through Spain and Borneo. I can't believe I get to do this for a living, and I've had the time of my life despite existing on very little sleep thanks to the busy itinerary and jetlag. I'm so fatigued, but I'd trade nothing for the experience of taking a luxurious train through the Andalusian countryside for a week and then attending the *Rainforest World Music Festival* (RWMF) in Sarawak, about an hour from the capital. I'd also managed to catch up with my sister in Madrid (my new favourite city), like any travel writer always making the most of the airfare.



Less than 24 hours ago, I was in the media pit at the music festival photographing an incredible Malaysian band called Akasha as they plucked the sitar and beat the tabla drum to an enchanted crowd. I often find the audience's reaction just as fascinating as the performers themselves, so when I turned around to capture their reaction, I spied Thomas McClary from The Commodores grooving away all by himself in the audience. He recognised me from the day before during the press conference, where I'd had a fangirl moment and got a selfie. Magnetic would be the best word to describe the music icon.



With a beaming smile, Thomas beckons me over. Before I know it, I feel like I'm the only person in his orbit as I gush over his performance from the night before until our exchange is interrupted by another fan asking for a selfie. I return to taking photos and notes, very much aware that a potential scoop is within my reach. In this instance, I let the opportunity pass as the superstar seems so blissful in the moment. I can't bring myself to burst his bubble with an interview request, as he's enjoying a rare night off before an early morning flight to the US the following morning. As I'm writing this, I'm kicking myself for missing out on a potential interview, but would I have even been able to sell the story? As a freelance travel writer, the hustle is relentless and selling stories is how I make my money, as meagre as it is.



There's a common misconception that travel writers get paid to travel the world. We don't. In some instances, our expenses are covered by the airlines, hotels, tourism boards and travel operators. Other times, we cover the travel expenses ourselves, reminding me never to take any generosity for granted. Unfortunately, travel, hosted or otherwise, doesn't pay the bills; I'm paid by various publications to write articles. It's in my best interests (as well as the tourism operators) to sell as many stories as possible to make each trip profitable, or at least fulfilling, and in the ultimate scenario both lucrative and rewarding.



My income is supplemented by other forms of writing such as copywriting and ghostwriting memoirs. Don't get me wrong, I love the diversity of the job I've carved out for myself, but that old adage of a "struggling writer" has never been more apt. The hours are long and lonely. As word rates dwindle and the number of paying outlets decline, writers face many challenges, including AI and twirling influencers. I've been a travel writer for 20 years, and I prefer not to dwell on things I can't change; nonetheless, I still wonder what would have happened if I had asked for an interview with this year's festival headline act.



This is my fourth time at the RWMF. There's a group of returning writers each year, combined with occasional international media who we instantly welcome into the fold. We bond over the chaos and all-consuming heat since it's always steamy in the rainforest, especially while perched between the huge

speakers metres from the performers, who must feel like they're melting beneath the lights. We're so close to the stars, they sweat on us, if we're lucky. Although it's often hard to tell. Streams of perspiration saturate my clothes and hair, washing away any hope of glamour in the presence of music legends and local photographers and videographers, often tasked with capturing sweaty foreign media like myself as part of the tourism board's deliverables.



From the outside looking in, it might look like I'm living the dream, and on some occasions, I am. But after spending weeks on the road, including several days and nights on my feet in the rainforest, every cell in my

body aches for the comforts of home. I have blisters on my blisters, and I worry that I'll get trench foot as the damp ground seeps through my sandals. Of course, I have many other concerns too, including the gangs of monkeys who sense my fear. Two king cobras were discovered on the beach a couple of days ago. Although there haven't been any scorpion sightings this year (at least any that I'm aware of), I give the outcrop I've named Scorpion Hill a miss after discovering nests of the beasts only after I had sat there blissfully unaware one year. The gruesome discovery almost stopped the show as arched scorpion tails scuttered amongst the screaming crowd.



Adrenaline powers me through the press conferences, workshops and performances to the point that sleep evades me entirely. I find it impossible to shut down my mind, addled by a kaleidoscope of twirling fabrics from dancers from the Fergana Cultural Group (Uzbekistan), traditional instruments from Namgar (Mongolia/Japan), and sapes from Suk Binie (Sarawak). Star-studded nights don't end at the concerts as

we all stagger back to our rundown hotel in search of alcohol and stories shared beneath Sarawak's soupy sky.



Back in Kuching post-festival, I slink down to reception seeking a solution to my room predicament. They tell me I'm in number 848 and reprogram my key card. I head back up to the 8th floor, swipe the card, then stand in the doorway, confused. This isn't my stuff or my room. I cautiously back out, thankful no one is home. I return to reception, where they profusely apologise for the confusion, barely able to hide their amusement at the wild woman of Borneo before them. "No, it is me who is confused as I've been in a lot of hotel rooms recently," tumbles out of my mouth, realising how inappropriate this must sound to the conservative locals.



As I share this tale with friends and family back home, fellow travel writers regale me with similar tales, while those not in the industry seem to be concerned for my mental health.

Finally, back in the right room, I drift off to sleep with a smile on my face in the knowledge that the next bed I sleep in will finally be my own.



Further reading and listening:

Here are some examples of my published articles and podcast interviews about the [Rainforest World Music Festival](#) over the past few years. My article about this year's festival hasn't been published yet, but you might enjoy reading and listening to these articles and podcasts: [Sarawak: Returning to Sarawak for the Rainforest World Music Festival](#) (Travel Writers Radio); [All the things in Kuching: A solo woman's guide to Sarawak's Capital](#) (Onya Magazine); [Reporter Carmen Jenner loved Sarawak Rainforest World Music Festival](#) (Travel Writers Radio); [Maori echoes at Sarawak's Music Festival in the rainforest](#) (National Indigenous Times); [Global Harmony at Rainforest World Music Festival Sarawak](#) (Travel Writers Radio); [A guide to the music festival in the rainforest](#) (Common Thread); [A Borneo discovery enjoying the Sarawak serenades in the rainforest](#) (Have A Go News).

Some flavourful Sarawakian inspiration:



SARWAK LAKSA CHICKEN

Sarwak is famous for its laksa, and here's another way to use laksa paste to create a chicken curry rich in flavour and spice.



PREP TIME

30 MINS



SERVINGS

4 PEOPLE

Ingredients

2 TBSP OIL

1 STALK LEMONGRASS, BRUISED

2CM PIECE OF GINGER, POUNDED

5 CLOVES OF SHALLOTS, PEELED & POUNDED

5 CLOVES OF GARLIC, PEELED & POUNDED

***1 STALK OF TORCH GINGER FLOWER, THINLY SLICED**

4 PIECES OF CHICKEN THIGH

****½ TERUNG ASAM (SOUR EGGPLANT)**

600ML COCONUT MILK

2 TSP SALT

2 TSP SUGAR

LAKSA PASTE

4-5 DRIED CHILLIES

1 RED ONION, ROUGHLY CHOPPED

1 PIECE OF GALANGAL, ROUGHLY CHOPPED

4 STALKS OF LEMONGRASS, SLICED

3 RED CHILLIES, SEEDED AND ROUGHLY CHOPPED

*****10 CANDLENUTS**

2 TSP OF SHRIMP PASTE

2 TSP OF GRATED FRESH TURMERIC

2 TBSP OF OIL

***USE RED GINGER AS A SUBSTITUTE**

****DRIED TAMARIND CAN BE USED AS A SUBSTITUTE**

*****MACADAMIA, CASHEW, BRAZIL, ALMONDS OR PINE NUTS CAN BE USED INSTEAD**

Instructions

1.To make the laksa paste, soak the dried chillies in hot water for 20 minutes. Drain the chillies and place them in a food processor with the onion, galangal, lemongrass, fresh chillies, candlenuts, shrimp paste, turmeric and oil. Process finely. Alternatively, you can use a mortar and pestle if you prefer a rustic consistency.

2.Heat oil in a wok.

3.Add the pounded lemongrass, ginger, shallot and garlic into the hot oil. Sauté for 30 seconds and then add the torch ginger flower.

4.Add the laksa paste. Turn the heat down to medium and stir until the colour changes and the paste becomes fragrant.

5.Add the chicken and terung asam. Fry for about 5 minutes on medium heat.

6.Add the coconut milk and bring to the boil. Turn the heat to medium-low, place the lid on and simmer for about 10 minutes.

7.Add the salt and sugar to taste.

8.Simmer for about 10 minutes or until the chicken is cooked through, and the sauce is at your desired thickness.

9.Serve with rice and/or bread, garnished with red chilli slices and coriander leaves.

My Writing Services

If you have a story to share or would like some help with your writing, then please get in touch with me at carmen@fluffytowel.com. You might like to pop over to my [Fluffy Towel Travel](#) and [Focus Write](#) websites to find out more about my writing services, which include travel writing, copywriting, ghostwriting, editing and manuscript assessment.

Thanks for subscribing!



[View in browser](#)

Copyright (C) *2025* *Fluffy Towel*. All rights reserved.

Want to change how you receive these emails?

You can [update your preferences](#) or [unsubscribe](#)