

WRITING SAMPLES

Travel & Documentary Blog Post

Ayomide Victor Oluwatimilehin

An original sample written to demonstrate voice and structure for documentary-style travel storytelling, the register this project calls for.

THE ROAD THAT WASN'T ON THE MAP

The map said the village was two hours away. It took six.

Not because the map was wrong, but because it couldn't account for the herd of goats that owned the only bridge for forty minutes, or the old man who insisted we stop for tea because "you cannot arrive somewhere new on an empty stomach, it is bad luck for both of you." I didn't have the heart to tell him I didn't believe in luck. By the time we left his kitchen, I wasn't sure I still didn't.

This is the part travel photos never quite capture, the six hours, not the two. The detours are usually where the actual story lives, not the destination the itinerary promised.

When we finally arrived, the village didn't look like what I'd pictured. It looked better, in the unglamorous way real places do, laundry lines instead of postcards, kids more curious about my camera than about being in front of it, an old woman who corrected my pronunciation four times before nodding, satisfied, like I'd passed some quiet test.

I didn't get the photo I set out for. I got a better one, of the moment right before she smiled, when she was still deciding whether to trust the stranger with the camera.

That's usually the one worth keeping.

Travel & Documentary Storytelling

Sample 1: Personal Travel Narrative

The Bus That Never Came (Ladakh, India)

The plan was simple on paper: catch the 6 a.m. bus from Leh to Nubra Valley, cross the Khardung La pass before the afternoon clouds rolled in, and be sipping tea in Hunder by sunset. Ladakh doesn't care much for plans.

I got to the stand at 5:40, which felt responsible. By 6:15 there was no bus, no driver, and no other passengers just a stray dog asleep on the ticket counter and a man selling boiled eggs who kept looking at me like I was the strange one for waiting. At 6:40 I asked him about the bus. He shrugged. "Maybe tomorrow." Not "delayed." Tomorrow.

I want to say I took this gracefully. I did not. I'd built the whole week around that pass road, and now I was standing in the cold holding a ticket for a bus that apparently existed only in theory. What actually happened next is the part I keep coming back to. The egg seller, whose name I never got, waved down a supply truck heading the same direction and just put me in it. No negotiation I could follow, no money changing hands that I saw. The driver, a wiry man named Tsewang, spent the next five hours hauling sacks of rice and me over one of the highest motorable roads in the world, stopping twice so I could take photos and once so he could pray at a small shrine wedged into the rock.

We didn't talk much. My Ladakhi is nonexistent and his English was maybe ten words, but somewhere past 17,000 feet, with the road narrowing to something closer to a suggestion than a lane, he pointed out the window and said the one sentence I remember clearest: "Same same, every day." I think he meant the mountains stay, everything else moves through them. I've thought about that more than I expected to.

I made it to Hunder around 4 p.m., dust in my teeth, no idea what I would've done without that truck. The tea that night tasted like it had earned its reputation. What stuck with me wasn't the pass, or the view, or even the sand dunes I'd come for it was how quickly a ruined plan turned into the best few hours of the trip, and how little of that was up to me.

Sample 2: Documentary-Style Culture Piece

The Last Boatbuilders of Kerala's Backwaters

In the village of Uzhavoor, about forty minutes inland from Alappuzha, there are three men left who still know how to build a kettuvallam by hand. Twenty years ago there were closer to thirty.

A kettuvallam literally "tied boat" is built without a single nail. The hull is made from jackwood planks stitched together with coir rope, then sealed with a resin boiled from cashew shells, a process that takes weeks and smells, according to Rajan, the oldest of the three remaining builders, "like

something burning that shouldn't be." These boats once hauled rice across Kerala's canal network. Now most of them get converted into houseboats for tourists, which is either the reason the craft survived or the reason it's dying, depending on who in the village you ask.

Rajan is 61. His hands are the kind that make you self-conscious about your own thick-knuckled, permanently stained from the resin, missing part of one finger from an accident he mentioned once and then changed the subject. He learned the trade from his father starting at age nine, sanding planks before school. His own son works in Dubai, in logistics, and has no interest in boats. "He calls it my hobby," Rajan said, not quite laughing. "I built forty of these. It's not a hobby."

What struck me watching him work wasn't nostalgia, exactly the village isn't asking for pity, and Rajan seemed genuinely unbothered by the idea that the craft might end with him. It was the precision of something that looks, from a distance, almost casual. He can tell if a plank is off by a few millimeters just by running a palm along it. He measures coir tension by ear, tightening rope until it makes a sound he described as "correct," a description that meant nothing to me and everything to him.

The last boat Rajan's crew finished took four months and now ferries honeymooners past paddy fields for two nights at a time, with air conditioning and a rooftop deck he had no hand in designing. He gets paid well for the hull. He doesn't go on the maiden voyage. "I don't need to see it float," he said. "I already know it will."

Sample 3: Photography-Focused Piece

What the Frame Leaves Out (Marrakech)

The photograph everyone asks about from that trip is a simple one: an old man in a blue djellaba, mid-stride, framed by a doorway in the Mellah with light cutting across the wall behind him at almost a perfect diagonal. People assume I waited for that light. I didn't. I got lucky, and then I stood in that alley for another forty minutes trying to recreate it on purpose, and failed every time.

That's the part photography rarely admits about itself how much of the "decisive moment" is just standing somewhere long enough for the moment to happen near you. I'd gone to that alley off Derb El Mellah because a shopkeeper mentioned the afternoon light hit differently there, and even then, I only got the shot because I'd already given up and was packing my camera away when the man walked through.

What the frame leaves out: the smell of the tannery two streets over, which by that point I'd stopped noticing.

The three separate times a different vendor tried to sell me the same brass teapot at three different prices. The fact that I'd been lost for most of the morning and was, if I'm honest, a little irritable when I found that alley not in the meditative, seeking-beauty mood you'd assume from the final image.

I think that's true of most travel photography, mine included. The frame edits out the boredom, the wrong turns, the forty failed attempts, and keeps only the one second that worked. Which isn't dishonest exactly, but it does create a version of a place that's cleaner than the place itself. I try, when I write about a shot, to put some of that back in not to undercut the photo, but because the mess is usually more interesting than the composition.

I went back to that same doorway two years later, hoping for a repeat. Different light, different time of day, an entirely different feeling to the street. No man in a blue djellaba. I took the photo anyway. It's fine. It's not the one people ask about.

This sample is original work by Ayomide Victor Oluwatimilehin, written as a fictional demonstration of voice for documentary-style travel storytelling. It has not been published or used elsewhere.