

I wrote guidebooks in the time before smartphones – it was a golden age for travel

The new millennium was just weeks old when our writer was tasked with updating the Malaysia chapter of the Rough Guide to Southeast Asia

[Carl Thompson](#)

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Carl Thompson says he enjoyed minor celebrity status, at least in traveller circles, through working for Rough Guides

On the western beach of the tiny [Malaysian island](#) of Perhentian Kecil, normal people were relaxing on sunbeds, reading books and playing CDs on portable players between dips in the turquoise waters.

Meanwhile, less than a mile away, I was struggling eastwards through the dense interior, about to jump down a 10-foot waterfall. It was either that or turn back, which wasn't an option: I simply had to reach the opposite shore.

Not knowing what lay below, I leapt – and splashed down safely, only to stumble out into a web the size of a bedsheet, startling a spider so big it had kneecaps. All this to see if the phone number of a backpacker resort had changed in the last year.



Thompson visited Perhentian Kecil island to update the guidebook Credit: Annette Lozinski/Alamy

The new millennium was just weeks old, and I'd been tasked with updating the Malaysia chapter of the Rough Guide to [Southeast Asia](#). I felt a weight of responsibility: then, travellers (never "tourists") still relied utterly on these weighty fonts of knowledge, collating as they did thousands of entries detailing places to eat and sleep, all written by people who have been there.

In what other [portable package](#) would you find local maps, bus times, emergency phrases, visa information and cultural hints to sidestep unintended trouble? How else would you learn how to keep going on £10 a day? Smartphones hadn't been thought of, and dial-up internet was a costly indulgence.

Updating every last line, I soon found, took intricate planning. Evenings were spent poring over maps and plotting the most efficient route to cover perhaps 30 eateries and guesthouses the following day. That meant burning through a lot of shoe leather under the tropical sun, but staying and eating in listed places gave me a head start, and in this case there was an obvious route up and down the Malaysian peninsula.



Travellers – never ‘tourists’ – still relied utterly on books for knowledge

Unexpectedly, I soon found myself enjoying minor celebrity status, at least in traveller circles. Whenever I introduced myself at a hostel, a buzz went around the lobby and I was quickly mobbed by combat-trouserred backpackers gazing at me as if I was about to ascend on a cloud. Such was the mystique of this embryonic form of influencer.

There was little time to sign autographs, though – just enough for a snap review based on a quick chat with the manager and an even quicker room viewing; unfair, but unavoidable. After all, the longer I took to complete the job, the more travellers’ cheques I’d need to cash in, and the less I would make from the flat fee.

Owners of tourist businesses are acutely aware of the clout guidebooks hold. Places listed in *The Book* are jam-packed while unlisted (and possibly better) enterprises next door struggle for custom; some of the latter resort to adopting the names of listed establishments.



'In what other portable package would you find local maps, bus times and emergency phrases,' says Thompson Credit: Radu Bercan/Alamy

Bribes are offered, and sometimes accepted: Stevie, the Chinese manager of the Backpackers Travellers Lodge in Kuala Lumpur, assigned me the best room in the house free of charge, insisted I dine in style with his staff, and even drove me miles to see the myriad fireflies of Kampung Kuantan. All for a positive two-line review.

Southeast Asian towns change quickly, and finding that a hotel or restaurant has shut down presents a headache, prompting a frantic hunt for a suitably budget-friendly replacement. Guesthouses with an internet cafe, laundry and ticketing services stood the best chance of inclusion; equally a restaurant serving banana pancakes and cheap beer would appeal to the target readership.

When time allowed, I got films developed, sent postcards home, crouched over a shortwave radio or – the ultimate pleasure – collected *poste restante* letters from the local GPO and caught up with three-week-old news.

Then it was back to rushing around, often mindlessly: I remember tearing up [a white sand beach](#), attracting bemused glances, conscious of nothing but meeting my target of accommodation reviews – before suddenly thinking: look where you are, you idiot! Slow down and enjoy it!



Thompson enjoyed watching ships navigate the Strait of Malacca

Having realised that, I started savouring the experience. By definition, [the assignment](#) promised to take me to every worthwhile corner of the country.

To this day, I recall the luminous Hindu shrines and monkey swarms of the Batu caves; the tangy air of tea plantations in the cool Cameron Highlands; sipping ais kacang and watching ships navigate the Strait of Malacca; the remarkable timewarp of the Coliseum lobby bar in KL; the molten streaks of a sunset on Pulau Pangkor, so beautiful I didn't even think of photographing it.

If there's one moment that summed up the experience, though, it was emerging from that jungle on Perhentian Kecil, covered in twigs, scratches and bits of spider, and stumbling into the resort I hadn't been able to reach any other way (boats weren't running that day).

Faced with my tattered figure, the owner looked incredulous as I produced a business card and cheerily announced, "Good morning. I'm from Rough Guides."