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Living like a 'Modern Nomad'

By Christine Boese
 CNN Headline News
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(CNN) -- In my last "Buzz Factor" column I posed the question "Are you a 'Modern Nomad'?" to readers, and myself, as well. After encountering "Modern Nomad" magazine on the newsstand, I found myself lacking. I was a mere Modern Nomad wannabe.

For this week's column, I spoke with the publishers of "Modern Nomad," and they told me not to be so hard on myself.

Founders Paul Jacob and Lindsay Bentz say their goals are both broader and narrower than my initial observations.

Broader, says publishing and editorial director Jacob, because he doesn't intend the magazine to speak ONLY to people who want to travel around the world on a little bit of money.

And narrower, he says, because the magazine is "designed like an art book that reads like a literary magazine." It publishes poetry by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, for heaven's sake.

Rebellion against travel magazines

This is a substantial break from "travel magazine" norms, Jacob says. Unlike offbeat travel guides like the "Lonely Planet" series or Rolf Potts' book "Vagabonding," Jacob says he doesn't even see "Modern Nomad" as a travel magazine. He cautions not to expect any articles on "how to be a modern nomad" in his magazine.

The goal of the magazine is "totally different," he says, because it aims for a sense of place in writing that can be found only by spending time in an area -- no resort and bikini stories, the bread and butter of travel industry "advertorial" content. He says he also wants to reach beyond "National Geographic-style" "culture as museum" educational pieces he says cast the world as a zoo, viewed safely behind a glass.

Some "Modern Nomad" writers will spend months in the places they are writing about, Jacob says.

Jacob says that to capture the essence of a place with writing and striking photography, the magazine seeks contributions that are art, not journalism, and are inspired by Beat writers and alternative literary voices.

Deep culture writing



"Modern Nomad" magazine

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Those writers weren't doing "travel writing," Jacob adds, "it was writing of deep culture and the place and experiencing the moment."

The magazine intends to be not only a rebellion against the travel industry, but also against the magazine industry, where Jacob says the average consumer-based magazine is more than 60 percent advertising. He pledges that "Modern Nomad" will always be more than 90 percent content supported by subscribers. It is distributed in the United States and Canada.

Some subscribers have been so moved by the magazine's editorial stance against the status quo and the directness of its writing, Jacob says, that they have called or written to tell about quitting their corporate jobs and turning to another kind of life. They have a new goal: to participate in culture, not simply consume it.

A manifesto

Jacob says he is most motivated by the poet Diana DiPrima, who wrote: "The only war is the war against the human imagination. All other wars are subsumed in it."

Jacob's editorial vision paired with Bentz's visual design seems to be connecting with jaded and over-marketed readers. Published for two years as "Places," the magazine has almost doubled subscriptions since the name change in the spring 2003 issue, Jacob says. Oddly, a superficial name change made a big difference in subscriptions.

They have done this with the ultimate goal of honesty, of being willing to talk about the good and the bad aspects of a place, and with an evangelical zeal, a Modern Nomad manifesto of sorts.

"When you are told all the time by the media and the government that you are the freest people in the world, you will believe it even though you are sitting in a cage," Jacob says.

"It is about not giving in to the living death that has consumed the world we live in."

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