

HOW TO WRITE A TRAVEL SHOW SCRIPT, AND WHAT TO DO IF THINGS GO WRONG



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INTRODUCTION

I'm Julia Avramenko, a script writer for the travel show "Heads or Tails". With my help, millions of viewers saw the following seasons: "Heads and Tails. Around the world", "Heads and Tails: Reload", "Heads and Tails: Sea Season", and "Heads and Tails: Ivleeva vs. Bednyakov".

I have visited more than 150 cities in 65 countries together with the travel show hosts. I have been a witness to extreme poverty, exotic wealth, loud megacities, wild jungles, dangerous animals, luxurious resorts, the most famous attractions and lost cities on the edge of the Earth.

While there, I thought of only one thing – how to make the audience see, feel and learn as much new and unusual as possible. How to share our experience with them and inspire them to travel.

Working in such extreme conditions, I tried many directorial and script moves, journalistic techniques, checked the laws of many genres and learned from my own experience what really works in a travel show, and what you need to turn your blind eye to.

In this manual, I have collected some common tips that will help you create an exciting travel show that won't leave anyone indifferent.



TRAVEL SHOW GOALS

Today travel shows, travel blogs, and reality shows “on the road” are gaining more and more popularity. Let’s analyze why travel has become so successful on TV, and why the viewer is so interested in all travel content nowadays.

The main goal of a travel show is to show the world to everyone and to be commercially successful among advertisers for investors and sponsors.

Unfortunately, not everyone can afford to travel right now, especially if we are talking about going to remote corners of our planet, about wild places, about dangerous cities (which would not be on a bucket list of a run-of-the-mill tourist).

In this case, a travel show is a “ticket” to those distant and inaccessible places. That is why such a show is interesting for both couch potatoes and frequent travelers. For some it is a fascinating «movie», while for others it is a collection of tips, routes and locations.

It is this broad audience coverage that makes travel shows attractive to sponsors. Because when traveling, people spend their time actively and in different ways, which means that such a show is a good platform for selling various goods (from allergy pills to off-road cars). But it is very important to respect the viewers and not turn a travel show into a TV shop.

The goals of a travel show are:

- To motivate viewers to travel;
- To become a useful guide;
- To be a pioneer.



Now let's talk more about each of them:

1. A travel show aims to **inspire the viewer to travel**. Many people still think that traveling is expensive, dangerous and difficult. Our task is to show and explain to the audience that it is not necessary to be the owner of an unlimited credit card in order to go on a trip.

We must clarify that travel is not scary or dangerous if we educate ourselves first. We need to prepare our viewer for all the difficulties of the journey, so that any unforeseen situation turns into a fun adventure, not an ordeal.

2. A travel show becomes a **trusted guidebook**. This is making travel shows and travel blogs more and more popular every year. Nowadays, many airlines operate low-cost flights, give away tickets, allow travelers to redeem their accumulated miles – in general, they do everything to make people travel more willingly. These opportunities also make people question: “Where to go?”, “What to do there?”, “How to spend time and money in the most reasonable and interesting way?” That's where we, the creators of travel content, come to the rescue. Ten years ago only travel companies could answer the above-mentioned questions, however, today people trust travel content creators more than tour companies. Therefore, you should always remember that any of your travel videos could become a potential travel route for others. The process of creating such content should be approached with journalistic precision – all addresses, prices, routes, names have to be accurate!

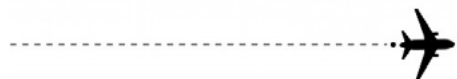


You must be absolutely honest and specific with the viewer, so that he could repeat your path with confidence and get more emotions and less problems out of it. Also, a satisfied viewer is more likely to recommend you as an interesting and useful show to others.

This makes any travel show not only an extravaganza of emotions, but also a source of an irreplaceable travel content.

3. A travel show **becomes a pioneer**. A travel show is a real virtual journey (through a TV or computer screen) where the viewer experiences this adventure with you through catchy scenes, hosts' emotions, and an eloquent script. And one of the goals of a travel show is to collect unique information on the spot, to find unique locations, unknown phenomena, traditions, and features off -the-beaten path that could not be found on Google Maps.

Otherwise, why go to the other end of the Earth, if not for a unique content?



TRAVEL SHOW STRUCTURE

Let's take a look at what a travel show is. In fact, it is an entertainment program. But travel shows are also a symbiosis of reality show, documentary, reporting and journalistic investigation.

A travel show is built according to all the laws of drama: an opening and further development of the events with twists and turns, a climax (the central event) and an ending.

Let's use Heads and Tails as an example:

- Our opening is the starting profile of the country or city we are filming. We immediately inform our viewers about what this place is and what is it famous for (what is the peculiarity / complexity of this place - the most expensive / wildest / most dangerous / most unknown ...) + the first turning point (tossing of a coin - someone will get an unlimited credit card, and someone will be left with only \$100 for a whole weekend).
- Our plot development is the way the hosts spend their weekend. Each of them has their own route, filled with twists and turns: finding the way from point A to point B, searching for an overnight stay, eating local delicacies, indulging in extreme / unusual entertainment / taking a walk in dangerous areas, meeting animals, tribes, unusual characters, participation in carnivals, unusual processions, ceremonies, rituals, etc.
- Our climax is some kind of main entertainment of this city or region (climbing a volcano, jumping from a bridge, the highest bungee jumping, visiting a wild tribe ...). As a rule,



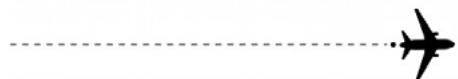
this scene is divided into several parts (we announce it, we are going there, we get to the place and the climax itself). The hosts start talking about this event from the very beginning: “In this city, there is one cool / unusual entertainment that attracts tourists from all over the world and I, as a host, simply have to experience it myself and show you. And finally we will find out why this place is a magnet for travelers”.

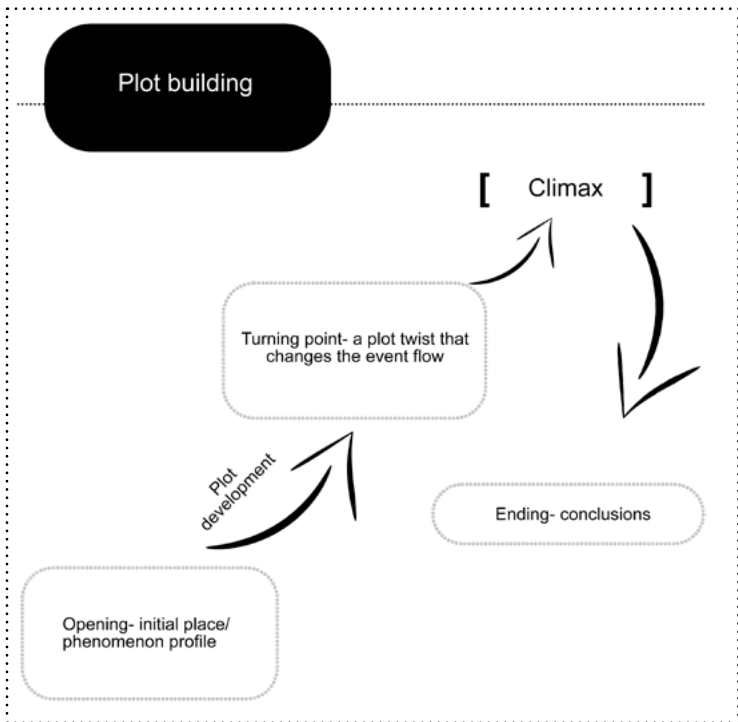
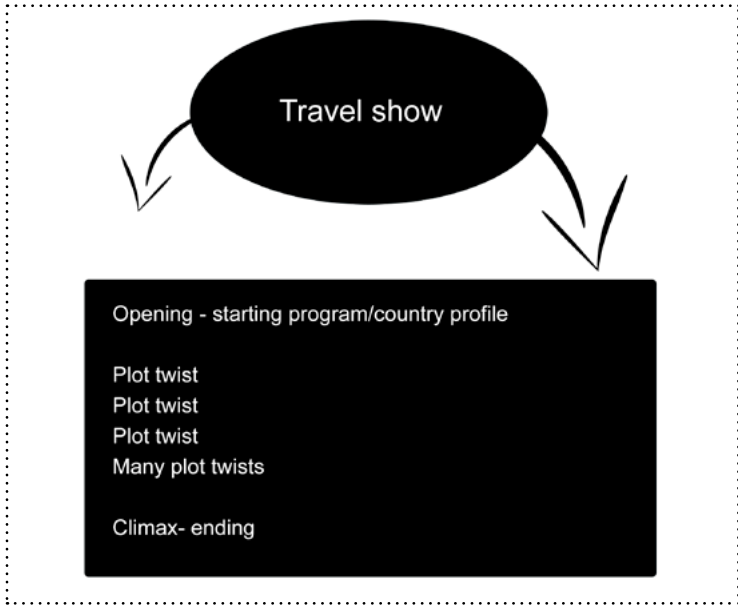
- Our ending is in fact, the end of our program – the final profile of the city/place. It is also the final meeting of the two hosts where they exchange their impressions. The final scene in a travel show is a very important part of our journey, as we draw our own conclusions, which will be very valuable to the viewer.

It is crucial to draw a line here and answer the following questions:

- Is this how we have envisioned this journey?
- Have our expectations been met?
- Have we used all of our budget (in the case of the “poor” (\$100 budget) concept in Heads and Tails)?
- How did this place surprise us?

Taking our experience into consideration, tourists who follow our footsteps will understand what awaits them in general and what they will need to be prepared for.





PRODUCTION STAGES

How to start working on such a large-scale video product as a travel show?

The entire production “from scratch to airing” can be broken down into the following stages:

- search and preparation of information in the chosen narrative direction;
- writing a script plan;
- shooting;
- preparation of a script based on the filmed material;
- editing.

Search and preparation of information in the chosen narrative direction

Your task is to find the maximum amount of interesting information “on the get-go” (before the trip): unusual places, phenomena, traditions, entertainment, laws and prohibitions. At this point, select everything that surprises, amuses, frightens you – in other words, everything that evokes emotion in you.

While collecting information, you need to get acquainted with the experience of other travelers, and learn about the difficulties they have encountered.

Nowadays Instagram really comes in handy. There you can enter the name of the place (geotag) and see the latest photos and videos taken in this place. With the help of Instagram, you can track any relevant information:

how the location looks like, how many people visit it and at what time, what time of the day this location looks the best.

One of the stages of preparing information is also fact checking. Before you travel, you need to check the information found on the Internet. For example, sometimes travelers exaggerate facts in their blogs, or the translation from the original language might not be entirely correct. This can distort details and lead to misinterpretation of facts. In this case, locals (people living in the country of arrival), tourism workers and those who have already studied your agenda thoroughly can help you.

Before you go, you can also contact different groups and communities (such groups are very popular on Facebook). There, you can address your questions both with the group itself, or find the most competent, in your opinion, group member and ask him everything that interests you.

You can double check some facts only upon arrival in a specific country or city – and this is normal. This is the essence of a travel show - you research some of the information while being on location. In order not to leave out any questions, you need to make a list and divide it by location: at location A you need to find out one thing, at location B – another, etc.

So, during the filming process, even if everything goes the wrong way and you feel confused because of an unexpected situation you are in, you can open this list of questions and ask them (in some cases you can do this



right in the frame). This is how your content will gain value for the viewer, because you will voice new information that is difficult to find on the Internet, and, what's more important, this information will come from the original source. After all, our task as creators of travel shows is to surprise, shock, find new information, explain phenomena that are incomprehensible to the viewer.

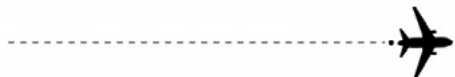
Writing a script plan

It is important not to confuse the script plan with the classic script, where the text for the hosts or actors is written, all script decisions, dramatic twists and turns, as well as the ending are thought out.

Because in case of a travel show, you cannot be sure of anything you are planning. All in all, travel shows are reality shows with elements of documentary films.

Sometimes getting to some countries or cities itself is a hassle with dramatic twists and turns and not always with a happy ending. And you definitely can't predict ahead of time that during an ordinary walk you might stumble upon a wild animal / a local gang would attack you / you would take a taxi and an incredible local taxi driver would take you to an off-the-beaten path place / there might be a downpour, flood, tsunami / you might happen to witness the funeral ceremony of a local tribe.

At this stage, when you have a list of interesting locations, topics and phenomena that you plan to experience, you need to:



- create a route;
- add the facts that you already know to the route that you chose;
- write down a list of questions that you need to find out on the spot;
- describe the phenomena that you want to film. For example, take 10-20 shots of people dressed in national clothes on the central square / shots of rickshaws and heavy traffic on the road / shots of unusual beggars / shots of poverty (barefoot children, beggars, cooking on fire, tent camps) / shots of expensive cars in the city / shots of different locations with people wearing gold jewelry / shots of fashionable youth, etc. In fact, this will be your script plan.

At the beginning of each story you can make a note to yourself of “what the story is about”. This will help you structure everything that you will see, as well as help you try to find an answer to what this story will be actually about. This way you have a better chance of retaining the structure and meaning of the plot, because when you are on location you can get confused and not understand what to film.

The peculiarity of a travel show is that its script is created in the process. And it is very important to understand that you will see a lot of new, unexpected things and you will also need to include them in the plot.

Shooting (scene types)

The first two questions you should answer before you start filming a city or country are “What will this episode



be about?” and “How is this country/city different from others?”. Before shooting, you can just guess the answer, and while in the shooting process you can come up with the answer to the second question.

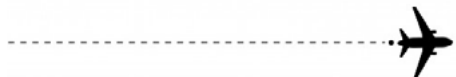
Further in the course of shooting, you always need to keep in mind the questions “What am I shooting about?”, “What is happening around?”, “What emotions does this evoke in me?”, “How would people in my homeland react to this?”, “What experience am I getting and how will it be useful to others? ”

All these questions will help you structure all the information that you will receive from the outside world (and there will be a lot of it).

It is also important to remember about the human factor: you are in a new country with a different language, a different climate – your body may be shocked by all of this. Therefore, it is very important to build on the preparation you have done prior to the trip. The more carefully you prepare, the more chances you will find and shoot something truly stunning!

Throughout the years, we have identified several types of plots for ourselves, which have been repeated from program to program:

- an overview plot – we tell about the place, we provide historical / geographical / economic information, on behalf of the host we also show his impressions of this place. The task of such a plot is to get ourselves acquainted with the place, describe the atmosphere, and provide educational information. Usually overview



plots contain “sketches”. They don’t even have to have a voiceover, just a set of frames with lively music or interviews with local people without musical background. Such sketches help the viewers to immerse themselves in the atmosphere of the city / country, feel the mood of the locals, and observe life without information overload. This is very important in travel shows, because the viewers are the tourists sitting on the couch, and they want to have their own unique impressions of the place.

- **plot-phenomenon** – these are plots that tell and show some phenomenon in a city or country. As a rule, through one specific location or hero in them, we tell about the trends of an entire city, country or people and give an explanation why it is here and this very phenomenon that has become a part of everyday life and culture. For example, everyone rides mopeds, carries a load on their heads, women shave their hair and put on wigs after the wedding ceremony, etc.

- **food plot** – these are plots which contain gastronomic reviews of dishes and products. In a travel show, this is either traditional food, or something very expensive / cheap, or very unusual. In general, any food and products that create surprise, admiration or horror. Details and close-ups are always important here so that the viewer can see everything thoroughly.

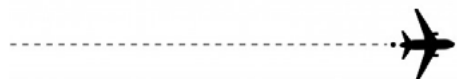
- **action plot** – as a rule, this is a plot about extreme entertainment or activities. A large-scale action takes place here and causes a lot of emotions (fear, euphoria). If there is an adrenaline rush and the host shouts that he



will never do this again, we can consider this an action plot. For example, it can be skydiving, bungee jumping, swimming with sharks, diving, trekking, climbing a volcano, amusement parks, etc.

- **plot-advice** – this is a plot (sometimes it can be a very short snippet), where the host shares his experience and addresses the audience directly: “Friends, my advice to you is...”. In such stories, we advise some place, entertainment, type of transport, or advise where not to go and what not to do.

- **plot-disappointment** – a plot in which the host’s (screenwriter’s and director’s) expectations were not met. As a rule, these are simple linear plots: a description of a place, presenter’s anticipation, a review, a complete “bummer” (we show everything as it is) and a conclusion (“everything turned out to be wrong, because ...”). In travel shows, such stories happen all the time, so you don’t need to be afraid of them, because anyone can be disappointed. It can happen both for objective reasons (weather conditions, repair work, natural disasters, etc.), and for subjective reasons. Sometimes we find very interesting locations on the Internet (wild tribes, faraway places in the jungle, unusual attractions, cheap places, cozy hostels, unique holidays, etc.), but in reality everything may not be as it seems: tribes are fake, the attraction is run-of-the-mill, the cheap diner is not that cheap, and the food is very ordinary there. At such a moment, it is important to build a story based on this disappointment and shoot it, and not leave the scene and waste a lot of time. The task of travel



journalism is to squeeze out the maximum of interesting and useful things for the audience from each location. Since this place is listed in guidebooks, chances are high that tourists will come here, have a similar experience and be just as disappointed. But if you show how things really are and that, in your opinion, it is not worth going here, the audience will save their time and money and will be very grateful. It has been proven from personal experience that 35-40% of the information found on the Internet does not match the reality. In pursuit of action and emotion, remember that you are paving a route for others. Let your mistakes become a lesson and experience for others.



ALGORITHM WHEN EVERYTHING GOES WRONG

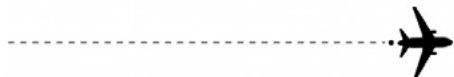
Because of the moments when something does not go according to plan and we have to report this on location a travel show becomes like a travel program, and not like a staged film or play.

Here's a list of things to do when your expectations have not been met:

1. Look around, look for things that make this place different from the places you are used to, and communicate with local people. Find out from them why there is one description of the place on the Internet, but in reality everything looks different. For example, why this place is not open, why there are so many tourists here, why there are homeless here, why there is a heavy police presence in the city, etc.

2. Before you start filming a story about some new unplanned phenomenon, ask yourself the following questions: "What will this story be about?", "What do I want to tell?", "What is so surprising and unusual about this location?", "Why is this happening?"

3. In descriptions and comparisons, you need to use simple and understandable language. It is better to compare everything with your viewers' lifestyle, with their prices, with their tastes. Your job is to immerse the viewer in what is happening, while all comparisons must be clear and in close proximity (geographically).



For example, that's how we do it in Heads and Tails:

- a night in this hotel costs like a one-month rent of a one-bedroom apartment Kiev downtown;
- This food tastes like the most ordinary potatoes, but instead of salt and pepper, it was mixed with sweet sugary syrup and hot spices were added;
- a lobster in a restaurant here costs like a kilo of chicken in our country/city.

At the end of each scene, we answer the questions: “What emotions did this evoke in me?” and “What conclusion can be drawn from this?”.



THE JOB OF A TRAVEL SHOW HOST

No successful travel show or travel blog would have been successful without a host / blogger / journalist in the frame. The value of travel shows is that people, sitting in front of the TV or computer, get your travel experience. And, of course, there must be a person in the frame who vividly and in detail conveys to the viewers his emotions, feelings, and shares his thoughts and experiences with them.

Therefore, the audience needs him - a traveler who will embody all their dreams and fantasies.

And although many people work behind the scenes (in pre-production, on location, in post-production) in travel projects, the viewer still sees and perceives everything exclusively through the host.

All the principles and rules of journalism teach us to be impartial, objective, focus on facts, reduce our emotional involvement, move away from personification and narcissism. But in travel journalism, these rules take on a different form:

- the host does not distort the facts in any way;
- the host passes everything through himself, gets involved emotionally;
- the host gives a subjective opinion (this part is integral in a travel show);
- the host gives an evaluation.



But there is a good reason for all of this. The host is the “eyes”, “mouth”, “hands”, “legs”, “skin” of our audience. They want to be there - on location, and they can be taken to this place only through the emotions and feelings of the host.

The audience would have never known how scary it is to enter a cage with a tiger, dive into the water with a shark, jump from a tower in Macau, if not for all those tears and fear from the host in the frame. The viewer would have never known what the taste of traditional dishes in Peru, Zimbabwe and Honduras is, if not for the description of the host (although it is very subjective, because everyone has different taste preferences).

The task of those working on the set is to help the host to be as clear and specific in describing his emotions as possible. The host has a great responsibility to convey sensations and feelings. Therefore, in order for the viewer to understand you, you need to go beyond “tasty - not tasty, like - not like, scary - not scary”.

The host in the frame must:

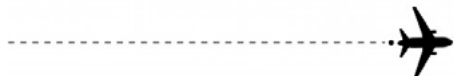
- **use comparisons where it is necessary** to describe sensations (smell, taste) – in other words, whatever the viewer cannot feel while in front of the screen. For example, “the food looks like a herring, but as if it were fried and sprinkled with sweet sauce”, “this is the central square, but there is such a strange smell here – it smells of burnt rubber mixed with something so sweet and sour, even pungent when you breathe this air, your nose starts to sting and tears well up. «



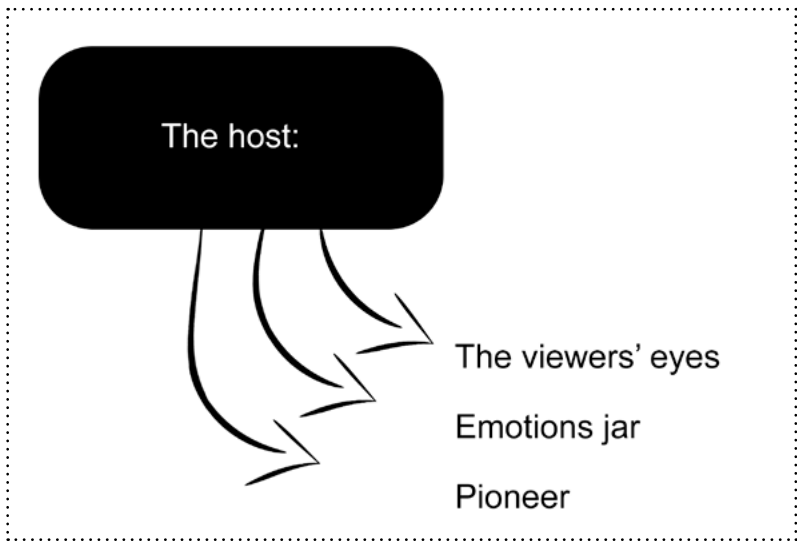
- **not be afraid to show his/her real emotions.** The host is not a national hero, and may be afraid or refuse to take part in some terrible entertainment. He/she is a living person after all. Therefore, you do not need to force the host to do what he/she does not want to do. However, the host always needs to explain to the viewer why he/she is doing something or not. For example: “I cannot parachute over the Grand Canyon. Yes, it is very beautiful and symbolic, but when I see this height and depth in front of me, my knees begin to tremble, my mouth dries up, like I have a lump in my throat, it’s getting hard to breathe ... I just can’t take this step. It is very beautiful, and if you are a fan of extreme activities, you need to 100% come here. But it scares me a lot. ” At that moment, many viewers associate themselves with the host, they understand him/her and support him/her. In any case, the plot will take shape: you showed the place, showed the entertainment, described the feeling. And the ending is never set in stone.

- **be ready to immediately “immerse” himself/herself in the situation.** When something is happening around you – it is the right time to talk about it, exactly while the host sees it and his/her emotions are fresh. Later, you can add the missing footage (close-ups, b-roll of location, etc.), but it will be difficult to reenact the emotions.

- to be a person “off the street”, the embodiment of millions of travelers. In travel shows, hosts don’t look like regular celebrities. They don’t have make-up artists, costume designers, they don’t have 100 takes to say their text, in fact they don’t even have a tangible script where



this text is written. Looking at the screen, the viewers should see themselves: the host should be comfortable and dressed for the weather, be ready to say what he/she sees and feels, make jokes, and communicate with strangers without the rehearsal. Of course, behind the scenes there is a scriptwriter who will suggest mentioning interesting facts about the place, questions for the locals, help describe the place, taste, smell. But ideally, the host should be willing to do it all on his/her own. Then, with the help of an editor and director, it will be possible to make even more interesting content.



HOW TO FILM EVERYTHING AND NOT MISS A THING

The main task of filming a travel show abroad is to understand all the phenomena, ask all the questions you need and shoot enough raw material. You cannot then go back and finish after you have found you are lacking some material. Therefore, you need to clearly understand what you need to shoot in order not to miss anything and still have time for everything.

To cope with such a task, you need to follow a few tips:

- Shoot only what surprises you (most likely, if it surprised you, then a million viewers will have the same reaction)
- Do not be afraid to ask locals, experts or eyewitnesses, silly and obvious questions (in your opinion): “What is this? Why are you doing this? Why is everything arranged this way? What is this thing for? How does it change / improve your life? ”. It’s better to look stupid in the eyes of the people you see for the first and last time in your life than to be stupid in the eyes of the audience when you can’t explain to them what has just happened. Your task is to thoroughly understand what is happening in the frame, otherwise you will not be able to fill the gaps in the plot due to the lack of facts and filmed material.
- Get the information onscreen or offscreen, and then shoot the storyboard. When everything has been explained to you, you will know what exactly you need to shoot, and what has nothing to do with your plot. Remember, you have



to show everything that you have been told about and what you have learned. Anything that has nothing to do with your topic should not be filmed.

- Always come to a conclusion. Each plot has its own result, and it is important to voice it in the frame (or at least off-screen).

- When something does not go according to a plan, ask yourself questions: “What do I get from this?”, “What can I take from this and tell the viewer?”. If the answers to these questions add to your storyline then film it; but if you understand that it has no value for the viewer or does not teach him anything - do not waste your time.

- Do not ignore the life around you: if you got stuck on the road somewhere in a swamp / lost your way / stumbled upon a group of wild rhinos that blocked your way, and you are running late? Film these adventures! If it surprises / shocks / scares you, this is a valuable material.

Always remember that when you share your experience, you open the whole world for people and inspire them to travel. Take this into consideration, and you will always make an interesting and useful content.

However, do not forget that each travel show is also burdened with a huge responsibility – our viewers will see the world exactly how we show it to them.

So, go for it!

