

“Travel is the world’s largest industry”, probably music to the ears of most tourism chiefs and tour operators, and the point of departure for our interview with the Chairman of the British Guild of Travel Writers, Melissa Shales.

The Guild, who are a non professional organisation for travel writers in the UK, with over 270 members, hold every second AGM abroad and this year Tenerife was the chosen spot, the decision no doubt somewhat influenced by the persuasive writing of one of their members and a one-time writer for *Island Connections*, Joe Cawley, and in large part by the excellent back-up given to them by Turismo de Tenerife, who helped them organise the event.

The agenda for their short stay was diverse, and parts of it “surreal”, according to Melissa. “When we started talking about coming to Tenerife the first version of the itinerary was straightforward, and then we looked at it and we tore it up. We have a very sophisticated group of travellers, we have been to so many places on so many press trips...it was a case of thinking, ‘let’s look at the island again, let’s look at what’s out there, and look for a different side of the island, that can be presented to the public’”. And they did, and with the help of the island authorities came up with a plan that was indeed different.

“We’ve had a blast”, Melissa enthuses, “dinner on our first night in a banana plantation – that was great fun, and the next day we drove across Mount Teide; it was so beautiful, and then tea and a short performance by the Agatha Christie group (in Puerto de la Cruz) which was completely surreal...we saw three very different aspects of the island in a very potted version.” In fact Melissa agrees that this alternative kind of package would be excellent to sell to tourists – and was disappointed to find out that at the moment the banana plantation they visited is not in fact open



Melissa Shales, British Travel Writers Guild

# Have pen, will travel

□ By Clio O’Flynn



to the public. “It would be something the Brits would be really interested in and quite simple to organise too - a trip into the plantation, feed people on bananas, serve them banana daiquiris...”

In fact if a tourist board was looking for expert advice on how to sell a destination to the travelling public, they need look no further than this group of visiting journalists, mostly freelance, who between them contribute to the world’s top media including the BBC, CNN,

*The Times, The Independent, The Observer, Vogue, France Magazine, Sky Travel.* Many of them have also written (or are in the process of writing) travel guide books, blog on a regular basis, and in general would represent the top of the travel writing trade. But it is a tough branch of journalism, and in fact one that, as Melissa points out, “doesn’t have any serious journalistic oversight. There are bodies of travel writers... but in terms of journalistic oversight, nothing. The travel pages in the papers are holiday pages.

So is there a difference between travel writing and tourism writing? “Yes of

**The Guild** had a highly enjoyable dinner in a banana plantation on their first night in Tenerife

course there is a difference... really rock solid independent travel writing, good journalistic travel writing is few and far between” according to Melissa, pointing some blame at least towards editors who want the travel pages there to sell advertising. “A lot of writing is good writing, but we’re not allowed, as writers, to be critical. And what about those who would argue that given the huge rise in the use of the internet by those planning to travel, and the plethora of blogs, which can be written by anyone, that the public want facts, want to

**Melissa Shales** on the terrace of the one of the pool bars at the Bahia del Duque

she or has visited. “There are a lot of people who are sent by a hotel who are genuine travel writers, there are a lot of people sent by a hotel who are not genuine travel writers and a lot of people who claim to be genuine travel writers who aren’t...”

Bringing the conversation back to the convention and the group’s impressions of this island she points out that many travel writers specialise

know what’s going on and will demand the truth about a destination? Melissa feels that this is going to happen, but adds, “I think the big problem with internet is that there is a mass of information going into it, blogging, sites like Trip Advisor for example, but what isn’t going on to the sites is information that isn’t sorted, edited”. She also says that nowadays a lot of the big guide book companies are, as a result of that information on line, skimping on research, etc. “It’s a vicious circle and very little genuine research is being done, certainly not in the depth that it used to be done...there is good stuff out there still, but there isn’t the money available to do good solid research.

“Nobody has yet found the model that makes the internet work and won’t until the public are prepared to pay for an online article, or online research. They have to break the cycle of expecting all online info to be free. Sooner or later research has to be done and research costs money, so it’s either subsidised by someone with a marketing agenda, or it is going to be subsidised by a large company or its going to be done cheaply.”

She is also critical of the trend towards ‘celebrity’ travel writing, which is loved by many newspapers, and the assumption that to be a travel writer all you have to do is travel. However this does not mean that a writer sent, for instance, by a hotel or travel company will not give a proper review of the place

within the sphere – on eco-holidays, or holidays for the physically challenged, for instance - and many of the Guild members here for the conference were also planning return trips to focus on their specific fields.

As an experienced traveller and travel writer I, perhaps unfairly, asked her to name her worst destination. After a pause she did describe one trip to a small village (which remained unnamed), on the east coast of Turkey (a place she adores) where the hotel was described as in a lovely little fishing village “but the Brits had got there and it looked like a Costa building site and it was just row upon row of about 25,000 horrible villas – and it gave me a profound sense of disappointment”.

So, in her opinion who is to blame for the ‘ruining’ of such places - holiday makers, developers? “I think it’s basic greed, a combination of greed and ignorance...in the 70s people didn’t know better... now they shouldn’t be making the same mistakes still, but they are. People should be developing new areas in a much more sensitive fashion and governments should know enough to be able to put the laws in place to stop that sort of development happening...”

Sound words from a woman who has seen and explored many a tourist trail but was delighted with her first visit to Tenerife, and is already planning to return – but this time on holiday, something that travel writers also get to indulge in now and then.



A visit to **Mount Teide** was also a welcome alternative for the writers