



### GREAT ESCAPE SUCCESS STORY: Connie Reed

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## Midwestern Retiree Earns Thousands' Worth of Travel Perks – for Free

Last September, Illinois grandmother Connie Reed snagged front row seats for a Wild West adventure. She bumped along in the back of a pickup truck behind 1,100 bison for the annual Buffalo Roundup in the Black Hills of South Dakota.

That same week, she got an eye-level view of Mount Rushmore – from a helicopter. She also rode a horse and glimpsed 27,000-year-old mammoth bones.

Connie's cost for these adventures? Zero. As a travel writer, she joined 20 other writers from around the world on an all-expenses-paid press trip to a place that was on her bucket list.

"I had never been to South Dakota before and I just fell in love with it," she said. "We went from sunrise til evening doing and seeing things, and just had a great time. We all bonded and still keep in touch."

### GOING OUT ON A LEDGE

The South Dakota vacation was just one of 17 press trips she took last year, as Connie, 60, crosses adventures and destinations off her list faster than ever before.



**MEMBER:**  
Connie Reed

**LOCATION:**  
Bourbonnais, Illinois

**HOW SHE GOT HER FIRST BYLINE:**  
One of the articles she wrote as a program assignment ran in *Travel Post Monthly*.

**TOP GREAT ESCAPE PROGRAMS:**

- *The Ultimate Travel Writer's Program*
- *Money-Making Travel Blogs*

It's what retirement looks like for Connie, who until last year worked in online education for a medical records company in Chicago. But she had always dreamed of being a travel writer, and collected piles of brochures on desired destinations.

"I really wanted to be able to travel more," she said. "I didn't want to do a two-hour commute, twice a day, until I was 70."

An online search led her to *The Ultimate Travel Writer's Program* from Great Escape Publishing. The web-based, self-paced program was exactly what she was looking for, covering not just how to write desirable travel articles but also how to break in – from approaching editors to landing coveted press freebies such as hotels, meals, and activities.

Previously, Connie's writing experience was limited to business reports in her job. In the program, she refined her craft and gained hands-on experience writing real travel articles. It was through a story she wrote in the program that she landed her first paid placement in *Travel Post Monthly*, the publication of the International Travel Writers & Photographers Alliance (ITWPA).

"My first published article was a huge boost of confidence for me," she said.

Next, Connie heard that Examiner.com needed writers to cover her home turf, the greater Chicago area. She reached out to an editor and was soon writing weekly articles.

Not long after she landed the regular Examiner.com gig, a PR firm unexpectedly contacted her. Would she tour the newly opened Willis Tower Skydeck Ledge (formerly the Sears Tower)? Though heights make her knees weak, this was a chance she couldn't turn down, and she was soon standing on a ledge 1,353 feet above the city.

"The general manager himself gave me a tour," she said. "When we got to the top, there were four ledges, and one was cordoned off for me. Talk about

feeling like a VIP. And this was my first travel-writing experience."

After documenting the Skydeck experience in Examiner.com, more opportunities began rolling in. The same PR firm invited her to speak on a travel panel at the Illinois Governor's Convention.

## BIRTH OF A BLOG

When Connie sought to expand her writing income, her son-in-law suggested she start a blog. The only problem: she really didn't know what a blog was. Again, she turned to Great Escape, where she invested in the *Money-Making Travel Blogs* program.

"The Great Escape blog program was instrumental in getting me started," she said. "I had no idea how to go about it, but it just took me step by step.

Within a couple of months, Connie launched her blog, *Midwest Wanderer*. With a focus on regional travel, she targets active empty-nesters looking for ideas on outings.

Connie still does some contract work in her field, and her husband still works. But the two manage to cover considerable ground on weekends – enough to give Connie material for several blog posts every week. She crafts "focus articles" that feature a single restaurant, hotel, or attraction.

Connie strategically targets places she's interested in, and simply reaches out. Her first stop – always – is the area's convention and visitors bureau. She mentions she's researching a possible trip to the area, and more often than not, her contacts help arrange her trip and line up complementary stays, meals, or adventures.

On some trips, everything but gas is covered. On others, Connie is comped a couple of free meals or activities.

### FREEDOM TO SEE THE WORLD — FOR FREE

This Midwest Wanderer is living her dream of being a travel writer. She took 17 press trips in each of the last two years. And at 60, life is a bigger adventure than ever before. Last year, she tried glassblowing and parasailing for the first time, raced a dragon boat, and sailed through the night skies of Chicago by helicopter.

Connie's blog also serves as an avenue for income. Using Google AdSense, she makes money anytime someone clicks on an ad on her site. While revenue is small at this point, she anticipates it growing as she expands the number of blog subscribers.

More recently, her husband started working remotely, freeing the couple for some much-anticipated longer road trips, including Route 66. Connie also plans to author e-books and guides, such as one about President Lincoln's Midwest home.

"I can work from anywhere and so can my husband," she said. "So now I'm trying to take my travel writing to another level."

But the greatest benefit of travel writing: fun at a fraction of the cost.

"In the first year my blog was up, I was given thousands of dollars' worth of perks," she said. "I'm getting to see so much for much less than it would cost otherwise."

### CONNIE'S TIPS FOR TRAVEL BLOGGERS

- **Simply reach out** – When Connie picks a destination, she emails the area's convention and visitors bureau asking for help in planning her trip.
- **Don't ask for freebies** – Ask bureaus for guidance with your itinerary and they may come back with offers – and potentially – invites for no-charge press trips.
- **Keep learning** – Connie continuously adds to her skills to keep advancing her career forward. Now, she's refining her photography through tips from Great Escape.

## Ready to pursue *the travel writer's life?*

Learn more about the program that launched Connie's career at  
[\*The Ultimate Travel Writer's Program.\*](#)